

Psalm-Shaped Worship: Reflections on Faithful Worship in the Psalms

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Introduction

The Book of Psalms is well known as the prayer book of Christians and Jews. Its 150 psalms explore the depths of human relationship with God, and therefore of human worship. This essay aims to reflect on some of the ways the Psalms shape (or should shape) our worship as Christians.

The Book of Psalms consists of five smaller “books,” each ending with a doxology or special word of praise.¹ It has an introduction (Psalms 1-2) and a conclusion (Psalms 146-150). The overall movement of the book is from lament (prayers of complaint to God) to praise, though the introduction includes a psalm of wisdom (Psalm 1) and a psalm about royal kingship (Psalm 2).



Worship is a central part of human relationship with God. David Peterson defines worship as “an engagement with God on the on the terms that he proposes and in the way that he alone makes possible.”² The Psalms teach us how to engage with God. Often this engagement is surprising, as in the psalms of lament, in which the psalmist outlines a complaint against God, such as God’s slow response to his suffering. Other times this engagement is what we typically think of when we consider worship, that is, giving praise and honor to God. The beauty of the Psalms is that they encompass the entirety of our lives – the easiest and the most difficult times – and thereby show us how to engage with God in every moment and circumstance.³

In this essay, we will explore a few central ways in which the Psalms instruct us with regard to our worship of God. We will begin with a look at the shortest psalm, one that gives us surprisingly deep insight into how we are to engage with God.

¹ Psalms 1-41; 42-72; 73-89; 90-106; 107-150. For a helpful introduction to the Book of Psalms, see Mark D. Futato, *Transformed by Praise: The Purpose and Meaning of the Psalms* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002).

² David Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), 20.

³ “. . . in both Testaments [worship] is often shown to be a personal and moral fellowship with God relevant to every sphere of life.” *Engaging with God*, 283.

Psalm 117: A Summary of Biblical Worship

Psalm 117 offers one of the most concise and profound statements of worship in the Psalms:

¹ Praise the LORD, all nations!

Extol him, all peoples!

² For great is his steadfast love toward us,
and the faithfulness of the LORD endures forever.

Praise the LORD!⁴

This short psalm summarizes the essence of human response to God. First, the psalm invites (literally, commands) the reader to “praise the LORD.” In Hebrew, this phrase is “hallelu-jah,” with “jah” being shorthand for the sacred name of God in the Old Testament (Yahweh). The reader is invited to praise not just any god, but Israel’s God, the God who revealed himself to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses. Immediately we see that worship is not simply a feeling without an object, as if we can simply experience worship without directing it to the one who alone is worthy. Nor can we rightly define for ourselves the object of our worship. Israel certainly found this out in Exodus 32 when they built the golden calf and called it their “god” (or “gods”). God’s displeasure with Israel’s actions was clear and impactful. Rather, biblical worship has as its object Israel’s God, who reveals himself more fully through Jesus Christ as the triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Psalm 117 also highlights *who* is called to worship. It is not just those who follow this God, but all nations and all peoples. Worship of God is not simply a personal and private matter. The God of the Bible, revealed most fully in the New Covenant through Jesus Christ, is worthy of worship from all humans, whether believing or not, as Paul affirms of Jesus Christ in Philippians 2: “at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”⁵ Psalm 117 makes this clear by calling “all nations” and “all peoples” to worship God.

Significantly, Psalm 117 also gives the reason for our worship. In verse 2, the psalmist tells why we are called to worship the LORD: “For great is his steadfast love toward us, and the faithfulness of the LORD endures forever.” The two terms, steadfast love and faithfulness, are consistently found together in the Psalms, as well as in key sections of the Old Testament. They are rooted in God’s revelation of his character to Moses in Exodus 34:6-7, in which God passes by Moses and proclaims to him: “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in *steadfast love* and *faithfulness*, keeping *steadfast love* for thousands.” These two terms are so important in the Psalms that it is vital to discuss their meaning. Together they serve as the bedrock for Israel’s, and later for Christians’, worship of the LORD.

Steadfast love is a love that is promised, a covenantal love. We see an analogy in wedding ceremonies, where couples promise to keep a marriage covenant of exclusive love for each other. But God’s covenantal love is different from human this love in one vital way: God always keeps his promises. For this reason, the psalmists can and do appeal to God’s steadfast love whenever

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

⁵ Philippians 2:10-11.

they are in trouble, and they extol his steadfast love in songs of praise. For example, in Psalm 36:5 the psalmist praises God: “Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds.” As is often the case, in this passage the word “faithfulness” forms a biblical pair with steadfast love: God is faithful in the sense that he keeps his promises. So steadfast love and faithfulness go hand in hand. When Christians worship, it is these aspects of God’s character that form the basis of their worship, since worship expresses a relationship with God, and the terms steadfast love and faithfulness are relational terms. As Psalm 117:2 says, God’s steadfast love is “great” and his faithfulness “endures forever.”

Learning to Relate to God Honestly

The most common type of psalm in the Book of Psalms is the psalm of lament. A psalm of lament may be personal or corporate (prayed on behalf of the community of believers). Psalms of lament provide words for us to engage with God when everything is not as it should be. Psalm 13 serves as a typical example:

- ¹ How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
- ² How long must I take counsel in my soul
and have sorrow in my heart all the day?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?
- ³ Consider and answer me, O LORD my God;
light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death,
- ⁴ lest my enemy say, “I have prevailed over him,”
lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken.
- ⁵ But I have trusted in your steadfast love;
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.
- ⁶ I will sing to the LORD,
because he has dealt bountifully with me.

In this psalm, there are three primary movements that inform our engagement with God and thus our worship. First, in verses 1 and 2, the psalmist seems to question God: How long will this suffering go on? How long will you seem distant and appear to have forgotten me? How long will this sadness persist? We may call this part of a lament the *complaint*. What is important to point out is that this honest questioning of God is offered not in unbelief, but in faith. Lament prayer is a way of engaging with God about our struggles, alone or with others. As such, it should form part of our worship practice as Christians.

Second, in verses 3 and 4, the psalmist asks God to intervene in his situation: “Consider and answer me, O LORD my God; light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death.” We may call this the *petition*. The psalmist here invites God to respond to his plight so that his “enemy” may not rejoice in his downfall: “lest my enemy say, ‘I have prevailed over him,’ lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken.” The psalmist’s downfall is understood to reflect poorly on God, which the psalmist uses as motivation for God to answer his prayer.

Finally, the psalmist expresses *praise* in verses 5 and 6. The praise is for God's steadfast love, just as we saw in Psalm 117: "But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation." The psalmist then indicates his intention to "sing to the LORD, because he has dealt bountifully with me." The psalmist's worship is a response to God's steadfast love, experienced in God's answering of his prayer in times of trial.

Prayers of lament challenge us at a number of levels. First, they call us to an honest engagement with God that does not ignore our suffering. Too often, such engagement is viewed as antithetical to worship: worship is viewed only as speaking nicely to and about God. But the psalms of lament teach us that there is a place for making known to God our struggles, crying out to him for help, and then praising him for his steadfast love and faithfulness. Sometimes this praise is in response to God's gracious deliverance, and other times it is anticipation that God will indeed answer because he has always been faithful to do so. Second, the psalms of lament encourage us to help others in the journey of lament. Suffering is a part of life, and we can help others recognize that Scripture, the Psalms in particular, give us words to pray in the midst of suffering. Significantly, as noted above, the book of Psalms as a whole shows the same movement as an individual psalm of lament, that is, a move from complaint (more common early in the book) to praise (more common later in the book; see Psalms 146-150 for the concluding praise).

The movement we see in the Book of Psalms has been described by Walter Brueggemann as a movement from orientation through disorientation to new orientation.⁶ Brueggemann sees Psalm 73 as exemplary of this movement. This psalm begins with a sense of certainty on the part of the psalmist: "Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart" (73:1). Here the psalmist affirms God as a good God who rewards the godly. This affirmation echoes the introductory psalm, Psalm 1, which affirms that the one who puts God's instruction (Word) first will be blessed and grow up like a tree planted by streams of water, always healthy. This perspective Brueggemann calls orientation. In orientation, all things work out for the faithful and the wicked are punished for their deeds. The world is a well-ordered and predictable place.

It doesn't take long for the psalmist to confess that this is not his current experience. In verses 2-16 of Psalm 73, the psalmist describes his struggle with the fact that the wicked are actually prospering, leaving him devastated: "For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked . . . All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence" (Psalm 73:3,13). The psalmist's suffering has provoked a sense of disorientation. What about the well-ordered world of Psalm 1 and Psalm 73:1? How can those who reject God enjoy prosperity and health? Why aren't those who follow God the ones who enjoy blessing? These questions tell us that Psalm 73 is a psalm of lament, like Psalm 13. The psalmist has presented to God his complaint.

As is typical of psalms of lament, the psalm resolves with a renewed worship of God. What Brueggemann shows, though, is that this renewal has led to a change of heart on the part of the worshiper. The psalmist affirms that it was when he entered God's dwelling place (sanctuary) that he saw the truth of the matter: "until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their

⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, ed. Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 189-213.

(those who reject God) end” (73:17). Even more significantly, the psalmist then confesses a simple but profound change from his statement in verse 1 that God is good to the pure in heart. In Psalm 73:28, the psalmist says:

But for me it is good to be near God;
I have made the Lord GOD my refuge,
that I may tell of all your works.

Rather than concern to experience God’s goodness as a result of his faith, the psalmist now affirms that what matters is that he is near God (or God is near to him). Rather than the *blessings* of God, the psalmist now desires *God*. What a significant change! This new orientation is the result of struggling through suffering with God, ending with what Brueggemann calls the “celebration” of God’s steadfast love.⁷ Such a celebration is seen in many psalms, most notably the psalms of ecstatic praise that close the Book of Psalms (Psalms 146-150).

This movement from orientation (Psalm 1), through disorientation (psalms of lament, such as Psalm 73), to a new orientation (Psalms 146-150), characterizes not just Psalm 73 but the entire Book of Psalms. In fact, it characterizes the entire Bible, most significantly the life of Jesus Christ, who cried out in lament on the cross and then experienced with his followers the new orientation of resurrection on Easter Sunday. With this in mind, we may now turn to a consideration of Jesus Christ in the Psalms.

Christ in the Psalms

There is a sense in which the topic of Christ in the Psalms should be primary in any discussion of this book. The Book of Psalms is quoted extensively in the New Testament, typically as providing evidence that Jesus fulfills the expectations, including the details, of Israel’s songbook. Sadly, approaches to the Psalms in churches often neglect this fact, so that the Psalms, while rightly used for personal and corporate worship, are not seen as connected to Jesus Christ, except in a few specific places.

To read the Psalms as about Jesus Christ may be called a “Christo-centric” reading.⁸ Such a reading does justice to the New Testament and helps us to see a greater depth of meaning and significance in the Psalms. The psalms are seen not just as prayers to be prayed but as statements by and about Jesus Christ. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer notes, “The Psalter is the prayer book of Jesus Christ in the truest sense of the word.”⁹ The Book of Psalms, then, is not just our prayer book, but also and more importantly it reveals Christ to us. A few brief examples will illustrate this understanding.

⁷ *Psalms and the Life of Faith*, 199.

⁸ See Patrick Henry Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms* (Ben Lomond, CA: Conciliar Press, 2000).

⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, translated by John W. Doberstein (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1954), 46. He adds, “Because Christ prays the prayer of the psalms with the individual and the congregation before the heavenly throne of God, or rather because those who pray the psalms are joining in with the prayer of Jesus Christ, their prayer reaches the ears of God. Christ has become their intercessor.”

Psalm 22 is associated with Jesus Christ because its first lines were prayed by Jesus on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” But the psalm in its entirety should be understood as an explanation of Jesus’ life and prayer. The psalm moves from bitter lament in 22:1-21a to a song of praise for God’s intervention in 22:21b-33. For example, in verses 22-24 the psalmist calls others to praise the LORD for his deliverance from his suffering:

- ²² I will tell of your name to my brothers;
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:
²³ You who fear the LORD, praise him!
All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him,
and stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!
²⁴ For he has not despised or abhorred
the affliction of the afflicted,
and he has not hidden his face from him,
but has heard, when he cried to him.

Jesus, who appeared forsaken by God on the cross, was delivered through the resurrection and now calls others to join in praising the God who did not “hide his face,” but heard and responded when Jesus cried out to him. Jesus, then, becomes our example of worship and the one who is ultimately the subject of the Psalms.¹⁰

Another example is Psalm 72. This psalm is a royal kingship psalm, with the king of Israel as its subject. The psalmist, perhaps Israel’s king himself, asks God to bless his rule:

- ¹ Give the king your justice, O God,
and your righteousness to the royal son!
² May he judge your people with righteousness,
and your poor with justice!
³ Let the mountains bear prosperity for the people,
and the hills, in righteousness!
⁴ May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,
give deliverance to the children of the needy,
and crush the oppressor!

Read Christo-centrally, these words may be understood to refer to Jesus Christ. Rather than an ancient prayer for a now forgotten king, the prayer teaches us about the one we worship, Jesus Christ. He is the one who cries out for and receives from God justice and righteousness. He is the one who takes up the case of the poor, who brings prosperity and righteousness, defending and delivering the poor and needy, and defeating those who oppress. Like the God cried out to in the psalms of lament, Jesus hears the cries of his people and responds in steadfast love and faithfulness. He, therefore, is worthy of our praise and worship. He is the Son who, on behalf of the Father, answers our lament.

A final example of Christ in the Psalms is Psalm 89. This long psalm begins with robust praise of God for his steadfast love and faithfulness:

¹⁰ “Properly to pray the Psalms is to pray them in Jesus’ name, because the voice in the Psalter is Christ’s own voice. Christ is the referential center of the Book of Psalms.” *Christ in the Psalms*, xvii.

- ¹ I will sing of the steadfast love of the LORD, forever;
with my mouth I will make known your faithfulness to all generations.
- ² For I said, “Steadfast love will be built up forever;
in the heavens you will establish your faithfulness.”

In many words, through verse 37, the psalmist rehearses God’s goodness, understood as his faithfulness to his promise to the Davidic king. But in verse 38, the tone changes:

- ³⁸ But now you have cast off and rejected;
you are full of wrath against your anointed.
- ³⁹ You have renounced the covenant with your servant;
you have defiled his crown in the dust.

Through the end of the psalm the psalmist takes up a lament, asking God how long he will keep his face turned away: “How long, O Lord? Will you hide yourself forever? How long will your wrath burn like fire?” The end of the psalm does not resolve the lament, but leaves the issue open:¹¹

- ⁵⁰ Remember, O LORD, how your servants are mocked,
and how I bear in my heart the insults of all the many nations,
- ⁵¹ with which your enemies mock, O LORD,
with which they mock the footsteps of your anointed.

What is significant for our purposes is that the New Testament understands Jesus Christ as both the subject of the psalm and God’s answer to the lament. Jesus is the anointed one (messiah) who is insulted and mocked. He is also the one who fulfills God’s promises to Israel regarding a royal descendent of David, and thus the one who after many centuries demonstrates God’s steadfast love and faithfulness. As the gospel of John puts it, “So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness” (John 1:14 (NLT)). Thus, we have another psalm about Jesus Christ, and one that returns us to the beginning of our journey in Psalm 117: praise the LORD all nations and peoples, for his steadfast love and faithfulness are great.

Conclusion

The Book of Psalms has been a treasured guide to Christian worship through 2,000 years. It teaches how to engage with God, and thus to worship God. It shows who should worship God and for what reasons. It gives us words with which to pray and worship God when things aren’t going as we think they should and helps us to see how an encounter with God, particularly in our suffering, can lead to a new and deeper understanding of our relationship with God. Finally, the Psalms point us to Jesus Christ, who is both the subject of the Psalms and the one whom they

¹¹ The final verse of Psalm 89 is generally understood to be a doxology or word of praise added to mark the end of a scroll. The placement of the psalms we have considered is significant: Psalm 72 ends Book II of the Psalms, and Psalm 73 begins Book III. Psalm 89 is the final psalm in Book III.

anticipate. It is appropriate to end this essay with the last words of the Psalms from Psalm 150:6, keeping in mind that they refer to Jesus Christ:

*Let everything that has breath praise the LORD!
Praise the LORD!*

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