

Teach Me to Pray
Week 5: Psalms as Prayer

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. – Romans 8:38-39

Opening Psalm as Prayer

¹I said, “I will guard my ways
that I may not sin with my tongue;
I will keep a muzzle on my mouth
as long as the wicked are in my presence.”
²I was silent and still;
I held my peace to no avail;
my distress grew worse;
³ my heart became hot within me.
While I mused, the fire burned;
then I spoke with my tongue:
⁴“LORD, let me know my end
and what is the measure of my days;
let me know how fleeting my life is.
⁵You have made my days a few handbreadths,
and my lifetime is as nothing in your sight.
Surely everyone stands as a mere breath. *Selah*
⁶ Surely everyone goes about like a shadow.
Surely for nothing they are in turmoil;
they heap up and do not know who will gather.
⁷“And now, O Lord, what do I wait for?
My hope is in you.
⁸Deliver me from all my transgressions.
Do not make me the scorn of the fool.
⁹I am silent; I do not open my mouth,
for it is you who have done it.
¹⁰Remove your stroke from me;
I am worn down by the blows of your hand.
¹¹“You chastise mortals
in punishment for sin,
consuming like a moth what is dear to them;
surely everyone is a mere breath. *Selah*
¹²“Hear my prayer, O LORD,
and give ear to my cry;
do not hold your peace at my tears.
For I am your passing guest,
an alien, like all my forebears.
¹³Turn your gaze away from me, that I may smile again,
before I depart and am no more.”

Psalm 39 (NRSVUE)

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Scripture reading:

This week, we are examining the Psalms as prayer. Whether we realize it or not, we likely censor or limit in some way what we are willing to take to God in prayer. However, in the Psalms we have example after example of Psalmists laying themselves bare before the Lord. This week, we will be examining the Psalms in this Message (MSG) because it affords us an opportunity to embrace the emotional depths being expressed. We are starting with Psalm 130:

¹⁻² Help, GOD—I've hit rock bottom!
Master, hear my cry for help!
Listen hard! Open your ears!
Listen to my cries for mercy.
³⁻⁴ If you, GOD, kept records on wrongdoings,
who would stand a chance?
As it turns out, forgiveness is your habit,
and that's why you're worshiped.
⁵⁻⁶ I pray to GOD—my life a prayer—
and wait for what he'll say and do.
My life's on the line before God, my Lord,
waiting and watching till morning,
waiting and watching till morning.
⁷⁻⁸ O Israel, wait and watch for GOD—
with GOD's arrival comes love,
with GOD's arrival comes generous redemption.
No doubt about it—he'll redeem Israel,
buy back Israel from captivity to sin.

Take a moment to reflect on a time in your life when you felt like you were at rock bottom. What insights or awareness does Psalm 130 offer you considering your experience with rock bottom and how you might take your struggles to God?

Next, please read Psalm 6:

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¹⁻² Please, GOD, no more yelling,
no more trips to the woodshed.
Treat me nice for a change;
I'm so starved for affection.
²⁻³ Can't you see I'm black-and-blue,
beaten up badly in bones and soul?
GOD, how long will it take
for you to let up?
⁴⁻⁵ Break in, GOD, and break up this fight;
if you love me at all, get me out of here.
I'm no good to you dead, am I?
I can't sing in your choir if I'm buried in some tomb!
⁶⁻⁷ I'm tired of all this—so tired. My bed
has been floating forty days and nights
On the flood of my tears.
My mattress is soaked, soggy with tears.
The sockets of my eyes are black holes;
nearly blind, I squint and grope.
⁸⁻⁹ Get out of here, you Devil's crew:
at last GOD has heard my sobs.
My requests have all been granted,
my prayers are answered.
¹⁰ Cowards, my enemies disappear.
Disgraced, they turn tail and run.

In this Psalm, the author opens with a statement that indicates God has not been treating them kindly, going so far as to accuse the Creator of what amounts to abuse by contemporary standards. Have you ever believed God has been beating up on you? Examine for a moment how this Psalm gives permission for those feelings and how that might free you from guilt, shame, or any other self-harm perpetuation pattern.

Finally, read through Psalm 42:

¹⁻³ A white-tailed deer drinks
from the creek;
I want to drink God,
deep drafts of God.
I'm thirsty for God-alive.
I wonder, "Will I ever make it—"

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arrive and drink in God's presence?"
I'm on a diet of tears—
tears for breakfast, tears for supper.
All day long
people knock at my door,
Pestering,
"Where is this God of yours?"
⁴ These are the things I go over and over,
emptying out the pockets of my life.
I was always at the head of the worshiping crowd,
right out in front,
Leading them all,
eager to arrive and worship,
Shouting praises, singing thanksgiving—
celebrating, all of us, God's feast!
⁵ Why are you down in the dumps, dear soul?
Why are you crying the blues?
Fix my eyes on God—
soon I'll be praising again.
He puts a smile on my face.
He's my God.
⁶⁻⁸ When my soul is in the dumps, I rehearse
everything I know of you,
From Jordan depths to Hermon heights,
including Mount Mizar.
Chaos calls to chaos,
to the tune of whitewater rapids.
Your breaking surf, your thundering breakers
crash and crush me.
Then GOD promises to love me all day,
sing songs all through the night!
My life is God's prayer.
⁹⁻¹⁰ Sometimes I ask God, my rock-solid God,
"Why did you let me down?
Why am I walking around in tears,
harassed by enemies?"
They're out for the kill, these
tormentors with their obscenities,
Taunting day after day,
"Where is this God of yours?"
¹¹ Why are you down in the dumps, dear soul?
Why are you crying the blues?
Fix my eyes on God—
soon I'll be praising again.
He puts a smile on my face.
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Reflect on this Psalm and what it tells us about faith and emotional states, namely depression and anxiety. How does the Psalmist reflect on their emotional state and faith? Specifically, does there appear to be any link between faith and emotional “happiness” or lack of emotional struggle? Explain how this may help break the false narratives between faith and mental health.

Learning Moment:

Take a moment to reread Psalm 130:7-8, this time from the New Revised Standard Version:

⁷ O Israel, hope in the LORD!
For with the LORD there is steadfast love,
and with him is great power to redeem.
⁸ It is he who will redeem Israel
from all its iniquities.

This Psalm follows a standard form of lament, that closes with a statement regarding God’s everlasting nature as a way of affirming one’s faith. While not always an easy or logical How does this affirmation of God’s unchanging nature serve to help us when we are in the depths of struggles and sorrows?

Now reread Psalm 42:9, this time from the New Revised Standard Version:

⁹ I say to God, my rock,
“Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I walk about mournfully

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Because the enemy oppresses me?"

The Psalmist expresses feelings of God forgetting them. Take a moment to reflect on any times or experiences when you have felt abandoned or forgotten by the Most High. Think about how the inclusion of passages such as this in Scripture as a contrast point for the message of God always being around and present in the lives of believers. How do you respond to the seemingly contrasting points between the Holy Spirit's ever present place in our lives versus the Psalmist's expression of being forgotten by God? Does this contrast offer you a sense of hope, being seen, struggle, or any other point of reflection in your own faith and prayer journey?

Breaking Down the Prayer:

For this week's prayer, we are going to use another acrostic. This time, the word we will use is HELP.

Hello: this refers to the opening greeting of the prayer in which you address the Divine One using language that helps you to identify who God is for you in this moment of prayer. "Heavenly Father," "Please God Almighty," "Christ Jesus who saves us," "Holy Spirit of God's grace," "God who birthed all creation," or any other form of greeting to open the lament prayer as you feel called to express yourself.

Explain: What is going on that is a challenge or cause for the lament you are offering? Give voice to the information, examples of experiences, explicit details of the challenges you are facing. This is the space to offer your complaint or dissatisfaction with God and/or your life at the moment.

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Litany: A litany is a space to offer a petition or plea for what you would like to have change or adjusted in your life. What is the outcome you are seeking by taking this lament to the Lord God? Lay it out plainly for the Almighty to hear as it will allow you to also better understand your own position.

Praise: As with many of the prayer practices we have explored so far, praise is an element found even in prayers of lament. By closing the prayer with praise, you are able to ground yourself in the praise of the Creator as part of your petition in the face of sorrow, anxiety, anger, and any number of troubling emotional experiences.

Now, try writing out a lament for using the acrostic HELP:

Hello: Click or tap here to enter text.

Explain: Click or tap here to enter text.

Litany: Click or tap here to enter text.

Praise: Click or tap here to enter text.

Going Deeper:

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Psalms in their original Hebrew are more poetic than what they translate as in English. This week's Going Deeper is a chance to write your own poetry. Start with a Haiku, a three line poem with seventeen total syllables in a 5-7-5 pattern.

Another form of poetry is a sonnet, a 14-line poem with a rhyming scheme. Try writing one now that expresses the emotions of a lament.

Finally, write a freestyle poem, allowing your emotions to take be in the forefront of your expression.

Final thoughts, reflections, takeaways: