

From the Psalms

How do we read the Psalms? For “devotions”? Because we hope they somehow enhance our piety? Perhaps for the Messianic passages? For something to read, and they’re nice and short? OK, but there’s massive instruction embedded in the Psalms, and it’s all there for us. We should take advantage of all that God has given us, because God wants us to be perfect. Perfect! Let’s discuss here just a few passages.

I. Psalm 101, a Psalm of David, says, **“I will be careful to lead a blameless life . . . I will walk in my house with blameless heart; I will set before my eyes no vile thing; the deeds of faithless men I hate; I will have nothing to do with evil . . . he whose walk is blameless will minister to me.”** Never mind what David did in the Bathsheba incident. Here, filled with the Holy Spirit, David is being more than just righteous. He’s telling us that the Lord requires holiness of us. That means eschewing all manner of sin and evil. We’re to despise sin, even sinful thoughts and motives. If we’re a child of the holy Creator God, the God of the Bible, we’re to be holy as He is holy. Now, this is an enormous problem for us today, because (1) we dwell in a sin-saturated society, and (2) we (or many of us, anyway) hold to a corrupted gospel.

Let’s think about these two things: (1) Modern, “post-Christian” (ie, anti-theistic) American culture is pagan *in its entirety*. There’s nothing – *nothing!* – in today’s secular world that a Spirit-filled David could approve of, nor will Jesus, the greater and ultimate son of David. We need a fresh vision of what kind of people we’re to be. Our calling is to be just like Christ: Holy, righteous, humble, loving and obedient. The Holy Spirit has been gifted to us *so that* we can actually live out such a perfect life before God. We therefore must renounce almost everything on offer in today’s wicked world, for example, movies, TV, magazines, and internet websites. Entertainment is all pagan. Politics is pagan. Sports is pagan. All that’s available in modern culture is there deliberately to defile us. Instead, we ought to fill our minds, if not with Scripture, with the writings or biographies of men faithful to Christ. Can we grasp how important this is for our soul? Do we care?

And (2), we evangelicals today suppose that because we have the forgiveness of all sins and the assurance of being in heaven when we die, we’re free to live a life that’s, well, clean enough. So, we don’t murder or commit adultery or participate in drunken orgies, and we keep our homes and lawns neat and tidy. We’re free, we suppose, to pursue our own interests and desires. And we attend church and put money in the plate on Sundays. But, dear Reader, that’s not the Gospel that’s in Scripture! The Gospel is to transform us into godly people, into a radically new humanity that’s just like Christ. Holiness and doing righteous deeds isn’t merely an option for those who seek greater piety, it’s for everyone who claims the name of Christ.

This isn’t being extreme, nor is it legalism. Nor is it “Old Testament stuff.” Mortification (putting to death the deeds of the flesh) is enjoined on every believer in Christ, just as sanctification is. We must, *must*, think carefully, with prayer and great discernment, about everything in today’s world with respect to our walk with God. If we’re in love with God and we’ve grasped who Jesus is and what He’s done, we’ll faithfully do it.

II. Psalm 133 is also by David. He writes, **“How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity.”** David had plenty of blood on his hands. Yet, in the Spirit he understood that we who are God’s people are called to love each other for we are a unique unity that’s identified with and united to the eternal union of the Persons of the Godhead. Our secular society knows little or nothing of this, because unbelievers are too filled with self. It is, however, God’s creational (and now also redemptive) intent that we live before Him as a unity. This is so important that John (in his 1st Letter) repeatedly specifies that love for our brethren in Christ is a test of whether we are saved, or not.

Now, other believers may not be lovely, nor even agreeable. They may, in fact, be downright offensive. They may hold opinions and views contrary to our own. Yet, if we have the Spirit of Christ in us, the self-sacrificing Christ who so deeply loved us, we can love them. This is not theoretical love; love is not some vague, abstract doctrine. Love means actually doing something sacrificially to bless others, help others, care for others. In love, we forgive their offenses. We bear their burdens. Even those who have different skin color and facial features and strange names. Our love for each other reflects or expresses God’s ineffable Person, and that glorifies Him.

Do we get it? I suspect not. We’re not here to enjoy life, albeit with an added veneer of salvation. We’ve been called to live out God’s transcendent love. We don’t do that by sitting in church for 2 hours on Sunday mornings. We do it all day, every day, life-long. Furthermore, we evangelicals think of redemption as *from* the Fall and *from* sin and its dreadful consequences, which of course is true. But we neglect that redemption also is *to* something. It’s unidirectional. It’s to our participation in the love, joy and peace of the Godhead. It’s to infinite blessing in God’s presence. And that will occur

by being part of a corporate unity of all believers, united with Jesus. We're to express that supernatural reality in the here-and-now, regardless what sacrifices it may entail.

III. Psalm 30 is by David too. He writes, **"You [that is, God] turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing to you and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give you thanks forever."** When I'm giving out tracts, I meet people who claim to be "saved." And I hate to have to say this but most of them have sour personalities, like they're sucking on a slice of lemon all the time. May I suggest that we turn off the internet, turn off all the ways that the world intrudes on our peace, and reflect as often as possible on how wonderful Jesus is and all that He's done (and is doing and will yet do) for us. And reflect on this, the most superlative reality conceivable, that the God of the Bible has called us into an intimate, personal relationship with Himself. And so let waves of Spirit-sent joy fill our soul, so much so that we have an uncontrollable desire to . . . yes, dance. We've cluttered up our lives with so many distractions and fruitless pursuits and interests that the joy of the Lord is something totally alien. The fruit of the Spirit is joy. If the Spirit is in control, rather than our own self-absorbed interests, we will experience that joy.

And giving thanks? Do we know *how* to say "Thank you" to Jesus? It should spontaneously and uncontrollably well up from the depths of our being, from our spirit, if we've really understood all that He is and has done. But wait. There's something else: David was God's servant. David grasped spiritual realities because they were given to him because he was faithful in his service. If we're not serving the Lord, if we're just muddling thru life, if we're desperately trying to be happy in spite of the circumstances of our lives, we'll never know the joy of the Lord and our thanksgiving will be polite at best. What we need to do is abandon our "personal" religion, and fulfill Jesus' commission as a faithful servant.

IV. Psalm 139 is popular and often referenced by opponents of abortion (see vv.13-15). But David also wrote about God's omniscience here, and it's wonderfully thought-provoking. **"Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O Lord . . . Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts"** (vv. 4,23). The idea is elsewhere in the Psalter, for example 94:11, **"The Lord knows the thoughts of man."** Do we have any idea how great God is? I suspect not. To say He is an infinite Being doesn't help, because "infinite" to us only means really, really big. All of God's creation, the entire cosmos, is just His handiwork, like if I were to make a small doll house for my daughter. He invented time and space and matter. God invented and made life. He knows everything about everything at all times. And God has total control over every aspect, every detail of this entire created world. He even – and here's where our verse comes into play – knows the future before it happens!

But perhaps David has in mind (or if David doesn't, well, I do) that God knows even the flow of information in the neuronal circuits of our brain and the words that will result from those encoded neuronal discharges. Just because I don't know the thoughts of other people doesn't mean that our thoughts are entirely private. Our thoughts are like things or events to God. He knows our motives, our desires, our presuppositions, and our hopes and beliefs. God reads us like a book. So He knows we're sinners, even if we don't acknowledge it. Jesus warned that God knows when we have lustful, adulterous thoughts, and they (our thoughts!) are an offense to Him. Paul writes that we're to bring all our thoughts into captivity to Christ. We're to think only on things that are lovely, true, good and pure. Holiness is holy thinking, holy desires, and holy motives. Let me clarify the importance of this: We need Jesus!! God knows our desperate situation and has made rescue freely available. This is why the work of the incarnate and risen, exalted Son is so *exceedingly* necessary for us all. Let's be assiduously careful not to under-appreciate all that God has lovingly done for us. Let's also be changed into the kind of person that glorifies God; we do that in the power of the Holy Spirit by deliberately, consciously living the Word of God.

V. David wrote this through the Spirit: **"God is a righteous judge, a God who expresses his wrath every day"** (Psalm 7:11). Wow! If we suppose that God's wrath is reserved for unbelievers, and will occur during the future Tribulation Period and/or at the Great White Throne judgment, we've missed it. God's perfect justice results in judgment *all the time*. We don't see a sign with big red letters saying "God's Wrath Here" on the bad things that occur in our world, so we fail to understand what this verse is saying. Famine, war, plague, tornados, sickness, whatever . . . these aren't just things that occur from time to time in our world; they may be God's judgment falling heavily because of offenses. God disciplines even His own people, so believers aren't exempt. We must pursue life according to God's will as revealed in His Word. Or else. We've been warned.

VI. Let's look now at Psalm 33. This Psalm is critically important because it confirms the Genesis 1 creation account (as opposed to evolutionary scenarios). The Psalmist, in vv. 6-9, reads Genesis 1 literally. But my interest here is verse 18, **"The eyes of the Lord are on those who fear him, on those whose hope is in his unfailing love."** In the Hebrew Bible, to

“fear God” is tightly linked to knowing, loving, serving and obeying Him (see Deuteronomy 6, for example). God is not a force in nature, nor some being who set creation in motion and then went to sleep. The God of Israel cares about those with whom He is in relationship, that is, His people, and so He looks out for those who know Him and love Him. In other words, there were within Israel those who were indifferent to God, and those who loved Him and wanted to be with Him. The Nation of Israel was a mixed group, and those who were faithful were (later) called a “remnant.” Such faithful people looked forward to One who was promised to come to express God’s greatest love and blessing, a Person who will (later) be called their Messiah/King. Jesus’ parables about the soils and the wheat and tares refer to this mixture of people within the Nation. John the Baptist’s ministry was joining together the remnant that existed at the time of Jesus. The author of Hebrews refers to the Old Testament remnant in his Chapter 11. The Church is no different: there are those who are faithful and those who are . . . well, not faithful. The faithful remnant (in the church) fears God, loves Him, serves Him and obeys Him. The opposite of hope in God’s love is either self-righteousness or simply indifference to Jesus. Paul ended his first letter to the Corinthian believers with a curse on those there who didn’t love Jesus. That’s heavy!

VII. David’s Psalm 40 expresses David’s heart for God as well as the heart of the greater, ultimate son of David, the Messiah. David writes, **“My ears you have pierced . . . I desire to do your will, O my God.”** The “ear piercing” here refers to the very first item in the Mosaic Law (Exodus 21:5-6), a servant who loves his master so much that he refuses to leave free at the appointed time so as to stay and continue serving for a life-time. David is saying that he is such a servant to God. David amplifies that by stating explicitly, “I desire to do Your will.” These two verses anticipate the Person and work of Jesus. He is the obedient One who entered this physical creation as Servant to fulfill God’s will, regardless the suffering it involved. If we’re Christ-like, that is, if we’re following Jesus, David’s attitude, which is Jesus’ attitude, will also be ours. But wait! Don’t we all say, “I desire to do Your will, O God”? Of course we do, we say it all the time. But . . . do we actually do it? Let’s not be like the Pharisees. I suspect our evangelical churches are loaded with Pharisee-type people: Hypocrites.

VIII. Psalm 45 is extraordinary! It’s written in praise of Israel’s king, yet it’s a human king who is also deity!!! Amazing. The subject of this text is someone who is distinct from God, who is beautiful, who’s a mighty warrior, and who rules on an eternal throne. A totally unique Person is being anticipated here. Do we realize that what God has done for Israel, indeed, for all humanity, is so supernal, so cosmic that the Spirit had authors of Scripture write about this Person millennia in advance. See Isaiah 9:6,7, also Zechariah 9:9. The Scriptures are supernatural; there’s no other way to account for them. Notice in verse 6 that Jesus’ throne is “forever and ever.” Jesus is Israel’s King not only for the millennial Kingdom but for eternity. Think about the implications of that!! Israel exists as a nation *forever*, and Jesus is King over all the earth *forever* – in the New Jerusalem that comes down from heaven (Revelation 21,22). There are only 3 verses in the Bible that bring together “throne,” “kingdom” and “forever,” and they are this one in Psalm 45; 1 Chronicles 17:14, God’s promise to David of an ultimate, eternal son; and that promise repeated by Solomon in 1 Chronicles 22:10. The Hebrew Bible is all about Jesus. The Greek Bible is all about Jesus. The Gospel is Jesus!

IX. Psalm 119 is unique among all the Psalms, not only in its format but in that it tells a story. Most readers miss the story because they don’t read Scripture canonically. This Psalm’s author is a servant of God, someone who is righteous, godly, who despises evil. This person delights in God’s Word, meditates on it and obeys it, and because of that is severely persecuted. This, then, is a story of conflict, of evil despising and seeking to eliminate good, in which the “good” is being in relationship with God thru His Word. So who is the author? Well, the one intended by the story is Jesus. Only Jesus seeks God with all His heart, loves the Word, is lowly and humble and blameless, is obedient to the Word, suffers from these godless persecutors and is dependent on God to deliver Him. If we’re Christ-like, we should be in view here too. This story should be our story; a follower of Jesus has been called to participate in this cosmic conflict. We do that by loving and obeying God’s will, revealed in the Scriptures, regardless what consequences result, trusting God for the ultimate outcome.

Something else is here. Why does the subject of this Psalm love the Scriptures, rather than God Himself, so intently? Answer: The Word of God stands for God Himself. See and think about Psalm 138:2d. The Word expresses and reveals the Person of God; it has His authority; it’s where we encounter Him and how we experience Him. To neglect God’s Word is to ignore God (protests of piety notwithstanding!) but to meditate on the Word is to know God, and to obey the Word is to obey God.

And one more thing about this Psalm, its length and unusual format call attention to it more than all the others in the Psalter? Why? I suggest that its message of passionate love for God’s Word is the key to understanding everything

spiritual. We need to fill our minds, our hearts, our lives with the Word of God, not for the sake of knowing information but to be able to actually be godly and so to walk with God. Exposure to the Bible on Sunday mornings is inadequate; we need to dwell in the Word, meditate on it, apply it. May our lives become the Word of God embodied and lived out.

Now, some brief but challenging thoughts on another half dozen or so verses from the Psalms:

Psalms 40:16b, **“May those who love your salvation always say, ‘The Lord be exalted.’”** If we’ve believed the Gospel, and the Gospel has transformed us, as it should, our obsession in life should be Jesus. All life, all our interests and pursuits, all our decisions, all our relationships, and all our thoughts and motives should be related to Him.

Psalms 49:20, **“A man who has riches without understanding is like the beasts that perish.”** Beware! Wealth is dangerous. In non-evangelical churches, they say that wealth is a blessing. No it’s not. In our evangelical churches we say that we’re to hold wealth as a trust. OK, that’s better. I say that wealth is the worst thing for the soul. Let’s understand that wealth demands worship as a god, or as an idol. We can only control our attitude toward wealth by deliberately giving it away. That way we repudiate or show righteous contempt for wealth.

Psalms 50:21b, **“You thought I [that is, God] was altogether like you.”** God here accuses Israelites of doing evil and thinking they were able to get away with it because God, being silent, must have been indifferent to their immorality. What they didn’t realize is, God sees everything and judges offenses in His time and His way. May we be extremely careful that, because judgment doesn’t fall immediately, we’re not getting away with *anything*. We can excuse sins, but let’s not presume that God does that also.

Psalms 62:12, **“You, O Lord, are loving. Surely you will reward each person according to his deeds.”** In love, God sees to it that every human gets a reward. The problem is, When? People who live for self, or for some other god, get their reward in this life – such “reward” as it is. Those who live for God as expressed by their works, their fruit, their service for Jesus, receive their reward on the other side of death, in the next existence. And what a stupendous reward that will be! Let’s be wise about this.

Psalms 97:7c, **“Worship Him, all you gods!”** Idolaters are going to be put to shame (7a,b). But worse, even the hidden object of idolatry, the wicked gods, that is, all the gods who rule over the Gentile nations, will one day have to worship Israel’s God, more specifically, Jesus (see Philippians 2:10,11). So involvement in idolatry of any kind is doubly stupid. Idolatry is rife in modern society; we need to be exceedingly discerning.

Psalms 126:5,6, **“Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy. He who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with him.”** The “sowing” in view here is teaching, preaching, distributing the Gospel. Tears? Yes, if we’re filled with the Spirit, the tears of Jesus for the lost will flow over our face too. Joy? Yes, there’s joy in serving Jesus, a joy that those who refuse to serve Him will never experience.

Psalms 141:4, **“Men who are evildoers – let me not eat of their delicacies.”** We’re to be separate from ungodly people, even to the extent that we eschew fellowshiping with them. OK, we need to interact with them at work and in other necessary contexts. But we don’t want to enjoy their company, being with them, in relationship with them. We belong to Jesus, the Holy One of Israel. We’re not free to associate with any people we want to or that we like.

Psalms 141:5, **“Let a righteous man strike me—it’s a kindness; let him rebuke me—it’s oil on my head. My head will not refuse it.”** We must be humble to be godly. No proud person can be godly. So if in some way we stray into error, and a brother recognizes it and rebukes us, we need to accept the correction as an act of love. Sadly, our evangelical assemblies are saturated with people who have fixed opinions, values, ideals, and beliefs that aren’t biblical, and they’re refractory to correction because of pride.

Dear Reader, the Book of Psalms is packed with gems of true, spiritual realities. I’ve discussed the above to create a desire for more as well as for our instruction. We need to read and meditate on the Psalms all the time for our growth and sanctification. May we love God and the things of God as much as did David and the other authors. More important is this, may our reading and meditating on the Psalms translate into godliness.