

A Parade and a Pacemaker: Getting Into the Psalms, So That the Psalms Get Into You

Psalm 118:19–24 and 119:97–104 | 08.13.2017 | The Psalms

Imagine . . . what it looks like to watch a parade: What do you see? Floats, old cars, bands.

Well . . . in this parade . . . we have band after band after band . . . each playing their own tune, each marching with their own song.

Yet, this parade also has a master conductor . . . who has arranged the songs of the marching bands . . . so that each band contributes to the overall parade.

Then, at last, like the Macy's Day Parade, you have the final float, this is the one everyone is waiting for . . . in the Macy's Day Parade it is Santa's float.

But in our parade the main float is that of Jesus Christ.

This marching band illustration is something like what you find in the Psalms.

As we are learning . . . you know each Psalm, like each marching band, plays its own tune. It may have similarities with other Psalms, but we can listen to each on its own.

However, these Psalms have been collected, arranged, and ordered in such a way that their presentation, much like the arrangement of bands in a parade—if one was thinking this way—communicates a larger storyline.

Then, as with the Macy's Day Parade, there is final figure to whom the parade leads. In the Psalms, we are introduced to God's righteous man and royal son in Psalms 1 and 2.

But it takes the whole Psalter before we understand who this man is . . . it is not David son of Jesse. Rather . . . it is David's Son.

As Jesus says in Matthew 22, quoting Psalm 110, "What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?"

Indeed, debating the Pharisees, it is Psalms 118 and Psalm 110 that Jesus quotes. This is not accidental . . . for these Psalms are the gateway to entering the Psalms.

Indeed, after watching intently the highs and lows of David's prayers, after hearing the cries of salvation in Book 3 and the promise of the Lord's kingship in Book 4 . . . Book 5 introduces the coming messiah who will make all things right.

Psalm 110 introduces the priest-king who will defeat the nations.

Psalm 118 explains how he will be the one rejected by men on the cross and taken up by God the Father and made the cornerstone of God's Kingdom.

This is why Jesus says in Matthew 21:42: "Have you never read in the Scriptures: " 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes'?"

Indeed, the Psalms are not just songs to learn or prayers to study,

Individually, they minister grace to our hearts . . .

But even more . . . **collectively** they lead us to God and the Son of God, Jesus Christ.

That is . . . they move from history to heaven . . . from David to David's Son, who is David's Lord.

This is why we have taken time to consider the Psalms as a whole.

And why today, we pause to consider . . . how to join the parade.

Here's our question . . . **How do we get into the Psalms ??**

And more importantly, how do the Psalms get into our hearts and our habits?

So, in the time we have . . . I will suggest 7 ways you can get into the Psalms.

And the first begins right where Jesus leads us in Matthew 21–22.

The gateway to the Psalms is the One to whom the Psalms point.

1. Read the Psalms with Christ

Before asking the question: Is Christ *in* the Psalms?
We must ask: Is Christ your guide *to* the Psalms?

To borrow from Jared's illustration last week . . . we wouldn't enter a cave without a guide

We can't approach the throne of God without a mediator.

And we can't understand the Old Testament without the instruction of the Spirit of Christ.

In other words, Christ who is our saving mediator . . . is also our seeing mediator.

That is, when we are saved by him . . . he gives us eyes to see.

W/O him . . . and his saving & enlightening work . . . we cannot understand God's Word.

Thus we need to ask . . . what does he say about the Psalms?

Again Matthew 21 and 22 are the place to begin. In these two chapters as Jesus debates the Pharisees about who has authority . . . he stumps them on two Psalms – 110 & 118.

After quoting 118:22, he says – ⁴³ **Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits.** ⁴⁴ **And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him."**

Friends, this is the whole story of the Psalter.

God promises David a kingdom. He establishes David on the throne – **Book 1**

David puts the throne in jeopardy with his Sin – **Book 2**

God has mercy and establishes David's Son Solomon – **Psalm 72**

But Solomon also sins and so do his sons. Therefore, David's kingdom is lost.

Israel is exiled. And God's covenant with David is in question – **Book 3**

Enter God's plan of redemption. He will be Israel's king. And God will establish himself on the throne, through the offspring of David, who we find out is also God. All of this is told in books 4 and 5 of the Psalms – the context of Psalm 118.

And so David quotes from **Psalm 118** to say the kingdom promised to heirs of David has been given to those who trust in David's Son . . . and we enter into this kingdom, we join the royal parade by means of faith in the stone rejected, the one who is the cornerstone.

This is the most important aspect of our reading. We do not read the Psalms as lawful Jews. We read them Christians . . . we read them with Christ as our teacher.

When we read them together . . . we hear the story of our Savior and we want with all our hearts to follow their lead . . . to sing the soundtrack . . . and to lead others to joy the chorus.

This is also what impels us to read the Psalms . . . Consistently . . . Even Every Day

The first key to reading the Psalms is to read them WITH Christ

The **second** key to reading the Psalms is to read them WITH Christ consistently.

If you go home today and read Psalm 119 . . . you will find two overarching themes.

1. You will see again and again . . . a reference to walking in the WAYS of God.
2. You will see a heart delighting in the sweetness of God's Word.

In fact, **verses 1–3** display both of these themes.

- 2 Blessed are those whose WAY is blameless, who WALK in the law of the LORD!
- 3 Blessed are those who keep his testimonies, who seek him with their whole heart,
who also do no wrong, but walk in his ways!

Indeed . . . such a longing to live according to the Word of God is a gift of God.

The natural man has no such affections for God's Word. To him, the law is ONLY a burden. And the words in this book are only consumed because they must be.

But . . . when someone is born again, when he opens the eyes and regenerates the soul, . . .
. . . that heart will of necessity long for the pure word of the Lord.

This is what we find in Psalm 119 . . . the meditations of a man fully converted.

So it is entirely possible . . . that if the Word of God is uninteresting to you . . . it's because you have no inheritance in God's kingdom and no participation in God's Spirit.

If that's you . . . cry out in your darkness . . . like the blind man who hears Jesus voice . . . cry out to Christ and don't hold back. Jesus heard blind Bartimaeus and he will hear you . . .

Yet, there's another possibility . . . it is also possible that the heart cleansed by Christ's blood has tasted so little of God's Word that your appetite is small and stunted.

Like an orphan child can be alive but badly malnourished . . . so the child of God who takes residence in a church devoid of the Bible can be alive but weak and weary.

So too . . . the child of God who feasts on the living bread once a week only has spurts of energy . . . and fails to know the pleasure of daily fullness.

Therefore, we must begin here.

To know the Psalms . . . you must give a part of your day to the Psalms.

If have a daily quiet time, you can add them to your Bible reading. If you don't have a daily quiet time, you could start by reading 1 Psalm a day.

By just reading one Psalm a day, you can read the whole Psalter twice in a year. If you read five a day you can read the Psalms 12x in a year.

If you did that for a year . . . imagine the way it would stir your affections for God and impel you to read other parts of the Bible!!

A number of years ago I started the habit of reading five psalms a day, then after a short time I moved to one a day . . .

This has now become a prime way I pray in the morning . . . and it is what has given me the most insight into the whole book.

After a sermon a few weeks ago, someone said: "You must have done a lot of study for this."

Well sort of . . . really . . . most of my observations have come over the last few years.

In this series . . . I have refined those observations. But in truth, it has been the yearly habit of reading through the Psalms multiple times that has given the most insight.

So if you want to get into the Psalms, you have to find a way to read them daily.

Now . . . Consider the alternative . . .

If you don't read them daily you will experience them like a musician who only practices once in a great while.

If you've ever learned to play an instrument, those beginning lessons are hard, strange, maybe even painful.

But overtime, regular practice turns the instrument of drudgery into an instrument of love, indeed, it becomes an extension of your body, such that you express your deepest emotions through the strings, chords, and meter.

So too the Psalms, when you only read them occasionally, you will experience the same kind of frustration that an unpracticed musician or an untrained runner does.

But if you spend daily time with David, Asaph, and the Sons of Korah they will become intimate friends, their vision of God will become your vision of God, their faith will strengthen your faith, and their prayers will catalyze your prayers.

But all of this comes . . . only as you read the Psalms consistently.

3. Reading the Psalms Prayerfully

Still . . . reading the Psalms daily only grips your heart as you read them prayerfully.

Indeed, just as a hunger for the Word is a gift from God, so is prayer.

Yet, until we stand in glory . . . we will struggle with prayer.

I wish it wasn't so, but part of the normal Christian life is to fight for breath.

If God's Word is spiritual food; prayer is our spiritual breath.

The trouble is . . . while the Spirit impels God's children to cry out "Abba, Father."
We are all Spiritual asthmatics . . . in need of more air, more grace, more Christ.

And some of us need more help breathing than others!

This is where the Psalms come in

While we can read any passage of Scripture and pray it back to God . . . the Psalms are especially written to shape our prayers.

Indeed, many of them were birthed out of intense seasons of emotional longing & prayer.

These God inspired words are not simply words from God to man, they are Spirit-inspired words from man to God.

That is, when 1 John 5:14 says that God hears us when we pray according to his will, we get God's will from the Bible. And we find in the Psalms model prayers to guide and empower our prayers.

I'll be honest . . . there are days when I wake up and find my heart tired and struggling to rise.

Thankfully this is not everyday . . . but it is more prevalent than when I was 25.

Indeed, the weight of the world and the sluggishness of our flesh will chain our hearts and silence our prayers . . . unless the Lord comes to our aid.

Even one of the greatest voices for truth in our generation, John Piper, has said: "I feel like I have to get saved every morning. I wake up and the devil is sitting on my face."

Friends, this is why God gave us the Psalms.

The Psalms are God's spatula . . . they scrape our weary souls out of the depths and lift them high into the heavens . . . until they flip us over and we find joy in God.

To the tired and weary soul . . . the Psalms teach us how to pray

Listen to Psalm 63

¹ O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. ² So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. ³ Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you. ⁴ So I will bless you as long as I live; in your name I will lift up my hands. ⁵ My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food, and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips, ⁶ when I remember you upon my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night; ⁷ for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy. ⁸ My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.

To put it simply, every time you read the Psalms, you can pause after each verse and offer that verse into a prayer.

If you are lacking power, the promises of God in the Psalms give strength.

If you are lacking direction, the focus of God's Word gives clarity.

Indeed, hear again **Psalm 119:97–100**

⁹⁷ Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day. ⁹⁸ Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies, for it is ever with me. ⁹⁹ I have more understanding than all my teachers, for your testimonies are my meditation. ¹⁰⁰ I understand more than the aged, for I keep your precepts.

There is no better way to learn wisdom than poring over the Psalms in prayer.

Such meditation and prayer gives comfort and counsel, and in time it enables you to comfort others with the counsel you have received.

In this way, the Psalms spur not only personal prayer and supplication, but informed intercession on behalf of others.

Indeed, there is no better healing balm than the Spirit-inspired words of the Psalms.

As Donald Whitney has said, ““God has inspired a psalm for every sigh of the soul.” (54) . “God gave the Psalms to us so we would give them back to God” in praise and prayer.

To get into the Psalms, therefore, we must let the Psalms get into us . . . and that only comes through Christ-present, consistent, prayerful reading.

But . . . such prayerful reading can go astray . . . if we don't follow the route of the Psalms

Like a parade that turns down a dark alley, we can misread the Psalms if we don't follow their inspired route. . . and that is why we've spent the summer reading them canonically.

4. Read the Psalms Canonically

The word CANON can be a little vague . . . so let me explain.

Originally . . . canon (with 1 'N') meant "rule," like it is translated in Gal 6:16.

As for all who walk by this rule, peace & mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.

In time, CANON came to describe a certain authorized collection of books in the Bible.

In opposition to the Catholic Church, these books of the Bible were not authorized or made legitimate by the church. They were recognized as being inspired by God.

With regards to the Psalms, canon or canonical has to do with reading all of them together.

And this is vitally important. It's important because the order and arrangement of the canon is intentional, not accidental.

Just as every psalm was inspired, we believe that the book as a whole was also inspired and arranged for our edification.

So David wrote **Psalms 23** . . . but he didn't know it as Psalm 23. Its placement in the Psalms came later through Ezra or some Spirit-led scribe like Ezra.

As Romans 15:4 says, "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope."

Why does it matter that we rightly understand the Old Testament . . . it is for hope sake!

God gave us the OT . . . with its laws and proverbs, stories and songs to give us hope.

And thus, if we ignore them or fail to read them as God wrote them . . . we deny ourselves the very hope God intends for us to have.

Consider this . . . If you're feeling downcast, discouraged, despairing, you might try reading OT

Countless are the times I have felt that way. And often it has been reading the OT . . . with its promise-filled, forward-looking message that has refreshed my soul.

But such hope comes only from understanding the message of the Old Testament

The Bible doesn't work like a magical potion. It is not a wizards spell book – sorry Harry Potter fans!

No . . . the Bible tells a story . . . and hope is garnished from the Bible as we read every passage, every chapter, every psalm in light of that story.

Or in the case of the Psalms . . . as we learn the story of David in its unfolding books.

So practically speaking . . .

Reading the Psalms canonically means keeping an eye out for where you are in the Psalms.

And this is where these Big Picture sermons are meant to serve your daily reading.

If you read the Psalms daily with an eye to the big picture, very shortly you will begin to get an intuitive sense of the book's parade route.

Let me illustrate: Over the weekend, I taught a class in Louisville, KY. When I arrived and drove to the seminary, I ran into construction.

Now if I ran into construction in DC I'd pull out my phone to find a way around because I'm still learning the city . . . Then I'd grow frustrated because there is no way around.

But in Louisville, since I'd lived there for five years, I didn't pull out my phone. I knew where I was. I turned the corner, took a back road, and avoided the men in orange.

This is exactly how you must learn to read the Bible.

At first . . . you read with help from others. You have your Bible and your study notes.

But soon, if you are reading with Christ, consistently, prayerfully AND in line with route of God's Book . . . you will soon discover fresh visions of grace and truth as you read the

Friends . . . there is nothing like following the Bible's own parade route . . . because it leads to glorious visions of Christ . . .

So let's apply this to reading any Psalms. When you read a Psalm you should consider...

ASK Is it in Book 1 or 2 where the prayers of David are still going?

Is it in Book 3 where the prayers of David have ended and exile for the nation is nearing?

Is it Book 4 where David's kingdom is lost, but God's is not?

Or is it in Book 5 where a new David emerges in Psalm 110 and rises to glory in Psalms of Ascent?

In reading or praying individual psalms, it might seem difficult to merge the individual psalm with the larger soundtrack of salvation.

But really it's no different than learning the order and arrangement of your favorite symphony or your favorite album.

Indeed, just as Handel's Hallelujah Chorus necessarily comes at the end of Handel's Messiah, so the Psalms also have a particular order we must follow.

5. Read the Psalms Consecutively

To read them rightly, you must read them consecutively.

Now . . . that doesn't mean you can't jump to Ps 23, 103, or 121 – three of my favorites.

But it does mean that in reading them consecutively, you are listening to the Psalms as they have been given.

As Jared showed us last week . . .

We must read Psalm 88 by itself **AND** in combination with the following Psalms.

Psalm 88 must be read by itself in order to feel the full weight of darkness that comes to an individual who has lost everything.

And we must also read that Psalm in its place in canon.

As it stands at the end of Book 3, a book designed to retell the downfall of Israel.

Psalm 88 also stands in close proximity to Psalm 90, a song of Moses, the man forever identified in Israel as the leader of the exodus.

His name would register in the mind of every Jew the hope of exodus and the possibility that light might shine into darkness.

Indeed, to read the Psalms as a unified soundtrack does not detract from the meaning of any individual psalm.

Rather, it amplifies the effect of each Psalm . . . and better yet, it protects us from the postmodern tendency of making every Psalm about myself.

Before asking “**What does this Psalm mean to me . . . ?**”

We **MUST** ask, “**What is this Psalm doing here in this place?**”

Only after we consider the words of the Psalm and the placement of the Psalm can we apply it to Christ and to ourselves.

So we must read the Psalms with an awareness of their ordering . . .

And for this reason I would urge you to read them **DAILY** and **IN ORDER** . . .

And the reason why this matters is because that's how they were intended be read, and because following the route of the parade will lead you to Christ.

6. Read the Psalms with Christ in Mind

That is to say . . . when you read the Psalms in order you see how they lead you to Jesus.

Here's how it works . . .

First . . . you must read the Psalms with an awareness of the history of David.

As John Walton has called the Psalms a Cantata about the Davidic Covenant, we must read the Psalms in parallel to the covenant history of David.

Indeed, the Psalms are the musical score that follows the life of David and that proceeds beyond David to his son.

So if you want to understand the Psalms you have to know something of David's life and the lives of David's sons.

Therefore, the covenant history of Israel is a necessary part of understanding the Psalms.

Next, because the life of David ultimately leads to a son who will sit on his throne forever, we must see how the Psalms lead to Christ.

Indeed, it is not that a couple verses in the Psalms talk about him. The whole parade is for him. In the beginning it looks like this is David's parade but by the end, all eyes see whose parade this is. It's Jesus parade.

Therefore, to understand any Psalm you must see how every Psalm leads to Christ. Therefore, as you read the Psalms according to Covenant history of David's sons, you must read the Psalms eschatologically, anticipating and building expectation for a Christ.

Last . . . under the banner of reading the Psalms with Christ in mind . . .

We need to see that the Psalms are more than just an external parade, they are also heart-palpating pacemaker.

The Psalms beat with the heart of Jesus and train our hearts how to live, love, and labor in his kingdom as his disciples.

Truly . . . these are the songs meant to fill our hearts with praise, thanksgiving.

But even more . . . when we experience crushing sorrow and unbearable loss, the psalms of lament give us words to sing and strength to go from night to morning, sorrow to song.

And so church . . . this is why we need the Psalms and why we need to let all 150 Psalms lead us to Christ and help us walk with him, with hearts pumping in his parade.