

“Prayer Fuel”
Psalm 5
June 3, 2018

INTRODUCTION:

We are interrupting our study in Matthew’s Gospel for the summer and will resume it in September. I have selected some of the lesser known psalms for our focus this summer. The psalms have been called “Israel’s Hymnbook” because this book contains the songs used in Old Testament worship. The title “Psalms” is from the Greek translation of the Old Testament and came to have the meaning “songs.” Like our own hymnbook, there are both favorites and lesser known psalms. Just as there are jewels among many of the lesser-known hymns in our hymnal, there are treasures to be found in all the psalms, no matter how well-known or unknown they may be. It will be these less familiar psalms that we will be looking at this summer.

All of the psalms are designed to help us in our worship, which according to the Bible, is the most defining aspect of one’s life. As humans, it is impossible not to worship. Even atheists are worshipers. They can’t help it. They may not worship the God of the Bible or of any other recognized religion in the world, but they are still worshipers. A person’s worship is revealed by the voice to which they give ultimate authority. To worship someone or something is to make that person or thing your master. I came across an interesting line this week written by the eighteenth century English poet Alexander Pope. He once engraved a verse he had composed on the collar of a dog, which he then gave to the King of England. The verse on the dog collar said, “I am his Highness’ Dog at Kew; Pray tell me, sir, whose dog are you?” Kew is the name of the Royal Gardens in London. The point is that we all have a master, even the King of England. It may be the master of self, and often is in our age, or it may be human reason, appearance, success or money.

Only the worship of the true God brings life, and the Psalms are all about worshiping this God. We’re going to start with Psalm 5, which features a prominent part of worship—prayer. Most Christians I know regard their prayer lives as an area of weakness. The most common reason for that is not the lack of skill, as if we could just take a course on prayer and then have a great prayer life. The central problem, instead, is that of motivation. We don’t pray because we don’t want to pray. This psalm reveals three motivations for prayer.

I. Great Need

Psalm 5, like so many others, is written as a response to the threat of enemies. David, like most prominent leaders, especially those determined to

follow God, had many enemies. Some of them were intent on physical violence against him. The ones in this psalm seem more given to verbal violence. Note how often the sins of the tongue are described here, the sins of boasting, lying, flattery and deceit. In a memorable metaphor, he says in verse 9 that **“their throat is an open grave.”** We have all experienced the smell of death in the form of some decaying small animal. But this is no small animal, but a human being, whose grave is opened while the decaying process is in full swing. Remember too that this was a hot climate, accelerating the decaying process and leading to an abominable stench. The words of David’s enemies are nauseatingly offensive.

The sad truth for most of us is that our prayers are best motivated by great need, the kind of need against which we feel powerless. Desperation motivates prayer. We can see David’s desperation at several points in this psalm. Notice the three different words he uses for his prayers in the first two verses. He begins by asking God to **“give ear to my words.”** That makes sense. When we pray, we use words. But then he says, **“consider my groaning.”** He refers to his prayers as wordless groans. There are times when our need is such that we can’t even articulate it. We just groan. And then there is the third word, “cry.” **“Give attention to the sound of my cry.”** That is a cry for help, a looking to the Lord to come to David’s aid and deliver him from a situation of great need.

The very structure of the psalm highlights the depth of David’s need. Notice that it contains five stanzas, alternating between calls to God and descriptions of David’s enemies. In the first stanza, David simply reports on the fact of his praying to God. Stanza two (vs. 4-6) then speaks of his enemies, the boastful, deceitful and evil ones determined to harm him. Stanza three (vs. 7-8), then returns to God and David’s hope in him, followed by another return to his enemies in the fourth stanza (v. 9-10) and then a concluding stanza (v. 11-12) ending with God. Don’t you find that alternating pattern true of your prayers when you are facing a significant need? Let’s say you are facing a job loss with its consequent loss of income for you and your family. You begin praying to God, calling out to him to provide for you. It helps to do so, but as you pray, the enormity of the need returns to you and your heart begins to panic. That growing fear forces you to return again to the only hope you have in God. So you start praying again about this need, and the need once again leads you to think about the challenge facing you. Finally, you end in faith, taking your need to God and letting it rest there. This alternating pattern of looking to God in faith and then looking to the problem in fear is a common pattern in prayer.

So our prayers are motivated by need. Have you experienced this in your life? I can identify with David, because I too have been the victim of slander at times. There is nothing you can do in such situations except take it to the Lord. You can’t go about setting the record straight because you have no idea how far the lies about you have spread. Maybe you’ve not been the victim of slander, but you do have needs about which you need to be praying. Sometimes we

miss the opportunity for prayer because we don't think to take our small needs to God. I remember reading something Rosemarie Miller said about this. Someone once said to her that we shouldn't bother God with our little needs such as finding a parking space in a congested urban area. Rosemarie was currently serving as a missionary in London, and she replied, "How else can you possibly find a parking spot in London?" David said, **"In the morning you hear my voice"** (v. 3). I think it is a good practice to begin the day by remembering the needs you will face that day and taking these to the Lord. When you wake up each morning, you are awaking on the battlefield.

So who are your enemies? They may not be as obvious to us as they were to David, but that just means they are more dangerous. The Bible says that we all have three great enemies: the world, the flesh (the sinful nature) and the devil. These three form an alliance of evil, seeking nothing less than our destruction. Let's just talk about one of them, the flesh or sinful nature. The Bible teaches that it is our nature to sin. The strongest indictment of David's enemies in this psalm is the extreme statement of verse 9, **"their throat is an open grave."** Remember, though, that Paul quotes this verse not to describe just the worst among us, but also the best (Romans 3:13). It describes not only the bottom 10 percent of humanity, but the top 10 percent as well.

I was in the gym one day this week and couldn't help but overhear two recent high school graduates talking to one another about their graduation gifts. They were comparing how much cash they had each received. One of these young men commented on how great it was that his mother sent out graduation notices to all of her Facebook friends, and as a result he just started getting checks in the mail, many from people he had never met. As these two young men were discussing what they were going to do with their sudden windfall, one of them said, "Yeah, but the real bummer is that now I'm going to have to write thank you notes to all the people who sent me money." I dare say these two didn't know that a preacher was eavesdropping on their conversation and that its contents would end up in a sermon. But their lack of caution allowed a more honest look at their hearts, a look that revealed ingratitude. The honest truth, though, is that the preacher overhearing their conversation has the same enemy in his own heart. He too is ungrateful. But this is not just a common human foible; it is an enemy. It keeps us from experiencing joy and contentment in our lives and brings inestimable damage to us.

II. A Great God

It takes more than great need to motivate prayer. If all we had was a sense of great need, the only thing that would bring is great despair. We must also bring our great need to our great God. Notice, for example, how David early in the psalm addresses God as **"my King and my God"** (v. 2). The possessive

pronoun “my” teaches that God is willing to help and the titles “King” and “God” teach that he is able to help. When Jesus taught his disciples to pray by giving them the model prayer we call “The Lord’s Prayer,” he taught the same thing. He tells us to address God as “Our heavenly Father.” He is a father who is for us and he is in heaven, the place of authority and rule.

There is an important contrast in this psalm, found in verses 4 and 7. Verse 4 says the person of evil **“may not dwell with you”** while David said in verse 7, **“But I, through the abundance of your steadfast love, will enter your house.”** Couldn’t this be interpreted as being boastful? David is saying, “Evil people can’t live with you, but I can.” David had just said, **“The boastful shall not stand before your eyes.”** How is it that he is not being boastful here? The answer lies in the term “steadfast love” of verse 7. This is actually the first use in the psalms of a very important word in the Old Testament. It is the Hebrew word *hesed* which refers to the covenant love of God. To call it covenant love means that it is based on God’s promise, not on David’s merit. David is actually exhibiting great humility here. His claim upon God is bold, but is based on God’s character rather than anything in David. Notice how at the end of the verse he says **“I will bow down toward your holy temple.”** The temple is the place of sacrifice, the place where sins are paid for by blood sacrifice. And then notice how David prays, **“Lead me, O Lord, in your righteousness because of my enemies; make your way straight before me”** (v. 8). David did not trust himself even to make basic decisions about what he needed to do. He needed the Lord’s guidance in every area of life.

This truth about the greatness of God must be applied in our praying. It is foundational. I notice in this psalm how David both begins and ends with this and also includes it in the middle. When we pray, we begin by reminding ourselves that God is for us and that by his mercy we belong to him and he belongs to us. In the middle of our prayers, we never wander far from the truth that God has made covenant promises to us. He has pledged himself to stick with us and by us, and he will never go back on those promises. And at the end of our praying we close by joyfully remembering his blessings upon us. If I could be permitted another bicycle analogy here, prayer is like riding a bicycle in this way. If you’re riding along, you can only coast for so long before you will slow down enough that you can no longer maintain your balance. You must occasionally turn the pedals to increase your speed. Calling to mind and resting in the covenant love of God in our praying is like turning the pedals on a bicycle. It keeps the whole thing going.

III. Great Results

The third motivator in our praying is to remember that God answers prayer. That’s what David was talking about in verse 3 when he talked about “watching.” **“In the morning I direct my prayer to you** [I prefer the alternate

reading] **and watch.**” The word “watch” is commonly used of the night watchman looking for the dawn. Prayer is like shooting an arrow into the sky toward God. When you do so, it will come down. When I was a boy, my parents once gave a bow and arrow to me and my brothers as a Christmas present. It was a real bow and arrow, not a play version. We would shoot the arrows at targets, but would sometimes get tired of that and shoot them into the sky and compete for who could shoot them the highest. We learned that we always needed to watch them come down to make sure we didn’t get hit by a falling arrow. The same is needed in our praying. We need to look for the answers and then celebrate those answers.

The last stanza of our psalm celebrates the results of prayer. **“But let all who take refuge in you rejoice; let them ever sing for joy, and spread your protection over them, that those who love your name may exult in you.”** Remember that the wicked enemies of David were sinning with their tongues: boasting, lying and using flattery. All of those are basically ways to try to control our life instead of trusting God to do so. One of the most effective ways I know to avoid these sins of the tongue is to use the tongue instead to praise God. It is impossible for the tongue that is praising God to also boast and flatter, because the praising tongue trusts God while the boasting tongue trusts self.

CONCLUSION:

The psalms can help us learn to pray in the same way that we teach our children to talk. We teach them to talk by talking to them. At first, they just look back at us and don’t seem to respond at all. Next, they will smile at us as we talk to them. At some point, they will pick up words and begin repeating them to us, though oftentimes with pronunciations that only the parents can understand. Our two-year old grandson was with us last weekend and we enjoyed a time of swimming in our lake with him. We had to get out of the lake when the dark clouds gathered and we told him that we had to stop swimming because the thunder was coming. For the next hour, he was talking about the “bumber,” his pronunciation of the word “thunder.” But eventually, our children learn to pronounce the words correctly and even to string them together in complete sentences. They learn by listening to us.

We can learn to speak to God in the same way, by listening to the psalmist as he prays. Perhaps your prayers right now are like those of the toddler. I would urge you to keep reading and praying the psalms. Jesus did so, and many of his prayers are quotes from the psalms. May God both teach us and motivate us to pray as we read these prayers together!