The Psalms as an Invitation into a Spiral Relationship with God John Goldingay

The last two chapters of Ephesians include two exhortations about prayer. Ephesians 5:19-20 urges, “Be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making music in your hearts to the Lord, giving thanks always for everything in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ, to God the Father.” Then Ephesians 6:18-19 adds, “In every prayer and request praying at all times in the Spirit, and to this end staying alert with all perseverance and request for all the people who belong to God, and on my behalf, that the message may be given me when I open my mouth.”

The fact that these exhortations start by referring to psalms suggests they would be thinking at least in part of *the* Psalms, the book of Psalms, the Psalter, and it would make sense if they assumed that the Psalms were the church’s resource for prayer and praise. It would fit with the fact that it was some centuries before Christians started composing a lot of Christian hymns. There are one or two compositions that you could call Christian hymns within the New Testament, such as the songs of Mary, Elizabeth, Simeon, and Anna in Luke 1 – 2, but it’s also significant that these are rather like psalms. When the Holy Spirit inspired those people to give praise in connection with Jesus’ coming, they did so in a form that fitted the way the Holy Spirit had inspired the people who praise and pray in the Psalms, which is not very surprising. Suppose we were to try out the idea that the book of Psalms is in the Scriptures to teach us how to pray, too?

I can imagine the people who put the book of Psalms together now rolling their eyes, because they themselves gave us some signals that they did their work in order to teach Israel how to pray. The Book of Psalms divides into five books, like the Torah. It’s a book of teaching on praise and prayer. It’s 150 examples of things you can say to God. But they fall into a much smaller number of ways of speaking to God, about four main ways, I would say. First, there are psalms of praise. Second, there are actual prayers. Third, there are psalms that declare our trust in God. Fourth, there are thanksgivings or testimonies to God answering our prayer. In a psalm of praise, we say “You’re great.” In a prayer psalm, we say “Help!” In a psalm of trust, we say “I trust you.” In a thanksgiving, we say “Thank you!” And those are the dynamics of a life of prayer and praise. It is a continuing movement between praise, prayer, trust, and thanksgiving.

**1 Praise psalms**

First, praise. Here’s a typical simple example of praise, Psalm 100.

Shout for Yahweh, all the earth, serve Yahweh with joy, come before him with resounding.

Acknowledge that Yahweh is God, he made us and we are his, his people and the sheep he pastures.

Come into his gates with a thank-offering, into his courts with praise, honor him, worship his name.

Because Yahweh is good, his commitment lasts forever, his truthfulness to all generations.

Praise psalms like that one typically have two parts. There’s a challenge or an invitation to praise – shout, serve, come, honor, worship. And then there are the reasons – God made us, we belong to him, he is God, his commitment lasts forever, and so on. The reasons comprise the contents of the praise. Psalm 100 goes through the sequence twice – challenge, then reasons, then more challenge, then more reasons. It’s as if saying it once can’t be enough.

Then it’s noticeable that the first of these features, the challenge, implies that you don’t praise God on your own. We encourage one another to praise. It fits with an odd note in those exhortations in Ephesians, where people are bidden to speak to one another in psalms and hymns. They are speaking to God, but they are also speaking to one another. These psalms of praise do the same. Many do say directly to God, “You’re great.” But many involve people saying to one another, “Isn’t God great?” Because saying it to one another brings God glory. Another aspect of the challenge to praise is that it makes clear that praise is noisy. It involves shouting and resounding – that’s a word for ululating, for going nananana. The word for “praise” itself, which is related to the word “Hallalujah,” similarly suggests going lalalalala. Praise is not something you just do in your heart. It involves the whole person. The same is true about all the ways of praying that the Psalms illustrate. The Psalms have no ideal of silence. Ideas about prayer in urban societies often emphasize silence, and maybe they need to, because we are surrounded by noise. But it’s not an ideal we get from the Bible. In the Bible, praise and prayer involve noise.

It’s because praise and prayer involve the whole person that praise may also involve not merely thanksgiving but a thank-offering, an offering that expresses our praise outwardly and concretely. David once said that he refused to make an offering that didn’t cost him anything. Our Christian worship doesn’t cost us anything. Indeed, for us the question is more, what does our worship give us? What do we get out of it? The Psalms wouldn’t think that kind of praise was worship. They would think it was more like self-indulgence.

One feature of the content of the praise in Psalm 100 is that God is our maker, and God is our shepherd. The praise relates to God’s commitment and God’s truthfulness, and to the fact that Yahweh is God. Yahweh is the particular name of the God of Israel – in English translations, it’s usually changed into “the Lord.” But the way I translated it just now left the name Yahweh as it was in the psalm. God revealed his name to the Israelites and invited them to speak to him by name; it was an aspect of the personal relationship they had with God. But their having that relationship didn’t mean they were the only ones God was interested in. Yahweh wasn’t just God for the Israelites. Yahweh was God – period. That’s why the psalm begins by inviting all the earth to worship Yahweh. Yahweh *is* God.

Now none of this praise is about what God has done for the psalmist personally. We will come to that kind of praise in the Psalms in due course, but it’s worth noting that there are these psalms of praise that focus on who God is, on how God created us, and on the way God has consistently related to his people. In this respect, too, they pull us away from talking about ourselves. When I praise God, I get myself out of the picture.

## 2 Prayer psalms

Prayer is a second form of speaking to God that features in the Psalms. Here is an example, from Psalm 22.

My God, my God, why have you abandoned me, far away from delivering me, from the word I yell?

My God, I call by day but you do not answer, and by night – there is no quietness for me.

But you are enthroned as the holy one, the great praise of Israel.

In you our ancestors trusted – they trusted and you rescued them.

To you they cried out and they escaped; in you they trusted and they were not shamed.

But I am a worm, not a person, an object of scorn for humanity, an object of contempt for the people.

All who see me mock me, open their mouth, shake their head.

“He should commit it to Yahweh, he must rescue him, he must save him, because he delights in him.”

That’s the beginning of the psalm. The beginning, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” is the words Jesus uttered on the cross, but they didn’t start off life as a prophecy of the Messiah. They started off life as a prayer that any Israelites could pray when they were abandoned by God, when they were overwhelmed by sickness or poverty or fraud or attacks from other people. There are many psalms of this kind. They spend much of their time describing what has gone wrong in someone’s life and protesting to God about it. Indeed, in the eight verses included above, there wasn’t any actual prayer at all, in the sense of request for God to do something. In the next ten verses, there is only one line of prayer. It’s not particularly unusual; prayer psalms give a lot of space to describing, lamenting, and protesting about the situation we are in.

There is thus an interesting difference between the way we usually pray and the model the Psalms give us. We don’t spend much time describing the situation. Maybe we assume that God knows about it, so we don’t need to tell him. Yet oddly, we don’t mind telling God what we think he should do about a situation – Lord, give the surgeons wisdom, Lord give my friend peace, Lord help the Congress to see that they should be taxing the rich not cutting benefits to the poor. The logic I just referred to might make you think that God could discern what to do. The way the Psalms work is by being very general in what they ask God to do – listen to us, rescue us – but very detailed in their description of our situation and need.

We may have been taught that complaining or protesting to God is inappropriate. In contrast, the Israelites knew that God was like a father or a mother or a teacher or a boss, and they knew that if you have a good father or mother or teacher or boss, you can go to them and tell them how terrible things are and appeal to them to do something about it. You have the freedom of a child with its father or mother in speaking to God. Of course sometimes there are considerations other than your need of relief that a father or mother or teacher or boss needs to take into account in deciding how to respond to your plea. The same is true with God, which is one reason why God doesn’t necessarily do what we ask in our prayers. But the Psalms assume that if we do want our parent or teacher or boss, or God, to act, then we need to make it crystal clear to them how tough our situation feels, in the hope that they may then decide that our need does take priority over other considerations they are aware of. Sometimes people say that prayer is not designed to change God but to change us. The Scriptures see prayer as changing God in the sense that God agrees to do something different from what he would have done if we had not prayed, and fallen foul of that terrible comment in James, “You have not because you ask not.”

In those verses that I read, while some lines were protesting at how things were for the person praying, other lines were declaring truths about God. God is the one who is enthroned in Israel, the one who rescued Israel from its enemies. In fact, lines of this kind in the psalm are saying the kind of thing that a psalm of praise says. It turns out that praise and prayer are closely related. You can’t understand prayer unless you understand praise. One reason is that prayer starts when the things you say in praise aren’t being born out in life. In praise we say that God is faithful and always near us. In prayer, this kind of protest prayer, we say that things are not turning out that way. “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?”

At the same time, we don’t simply give up the praise. When your life falls apart, it’s tempting to react in one of two ways. Either you deny that it’s really happened, or you give up on the truths about God that you used to affirm. The Psalms model a third way, which involves looking steadfastly in the face two sets of facts. There are the facts about God’s faithfulness and power and mercy, and the facts about our experience of abandonment. It’s hard to hold onto both sets of facts, but that is what many psalms model.

One key to holding onto two sets of facts is to look to the future as well as to the present and the past, and the last third of Psalm 22 gives itself to describing how things will be when God has answered the psalm’s prayer. When the psalms think of God answering prayer, they imply that it has two stages. Answer to prayer stage one is when God listens to the prayer and says “Yes, I will do something about that need of yours.” Answer to prayer stage two is when God actually acts and does it. Psalm 22 and lots of others already begin to praise God for answering the prayer, and you could get confused about whether the person praying is still in the mess that the earlier part of the psalm described. The answer is that they are still in that mess, but they know that God has listened to the prayer and that he’s going to get them out of it. It hasn’t happened yet, but they know it’s going to happen. They haven’t yet received answer to prayer stage two, but they have received stage one. In a sense their relationship to the two sets of facts is now more complicated. You could even say there are three sets of facts. There are the facts about who God is, the facts of the situation as it is, and the facts about what God is going to do but hasn’t yet done.

A fine illustration of the dynamics of this process is the story of Hannah in 1 Samuel 1. Hannah is unable to have a baby. Her husband takes another wife as well as her, which was the ancient equivalent to artificial insemination. This second wife has children at the drop of a hat, which solves the problem for her husband, but isolates Hannah some more. So she goes to the sanctuary to pray, and she pours herself out to God, and eventually the pastor tells her that she can go home in peace and that God is going to grant what she has asked, and she goes her way with her face no longer downcast. Now she’s no more pregnant than she was before. God hasn’t answered her prayer in the sense of causing her to conceive yet. She has received only stage one of an answer to her prayer. But she does now know God has heard her prayer and has said yes to it, and this fact is enough to change the look on her face. The family all go home and Elkanah and Hannah make love, and “Yahweh remembered Hannah.” She conceives and has a baby. She has now experienced stage two of the answer to prayer.

One final insight about the prayer psalms is that you don’t just use them to pray for yourself. You use them to pray for other people. I’ll talk about that some more in the breakout session.

## 3 Psalms of trust

Thirdly, there are psalms of trust. An example is Psalm 23.

My shepherd being Yahweh, I do not lack; he enables me to lie down in grassy pastures.

He leads me to waters that are totally still; he restores my life.

He guides me in faithful tracks for the sake of his name.

Even when I walk in a deathly dark canyon, I am not afraid of disaster,

because you’re with me; your club and your cane – they comfort me.

You spread a table in front of me in full view of my enemies.

You have bathed my head in oil; my cup fills me up.

Yes, goodness and commitment will pursue me all the days of my life.

I will return to Yahweh’s house for long days.

The psalm knows all about what it’s like to be surrounded by enemies. More metaphorically, it also knows what it’s like to be a sheep in a dark canyon where there might be a lion or a bear or a snake hiding behind the next tree. It’s the kind of prayer you could pray in that kind of situation, so it’s like a prayer psalm, yet it’s also unlike a prayer psalm, because whereas a prayer psalm expresses a sense of panic and abandonment by God, a trust psalm is dominated by confidence and faith in God. The situation is the same; your feeling or attitude is different. Confidence and faith are usually there in a prayer psalm, but you have to wrestle for them. God has to give you the gift of faith. In a psalm of trust, God has done so already.

One neat feature of the life of prayer that the Psalms invite us into is that you don’t have to be in a particular state of mind or heart or spirit in order to pray. Once again, coming to God in prayer is like coming to your father or mother. You don’t have to get ready to talk to them. At least, when the relationship is healthy you don’t have to do so.

Psalm 22 and Psalm 23 stand next to each other. When there may be a lion around the corner, some people may find it possible to trust God, other people may panic. God can handle either reaction. There’s an old book called *Prayer* by Otto Hallesby in which he says, “As far as I can see, prayer has been ordained only for the helpless. It is the last resort of the helpless.... We try everything before we finally resort to prayer.... Prayer and helplessness are inseparable.” So when I feel helpless, or guilty, or doubting, or dishonest, or depressed, or angry, that feeling isn’t something that has to stop me praying. It’s my way into prayer.

That fact is also part of the answer to a question that often vexes people, the way the psalms express anger and a desire for God to put people down. Why would God want to have such prayers in his book? There are various answers. That desire of God’s may indicate that God prefers us to urge him to put people down rather than trying to put them down ourselves. But some of the violent desires in our hearts are right desires. We wish to see evil put down and punished. The New Testament affirms that desire. We may not be able to trust our discernment about whether our desires are right or wrong, and maybe it doesn’t matter too much, because the Psalms imply that the thing to do is express them to God and then leave it to God to decide what to do about them. So anger and hatred is not a barrier to prayer, but our way into prayer. That is how anger relates to trust. There is a real trust involved in expressing our anger and hatred to God rather than expressing it on the people we feel it for. It’s been said that “it is an act of profound faith to entrust one’s most precious hatreds to God, knowing they will be taken seriously.”

The psalms of trust give us resources to make trust possible. We need to turn to those resources before we are consumed by anger or fear; when we confront things that make us angry or afraid, if may be too late. It’s a bad idea to tell people who are suffering that they should read the Book of Job; the people who need to read Job are the people who aren’t suffering, so that it shapes their reactions when trouble does come. The time to read the psalms of trust is when you’re not walking up a dark canyon. You can then discover from them what we can trust God for. From them you can remind yourself of bases for trusting in God that lie in your own experience and of bases for trusting in God that lie outside your own experience. Studying them when you are not on your way up a dark canyon has the potential to reframe your thinking so as to change your reaction if a lion appears. But if it turns out that you still get in a state of panic and need to pray the Psalm 22 way, not the Psalm 23 way, God may roll his eyes, but he’ll still get his club out and whack the lion. But if it turns out that you’ve become a Psalm 23 person, he will do so with a grin, and you will grin too.

## 4 Thanksgiving psalms

We come fourthly to thanksgiving psalms. We noted how the Psalms imply that there can be two stages to God answering prayer. First God says, “Okay, I’ve listened, I’ll do it.” Then God actually does it. There may be no space at all between the two stages to the answer, or there may be quite a gap; thus some psalms carry on praying when it looks as if God has *said* yes, because he hasn’t yet acted. If you become aware of God saying yes while you are praying, then you say thank you there and then – that’s why some psalms end with praise. But in due course God acts, and that’s when you pray a different way, the way that’s embodied in a thanksgiving psalm.

I spoke just now about Hannah. Her story goes on to illustrate the nature of this process. After she has had both stage one and stage two of her answer to prayer, she goes to the sanctuary again and she prays a kind of thanksgiving psalm; it comes in 1 Samuel 2. It’s a distinctive kind of thanksgiving psalm in that it sets the answer to her prayer on a broad canvas, because her son is no ordinary gift to an infertile woman. Her son is Samuel, who is going to be the prophet who anoints Israel’s first king, Saul, and who then anoints David. But arguably she thereby illustrates something that’s characteristic of answers to prayer. They come not as merely part of something private going on between us and God. They play a part in God’s wider purpose for the world.

In a looser sense that’s true of thanksgiving prayers in the book of Psalms. Here is Psalm 30.

I will extol you, Yahweh, because you put me down, but you did not let my enemies rejoice over me.

Yahweh my God, I cried for help to you, and you healed me.

Yahweh, you brought my life up from Sheol, you kept me alive from going down to the Pit.

Make music for Yahweh, you who are committed to him, confess his holy remembrance,

Because there is a moment in his anger, a life in his acceptance.

In the evening weeping lodges, but at morning there is resounding.

A few weeks after I met, fell in love with, and proposed to my wife Kathleen, I discovered I had prostate cancer, and I arranged to have surgery a few months after our wedding. We had a very moving prayer time in church and I knew God had heard people’s prayers. It was stage one in having a prayer answered, in the way the Psalms portray it. It means you start praising God for answering your prayer, but you recognize that stage one is only stage one. Only after stage two, when you have seen God’s answer and not merely heard God answer, do you stop praying and start simply praising. For me, even that process felt a bit more complicated, in that the doctors were very pleased with themselves after the surgery, and in this sense you could say stage two had come; but getting back to feeling normal took some more time, and the real stage two came when I had the test a few weeks later that established that the level of the relevant antigen in my blood was now right. Then I *really* knew God had answered those prayers.

Psalm 30 illustrates the way you pray after stage two – or rather, it illustrates the way you thank God for answering your prayers and other people’s prayers after stage two, and the way you give your testimony to what God has done. I use the word “testimony” as well as the word “thanksgiving” because thanksgiving involves telling a story. This kind of testimony doesn’t involve telling the story of how you got converted some years ago. It involves telling the story of something God did for you this week. The story characteristically comes in three parts. You relate how things went wrong for you, how you prayed, and how God answered that prayer. Psalm 30 has a feature in common with the psalm with which we started, Psalm 100: it says what it needs to say, but then it says it again. I actually read only the first half of the psalm. It then starts again, as if the psalmist felt that the first telling just wasn’t enough to do justice to what God had done. So the second half tells the story again, and gives us more information on how fine things were before trouble struck, and on the way the psalmist prayed.

When you offer a thanksgiving prayer, you are not the only person it affects. That’s part of the way in which answers to prayer are not merely something private going on between us and God. A thanksgiving psalm is also a testimony psalm because it’s designed for other people to hear and for them to join in with, because the facts about God that it illustrates are as relevant to the rest of the congregation as they are to the person who is healed or rescued. In other words, you can no more thank God silently than you can praise God silently. Psalm 30 thus has something else in common with a praise psalm like Psalm 100, and something that fits with the way Ephesians speaks about prayer. Thanksgiving is a way we speak to one another as well as to God, because it is testimony.

In our church on Sunday we try to give space to people to tell us what God has done for them this week. It’s only a little church, so we can do this in a way that you couldn’t in a big church. We don’t get contributions every week, but we do some weeks, and it’s something that gives glory to God and upbuilds the congregation. Now there’s a sense in which we should have things to thank God for every week – we have a lady who always thanks God that she woke up this morning. But the psalms think of thanksgiving as relating to special things God does for us, which won’t happen to everyone every week. But it would be nice to think they would be happening to someone most weeks. Hearing their testimony then upbuilds us all.

That fact links with another feature of the life of prayer that the Psalms point to. The ways of speaking to God—praise, prayer, trust, thanksgiving—form a circle. Praise leads to protest and/or to trust, and to thanksgiving, and back to praise. And you don’t go around that circle just once. After you get back to praise, something else is likely to happen to drive you to prayer or protest and trust, and when God answers, that experience will again push you into thanksgiving and testimony, and thus back to praise that is now even more nuanced. That is the spiral life of prayer into which the Psalms invite us. To judge from individual psalms, you can come into that spiral at any point and go as far around the spiral as you need to or can on that occasion.

One footnote. I’ve said nothing about confession of sin, because the Psalms say little about confession of sin. There are one or two psalms that major on confession and a few others that refer to our sinfulness, and if you add to the Psalms the prayers in other Old Testament passages such as Ezra 9, Nehemiah 9, and Daniel 9, then you get more of an understanding of the significance of confession, but the Psalms’ own emphasis is that if you want to praise God or pray, you had better be a person of integrity, not a person who needs to go in for a lot of confession. Its further significance for us is that the Psalms don’t give much basis for what a therapist friend of mine calls “worm theology.” That fact links to the way the Psalms do stress the importance of being people of moral integrity. The Book of Psalms starts there; Psalm 1 implies that you can only praise and pray if you are someone who walks Yahweh’s way, as opposed to someone who walks in the way of the faithless.

So the life of prayer into which the psalms invite us takes us on a spiraling journey through praise, prayer or protest, trust, and thanksgiving or testimony. May God bless you as you take that exciting journey.