

# The Costly Loss of Old Testament Spirituality (2)

## Praise, Prayer, and Intercession

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Speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, says Ephesians. Pray in the Spirit, it goes on. When it speaks of psalms, it may not have in mind only the praise and prayer songs in the Book of Psalms, but it surely includes them. Placing Ephesians and the Psalms alongside each other invites us to infer that the Psalms model the nature of worship, thanksgiving, and prayer. The Psalms are in Scripture to guide our praise and prayer. But when I listen to Christians pray, I hear little evidence of our praying being shaped by them (or by any other part of Scripture). The loss of the influence of the Old Testament's material on worship and prayer is a costly one.

### **First, worship.**

In our culture, worship often means a block of singing that occupies one of the two major parts of a service—the other being the sermon. The emaciated nature of what counts as worship is a feature of our culture. Now Jeremiah makes some comments on the spiritual state of things in Judah that helps us understand our spiritual state.

After its introduction, the Book of Jeremiah starts with Jeremiah lamenting the reduced state of Judah in his day, and offering some explanation for it. They've forgotten their gospel, he says, the good news, the story of what God did for them, the story about the God who brought them out of Egypt and gave them the land; and they haven't asked where God was when things went south. Further, they've given up on God's written word. "The people controlling the Teaching, the Torah, didn't acknowledge me," Yahweh says. The written word of God wasn't shaping their relationship with God, and their lives. Instead, they have turned to other spiritual resources. They've abandoned the fountain of running water, in order to dig themselves cisterns that can't hold water. In Israel, the best water supply would be a spring or a well from which you could get fresh water, but sometimes you'd have to make do with a tank to collect water in the winter for use during the summer. A leak in the tank then has deathly

implications. How stupid to give up a spring and choose to rely on a tank, specifically a leaky tank. Yet Israel has done that in turning from Yahweh. It happened because they thought the culture around them had the answer to their key needs, and they assimilated to the culture in turning to Ba'al as a deity who could meet their needs. Perhaps they continued to call God Yahweh, but they'd changed Yahweh's nature to that of Ba'al, so that in effect Ba'al was the one they were worshipping.

Parallel factors can affect the church. We can assimilate to our culture, and worship is a key way we do it. Worship becomes the way we deal with our emptiness and our isolation. Worship is designed to make us feel good. The point about God is to make us feel good. So churches may give up the reading of Scripture in worship, because the reading of Scripture is not very engaging. They may give up much reference to the gospel story, because those events happened a long time ago and they don't look as if they speak directly to people's lives. It can be possible to go through a whole worship service without hearing any reference to the gospel events – to the way God created the world, delivered Israel, sent Jesus to live and die for us, and raised him from the dead. Like Israel, we can forget the gospel and give up on God's written word because we're so concerned with our personal needs.

What we really need is to be brought out of ourselves by seeing our lives set in the context of a bigger picture, a bigger story, the gospel story (in the context of this talk of mine, by the gospel story I of course mean the whole story that comes to a climax in Jesus but that isn't confined to his story). Yet we are so overwhelmed by our emptiness, our isolation, and our insignificance that we don't pay attention to this bigger story. All we want inside church as outside church is to think about ourselves in our need. So we turn God into someone whose focus is on meeting those needs. In worship we use many of the same words our forebears used, the words God and Lord and Jesus, but the content we read into them comes from the contemporary context. We are scratching where we itch. But when people have a serious itch, they need more than scratching to put it right. We are trying to short-circuit the process whereby God gives content and meaning to our lives. We make God a quick fix for our needs. But quick fixes don't work. The only fix that works is the gospel story and the Scriptures where we find that story. But in worship we have given up on those.

We have devised a religion to enable us to give expression to our individual sad selves and we hope it'll make us feel better, but it doesn't really do so. We may leave worship on a high but we're soon just as sad as when we arrived. We think that more of the same is the solution. If we make the worship livelier, it'll work. But we're trying to get a drink from a tank with no water. We've focused on our immediate felt needs and given up on the gospel story that made us what we are. We're focused on me, rather than on God, on Scripture, on the church, on the gospel, and on our calling on God. We've assimilated to the culture, as Israel did, and forgotten the big picture. We think the gospel is just about me and God—especially about me. The worship that Jeremiah longs for and that the Psalms commend and model is one that focuses on God.

### **Second, testimony**

Once every month or so, I sit in front of the congregation instead of preaching, we re-read one of the Scripture lessons together, and I ask people whether there was a verse that jumped off the page for them (our congregation numbers only thirty or forty, so it's a practicable procedure). The other Sunday, almost before I'd asked the question about what had jumped off the page from the chapter we were looking at, Hebrews 13, a woman came out with some of the lines:

He has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you." So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?" ... Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

We knew the tough year this woman had been through as she'd been the victim of abuse and fraud. Our awareness of that gave great power to her testimony about God's presence with her and God's proving that she didn't need to be afraid. It's the kind of testimony that builds up the trust of other people in a congregation.

The woman's testimony fulfills the function of testimony psalms. Psalm 30 is an example. It begins, "I will exalt you, Yahweh, because you lifted me up out of the depths," and it goes on to tell the story of how that happened. They're usually termed thanksgiving psalms,

and they do give thanks, but they interweave thanksgiving addressed to God with testimony addressed to the other people in the congregation. They tell a story along the lines of the one presupposed by that woman's testimony, a story of how things were okay, and how things collapsed one way or another, and how the person prayed, and how God answered. It used to puzzle me that Ephesians speaks of singing to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, but one clue to the rationale for that way of speaking comes here. Our worship, and specifically our thanksgiving, addresses other people as well as God. It builds them up.

There's a paradoxical or an ironic extra comment to be made about praise and testimony. Israelite worship was costly. Whereas we can go to church with empty hands and expect to leave having received something, Israelites often went to worship taking the best lamb from their flock or the best bull from their herd. A Jebusite once had David show up wanting to buy his threshing floor to build a sanctuary there. Wisely guessing which way the wind might be blowing, the man offered David the threshing floor for free, but David declined, declaring, "I won't offer up to Yahweh my God burnt offerings that cost me nothing." We Christians are inclined to think that no longer having any obligation to offer sacrifices to God marks our faith as superior to that of the Old Testament. At the very least, things are more complicated. Ironically, Jeremiah (like some other prophets) told people that Yahweh loathed their sacrifices—they thought that sacrifices pleased God whether or not their lives outside worship matched who Yahweh is. In our context, Jeremiah's message would be the opposite. He'd be expecting us to find ways of offering God worship that cost us something, like the woman in the Gospels who put her last two dollars in the offertory.

### **Third, prayer**

In 1945, a nineteen-year-old German soldier called Jürgen Moltmann was taken prisoner by the British and placed in a camp in Sherwood Forest, not far from the seminary where I used to teach. There the YMCA set him going on the theological study that eventually took him to being one of the great twentieth-century theologians. Having lived through the horrors of the Second World War, the collapse of an empire and its institutions, and the guilt and shame of their nation, many German prisoners collapsed inwardly and gave up all hope, some of them dying. "The same thing almost happened to me," Moltmann says, were it not for a "rebirth to a

new life” which turned Christian faith into reality rather than formality. The experience of misery and forsakenness and daily humiliation gradually built up into an experience of God.

It was the experience of God’s presence in the dark night of the soul: “If I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there.” A well-meaning army chaplain had given me a New Testament.... I became fascinated by the Psalms (which were printed in an appendix) and especially by Psalm 39: “I was dumb with silence, I held my peace, even from good; and my sorrow was stirred.” ... Hold thou not thy peace at my tears: for I am a stranger with thee, and a sojourner, as all my fathers were.” These psalms gave me the words for my own suffering. They opened my eyes to the God who is with those “that are of a broken heart.”

Claus Westermann speaks in similar terms about his own wartime experience, when the Psalms were the part of the Bible that most resonated with him (he then focused on the Psalms for a significant part of his academic career).

I realized that the people who had written and prayed the psalms understood prayer differently than we do. Prayer was closer to life, closer to the reality in which they lived, than is true with us. For us, prayer is something a person does or is admonished to do—a human act. But in the Psalter, crying to God grows out of life itself; it is a reaction to the experiences of life, a cry from the heart.

It’s been said that the Psalms invite us to let church be the place where you can talk about things that you can’t talk about anywhere else. It’s easy to think of church as a place where we can shut those things outside for an hour—but we then discover that they are still real when we leave church. I recall a scene in a movie or a sitcom in which one girl is telling her friend about a problem. The friend asks her if she has told her therapist about the problem. “Oh no, it’s personal,” she replies. She hadn’t got the point about therapy, in a way that we often don’t get the point about church. The Psalms invite Israel to get this point about their prayer in the

temple, or in their local sanctuary, or in their homes (most Israelites lived too far away from Jerusalem to pray there, so I guess they prayed mostly in those other contexts). The significance of the prayer psalms, which are often referred to as psalms of lament (though psalms of protest seems to me a better description) has come home to many people over the past twenty or thirty years, and it's enabled them to find some freedom in prayer and protest. It wouldn't be surprising if they've also thus found some maturity, given that Jesus, the most truly human man, during his time on earth "offered pleas and petitions to the one who was able to save him from death, with loud shouting and tears.... He learned obedience through the things he suffered" and thus he was "made mature."

#### **Fourth, intercession**

While I see the importance about the way that protest or lament psalms has changed people's understanding of prayer, I think there is another aspect to that revolution that is not so understood.

I used to wonder about two general questions concerning the Psalms, and eventually I realized that the same consideration suggested the answer to both questions. I used to teach in a Church of England Seminary, where we were in prayer and worship every day and we prayed the Psalms one-by-one day by day. We weren't choosing a psalm to read each day on the basis of its corresponding to our current situation. We were reading (say) Psalm 47 because we read Psalm 46 yesterday and we will read Psalm 48 tomorrow. That practice made me ask what on earth we were doing, and I came to two conclusions. One was that by reading the entire Psalter we were shaping our habit of thinking about praise and prayer. The other was that in praying prayers or praises that didn't correspond to our own circumstances, we were identifying with other parts of the Christian community and the world community whose circumstances corresponded to those out of which the psalm prayed. In other words, we were involved in intercession.

This realization provided me with an answer to another question about the Psalms that had puzzled me. It seemed obvious that the Psalms modeled the nature of supplication—of praying for oneself. But how did Israelites pray for other people—how did they intercede? There are hardly any explicitly intercessory prayers in the Old Testament, but a feature of some

of them is that the prayer takes first-person form. Someone is praying for other people, but identifies with them: praying not for *them*, but for *us*. Intercession involved putting oneself in other people's place. It involves acting as a go-between, interposing between two parties so as to bring them together, identifying with one party and representing it to another. So one speaks as "we" or "I" not as "they" or "he" or "she." I realized that the apparent absence of intercessory prayers from the Psalter meant that the "I" and "we" psalms could be used as intercessions as well as supplications. Perhaps Israel used them that way; certainly we might do so. In praying protest psalms, one need not be praying for oneself.

This year is the tenth anniversary of the partial genocide of the Darfuri people in Sudan. Many of the Darfuri who escaped that atrocity fled to Chad and have been living in refugee camps there ever since. My step-daughter and her husband have spent most of these ten years seeking to get the West to recognize the plight of the Darfuri and to take some action on their behalf. When I married Katie-Jay's mother, Kathleen, three years ago, we started making prayer for the Darfuri part of our prayer routine. When we are home for dinner, we use the Episcopal form of prayer for early evening before we eat, and we added to it a psalm that we said on behalf of the Darfuri people. We started at the beginning of the Psalter, and simply prayed the psalms one after each other, one a day.

Now more than half the psalms are psalms of lament and protest, and in praying the prayers in the Psalms that speak out of oppression, affliction, persecution, and tyranny, we pray not directly for ourselves but for people who experience oppression, affliction, persecution, and tyranny, with whom we identify. We pray for God to put down tyrants and oppressors. In connection with the Darfuri, one might think of President Omar al-Bashir of Sudan, for whose arrest the International Criminal Court has issued a warrant on counts of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide.

A feature of the Psalms is then that they virtually never speak of taking violent action to put down oppressors. They don't give reasons for this omission. I'm tempted to describe the Psalter as the most pacifist book in the Bible, though I resist the temptation because speaking in terms of pacifism is anachronistic; pacifism implies a framework of thinking that doesn't appear in either Testament. Two other considerations underlie the Psalms' stance. One is the

practicality that the people who prayed the Psalms were usually in no position to take action against their oppressors. Prayer was all they had. But what a powerful weapon they knew it was! That fact links with the other consideration. Prophets such as Isaiah frequently insist that the vocation of the people of God is to trust God for their destiny and not to take action to safeguard it. The Psalms' stance fits with that emphasis. "Praying the Psalms," it's been said, "is an audacious act of trust."

### **Fifth, imprecation**

The way the Psalms pray for deliverance from oppressors does trouble Western Christians. The psalms are praying for people; they are also praying against people. They are imprecatory psalms. They provide people who are oppressed with a means of urging God to take action against evil in the world, and they give people who identify with the oppressed a means of praying for them. It may well be that there is a therapeutic value in expressing anger. But the main point about imprecation is not to get things off one's chest so that one feels better, but to urge God to take action. It compare with Paul's comment in Romans 12 about vengeance belonging to God. The imprecatory psalms enable us to take up our role as intercessors for the victims of oppression. It's a crucial role when we're in no position to do anything about the oppression, but it is just as crucial when we *are* in a position to do something, because the psalms remind us that what we do is not decisive.

Maybe the imprecatory psalms are more significant for the brothers and sisters of the oppressed than for the oppressed themselves. The Old Testament knows that people who are wronged may recognize a call to turn the other cheek and not desire the punishment of the people who have wronged them. Joseph takes that stance. It may then be the responsibility of people who care about the victims of wrongdoing and who care about the vindication of right in the world to pray for God to put wrongdoers down. The imprecatory psalms are for us to pray, who are not victims. Indeed, if we don't want to pray them, it raises questions about the shallowness of our own spirituality, our theology, and our ethics. Don't we want to see wrongdoers put down and punished?

One reason for our not wanting to see it happen is that we may be on the receiving end of the putting down. The most notorious imprecatory Psalm is 137, the psalm that talks about



babies being dashed on the rocks. There's a reggae version called "Rivers of Babylon" that was a long-running number one record in Britain. Ironically, we British who listened to the song and sang it never realized that it was about us, that we were Babylon. Perhaps the BBC would have banned it if we had realized. People in countries such as Britain and the United States are therefore wise to support the view that nobody should use such Psalms. It would be dangerous if people prayed them and God listened and responded. Dangerous for us.

Christians commonly justify their opposition to the use of such Psalms by suggesting that these psalms are out of keeping with the New Testament, but it's not so. While the New Testament doesn't quote Psalm 137, it does utilize imprecatory parts of Psalm 69, which as a whole is more extensively imprecatory. Paul declares curses on various people. Jesus also makes clear that he wants to see wrongdoers put down and punished. Both Jesus and Paul affirm the necessity of that even if they also hope to forestall it by speaking in the way they do. Revelation 6 reports an imprecatory prayer on the part of the martyrs, who ask "How long, Lord, holy and true, will you not judge and take redress for our blood from earth's inhabitants?" God's response is not to point out that such a prayer is inappropriate in light of Jesus' exhortation to forgive enemies; it is to promise them that the time will soon come. Since it has still not yet come, perhaps this promise provides further reason for us to pray in imprecatory fashion and/or further reason for us Westerners to avoid doing so if we allow for the possibility that we will be its victims. The imprecatory psalms have the capacity to scare the pants off us as oppressors and pull us to a change of life.

During the singing of a psalm, God's justice thrives. Evil-doers who seem to flourish are actually doomed. We can look around at a situation where God's justice is not thriving and say, "I want what I hear and see in the Psalms." And when we meet an enemy, we can threaten them with, "Have I got a psalm for you!"

Costly indeed is the loss of Old Testament spirituality.