

Introduction

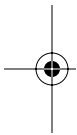
I remember it clearly. One afternoon in 1952 I was standing on the corner of Tenth and P in Lincoln, Nebraska, waiting for a bus. Okay, maybe it was another corner nearby, and maybe I was waiting for something else. But it was Lincoln and I was waiting.

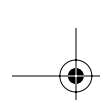
I had a brand-new copy of a brand-new translation of the Old Testament in two volumes. In my hand was the volume with the Psalms. I hazily opened to Psalm 108 and read, “My heart is ready, O God. My heart is ready.” The words leaped off the page, capturing with utter immediacy the state of my soul. I don’t know if I had recognized this state before I read those words, but when I read them, I knew. My heart was ready. My heart was ready for God. And I was learning to pray through the psalms.*

I imagine that something like this has happened to myriads of men and women over the centuries. A psalm is read privately or heard publicly in a worship service, and the hearer/listener says deep in his or her heart, “Yes, yes, oh yes. This is what I want to say to God.” From their origin in ancient Israel thousands of years ago, the psalms have indeed been the *answering speech* of God’s people.

It is my primary goal in the present book to make more explicit this *answering* character of the biblical psalms and to prompt learning how we

*Source materials are listed in the notes section, arranged by page number and key words.





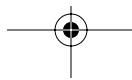
might more profoundly employ these psalms as our own speech—speech that reflects not just a generic reaction but our own utterly intimate response. May the psalms become our own individual answering speech!

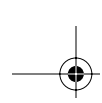
There are three aspects to this goal: (1) to learn what the psalms say about and do with prayer, (2) to learn to pray by means of the psalmists' words and (3) to develop a way of praying psalms with others.

READING COMES FIRST

Our response to God through the psalms first demands that we read them and that we read them well. So each chapter begins with a different psalm. Each of these psalms is, as Eugene Peterson says, an answering speech—the psalmist's response to God coming out of his own and his community's situation. It is, in other words, a particular response to a particular set of circumstances. Nonetheless, one of the glories of the psalms is that while they have a very particular origin in time and space—ancient Israel—they are universal in application. The presentations here focus on this mysterious connection: the way the ancient becomes modern and we twenty-first-century worshipers come to participate in the common worship of a God who never changes and yet is new to us every morning.

As mysterious as this process is, it does have a certain logic. That is, there are ways to proceed: we can learn and practice, or better, learn and practice and then learn from our practice. The present book is more like instructions for riding a bike than a presentation of a theory of prayer. It is my sincere desire that you will learn not so much from reading this book as from practicing its suggestions. That is why “Teach Us to Pray” looks as if it should be an introduction but is, in fact, the book's conclusion. Everything in that chapter should already have become obvious. Readers who have “practiced” the book should themselves be able to write the final chapter.





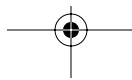
What then is the logic of this mysterious process? It all begins with reading. The sequence is this:

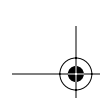
1. reading, rereading, then reading again—and again
2. clarifying the text, gaining an understanding of each of the words or phrases that seem puzzling
3. analyzing the structures in the psalm: (a) rational structure, i.e., the flow of ideas; (b) emotional structure, i.e., the flow of emotions evoked in and by the psalm; (c) rhetorical structure
4. achieving a sense of the psalmist's own often complex and changing relationship to God (e.g., calm, joyous, disturbed, turbulent, angry, depressed)
5. making the answering speech of the psalmist one's own, by repeating his words as one's own, adapting his words to one's own situation or doing some of both



The first stage, reading, is the most important. Only when we have grasped the psalm so deeply that we think its thoughts and feel its emotions are we ready to make it our own answering speech. The process puts strong emphasis on the initial, almost prerational act of reading the text, because this is the only way we can avoid second-guessing the meaning of the psalm. If we skip to analysis before absorbing the psalm, we are likely to be writing our own psalm—not just “our” psalm but one that is counter to that of the psalmist. Good readers yield to the text well before they become its analysts and critics.

Disciplined reading and rereading is a simple act of intensive looking—a looking to see what is actually there. Louis Agassiz, a Harvard zoologist of a hundred years ago, was famous for the way he introduced new students to laboratory work. He would begin by “handing them a dead





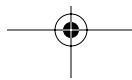
fish, or some other specimen, and requiring them to produce a complete and accurate description of it before he allowed them to proceed. To meet Agassiz's standards, this sometimes took weeks, and left the students with a badly decomposed fish on their hands." Of course, it is unlikely that any of us will come to know as much about any psalm we read as the students came to know about their fish. But that is not the goal. The goal is for each of us to know the psalm as well as we can. In the end we will not be left with a decomposed psalm; rather the psalm will have worked its way with us, attaining a clarity of meaning that brings us joy.

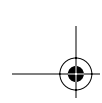
Stages two and three, clarifying and analyzing, lead to stage four and then quite naturally to stage five. Little has changed in human nature since the psalms were written. We readily see ourselves in the psalmists. In most cases their answering speech readily becomes our own.

There is, however, one set of psalms that often cause difficulty for followers of Christ. These are the so-called imprecatory psalms, in which the psalmist calls down God's vengeance on his enemies. I have chosen to face this difficulty head on in chapter eight, dealing with Psalm 137. Even where we find the psalmist's words horrifying, I think as we pray through them with care we will find that they ring true. This psalm will test our willingness to grapple with our own anger.

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE

Prayer is, of course, a spiritual discipline, however it is practiced. That is, it is a means God uses to grow and intensify our relationship with him. Moreover, prayer is closely related to other spiritual disciplines, especially the disciplines of silence and solitude. Each chapter in this book assumes that each reader is alone or at least undistracted by other people. You will be encouraged to be silent or to wait—that is, to stop the running inner dialogue we have with ourselves throughout any normal day.





To be silent means to refrain from talking, to refrain from paying attention to the sounds around us, to turn off the TV, the radio, the CD player, and to seek a quiet place for paying attention solely to God and to what he may send into our mind. This is not a normal habit for most of us in the Western world. We are a wordy people, and we seek the sounds of the marketplace and not the sounds of silence. But only as we make ourselves available to God through reading his Word and waiting for him to cast our attention his way will we mature in the practice of the spiritual disciplines and in the character of our spiritual life.

The difference between talking about silence and practicing it is like the difference between learning about prayer and praying. Only the practice contributes to spiritual growth. In the chapters that follow you will be directed to spend much time in silence with psalms that I trust God will use to transform your character and bring you closer to him.

I will say no more about this. I only encourage you to start the process as the next chapter directs.

PRAYING THE PSALMS IN COMMUNITY

Most of this book concentrates on private reading and praying. But the psalms can also be prayed in community. In ancient Israel many of the psalms were used in community worship. They are still used in the liturgies and prayer books of many Christian denominations.

Each chapter includes a group leader's guide and liturgy for that psalm. The appendix is a general guide for leaders of small groups.

But let's face it. The instructions in this book will not bring you a richer experience of God's presence. Spiritual fruit will come only if you actually pray through the psalms. And so to Psalm 32 . . .

