

1-1-1999

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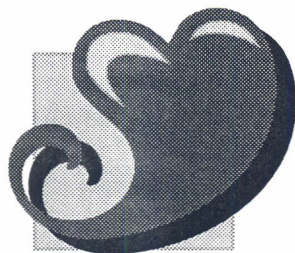


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Recommended Citation

Robarts, Charme (1999) "Learning Intimacy from the Psalms," *Leaven*: Vol. 7: Iss. 3, Article 5.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol7/iss3/5>

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Learning Intimacy with the Psalms

By Charmé Robarts

What the Psalms Assume

In the psalms we find honest expression of the two poles of human reality: gladness and sorrow. With reckless abandon Israelites sing praises to the Creator who has not been too busy with the cosmos or the political powers of the nations to hear and answer the prayers of the one. With equal certitude and unfaltering boldness, psalmists rail in complaint against their God who stands far away in times of trouble (10:1).

It is the intimacy of this speech that strikes us. The praises and laments are not spoken just in the silent rooms of the heart or just in the assembly of the people; many of them are spoken *to* God, and as C. S. Lewis has said, “this is the best part of all.” Here is true intimacy: that one may speak so not merely *of* God, but *to* him. Of the imprecatory psalms Miller says, “Whether one should or should not think and say such thoughts, in the dialogue with God one *may* say them.”¹

No doubt there are times when we cannot fully connect with the exuberance of praise or the depth of despair expressed in the psalms, but we are astonished by the perfect willingness to air these feelings before God. Can it be that he is not put off by such unguarded speech? Don’t the praises seem redundant, or the laments, a bit dramatic? Can we really come that close to him? The psalms say yes, we can. They teach us to expect to be seen and heard by God. This is not just because *we seek*

him. The psalms declare that *he seeks us*. He knows our going out and coming in. Before a word is on the tongue, he knows it (139:3–4).

The psalmist does not seem to wonder why he should pray since God already knows. The assumption is, God already knows these things; why not speak them aloud? Further, the psalmist is so certain that God sees all, knows all, and encompasses all, he insists on crediting God with every good thing that happens. He does not ponder second causes; God is Provider and Protector and Deliverer. To the psalmist, all of life hangs on God, “in whom I trust” (25:2). The trust is so secure that when danger or despair emerges, the psalmist places God at the center of this too. Trouble has come because God has not acted; when he does, the trouble will cease. The assumption is, God can change the situation; why not say it aloud?

Psalmic speech reveals an unquestioned assumption about one’s relationship with God. The assumption engenders free speech. Free speech creates and sustains intimacy. The assumption is not unfounded; it is rooted in the covenant of love extended by Israel’s God: “The LORD confides in those who fear him; he makes his covenant known to them” (25:14).² Since God has spoken, Israel may speak.

To know and be known is the heart’s cry for intimacy. In the psalms we overhear the speech of those

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who believe that they have encountered the One who knows them. They are not embarrassed to rejoice and to call others to join when life is good, nor are they afraid or ashamed to cry out for help or vindication when trouble comes. The movement from rejoicing to crying for help reflects the truth of human experience. Life is not always as it should be or as we would like it; we do not always feel like praising. Intimacy demands that the truth be spoken about this reality. The world of the psalmist is one of true intimacy, where one freely speaks of faith and doubt, of joy and sorrow, of commitment to righteousness and admission of sin. When we enter that world, we find sanction for our own pursuit of knowing and being known.

A Door to Ministry

The experience of intimacy with God enables our ministry to others. The essence of ministry is connecting with those who need connection with God, in hope that our own relationship with him lights their path to his door. In this we imitate Christ, who came to show us the Father. He took on our flesh, our causes for joy and sorrow, and from that vantage point revealed to us the Father. So we, too, show others the Father from life experience. God is not experienced in theory; he enters life and offers himself as Provider, Protector, Deliverer, and Friend. We take the offer because that is what we need—a Provider, Protector, Deliverer, and Friend. Those around us have the same need. We share with them our own experience of need and provision, terror and deliverance, loneliness and companionship with God.

The language of the psalms uncovers the possibility of such a relationship. We are not asked to believe that life is always good, but the view that things are hopeless is not tolerated. The psalms meet us on the field of real-life experience, where life is a continuum of good and bad. When we have enjoyed faithfulness and blessing, the song “The LORD is my light and salvation—whom shall I fear?” (27:1) rings true for us. When we have been mistreated or when we have sinned, the cry “Hear my voice when I call, O LORD; be merciful to me and answer me” (27:7) becomes our own. In either case, whether life is good or bad, we desire relationship, Someone with whom to share the experience. The psalms show us what life experience has revealed: there is only One who cares as deeply about our experience as we do; “My soul finds rest in God alone” (62:1).

The psalms give guidance as we seek intimacy with God. But we are not given patterns and rules; instead, we receive glimpses of human beings who have gone before us experiencing life under the reign of God. We engage with those who “stand on the earth and speak to a God who is ours but never owned.”³ The psalms hold in tension expressions of trust and doubt, and in so doing they teach us the truth.

The Lord Reigns

The psalms reveal several important imperatives for us as we seek intimacy with God. The first has to do with *recognizing the sovereignty of God*. At first glance it may seem difficult to relate God’s sovereignty with our quest for intimacy, but it is the recognition that God is over all that frees us from self-reliance, which is the bane of intimacy. The psalmists regularly rehearse God’s rule. Three examples will suffice.

1. God holds power over human life. In Psalm 3, the speaker is under threat of enemies. They threaten his life and taunt him for his belief that God will deliver him. Referring to God as his shield (v. 3), the poet concludes that his destiny is not in his own hand nor the hand of his enemy; rather, “I lie down and sleep; I wake again, *because the LORD sustains me*” (v. 5). The tense of the verb *sustains* implies that God’s care has been and continues to be in place. Recognition of God’s control gives the psalmist peace and confidence even when life is threatened.

2. God rules when the evidence seems contrary. Psalm 10 resonates in the heart of every believer whose anguished wails have been hurled upon the dull ears of the night. Suffering at the hand of the wicked is difficult enough, but equally difficult is that the wicked prosper. It appears that they get by with godlessness. The wicked person boasts, “Nothing will shake me” (v. 6); “God has forgotten; he covers his face and never sees” (v. 11). The psalmist wonders why God stands far off in the face of this trial (v. 1). The believer is forced to face such unfair circumstances. Is faith unrewarded? Will the faithful become victims of the godless? Where is God? The psalmist takes these woeful complaints to the Lord *even when God’s concern is questioned*. “Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?” (v. 1). Centuries later, storm-soaked disciples echoed the same angst while Jesus lay sleeping: “Lord, don’t you care if we drown?”

After cataloguing the violence and fearlessness of his enemy, the psalmist calls upon God to act in accordance with his character: “Do not forget the helpless” (v. 12). The plea is rooted in what the psalmist knows about God. He knows torah; he knows that God cares for the afflicted. In a final declaration of trust, the psalmist claims, “But you, O God, do see trouble and grief; you consider it to take it in hand” (v. 14). Movements like this from questioning to trust commonly characterize prayer in the psalms. The believer’s prayer consists of an internal dialogue⁴ wherein doubt and complaint are eventually met with renewed trust. The psalmist affirms that God is in control even when the evidence seems contrary.

3. God rules over the material world. Psalm 33 is a praise song extolling the truth of God’s word (v. 4), the subjection of creation to the Creator (vv. 6–9), and God’s sovereignty over the nations, their plans, and their trapings (vv. 10–17). To rebut anyone’s idea of trusting in the created world or in the accomplishments of its inhabitants, the psalm offers point and counterpoint to exalt the Lord. The stars and the heavens are splendid and the waters of the sea mighty, but it is God who made them; “let all the people of the world revere him” (v. 8). Nations have visions of power and dominance, but “no king is saved by the size of his army; . . . a horse is a vain hope for deliverance” (vv. 16–17). The psalm challenges the human inclination to trust in that which we can see and touch or that which we have made in our own image. God claims ownership and sovereignty over them

all, and yet his eyes “are on those who fear him” (v. 18). This phrase indicates God’s compassionate concern for his people. The material world offers no such care. Recognition of God’s rule over the material world clears away idols that will fail us and opens the door for intimacy with the One who will not.

The psalms reflect the anguish and trouble of life, and they do not always clearly indicate resolution to the problems. Still, taken as a whole, the Psalter claims that God still rules regardless of the circumstances. Times may be bad, and understanding may be unclear, but there is no one else to trust but God. Psalmic faith recognizes no Sovereign but God. Recognizing this truth begins the difficult task of breaking our patterns of resistance of God. The way is now opened to “dismantle” the self, to use Brueggemann’s term. In so doing we are positioned for a humility that is healing. As ministers, we bring the recognition of God’s sovereignty to those for whom we are caring. Our own lives are shaped by this knowledge, and we offer it to those for whom we care. Ministry that fails to teach by word and deed the sovereignty of God is not ministry; it is deception.

The psalmist affirms that God is in control even when the evidence seems contrary.



May the Lord Think of Me

Who can approach the Sovereign Lord? The psalms make it clear that relationship is quite possible and quite secure, but the terms are set by the Lord. Throughout its pages, the Psalter identifies those who may feel secure in their place before God. They are most often described as the “righteous.” To be righteous in the psalms is to delight in the law of the Lord, to fear him, to keep his ways, to have regard for the weak, to trust in the Lord, to sing of his love. The relationship is centered in the sovereignty of God, and the humble psalmists are planted securely in the soil of his love and care. By contrast, the wicked—or the enemies, as they are often characterized—are pictured like chaff that the wind blows away. They disregard the law; they lie and speak arrogantly against the righteous; they repay evil for good. These the Lord will bring to everlasting ruin (52:5).

But the righteous are not sinless. They frequently admit sin and in so doing again set themselves apart from the wicked. The righteous possess a true piety rooted in torah, so that they are keenly aware of the breach in relationship caused by sin. Convinced that God's rebuke and wrath will fall upon those who disregard the way of the Lord, the psalmists confess and plead for mercy and forgiveness. The relationship is secure, so the assumption that forgiveness and cleansing will be given is not disappointed: "The LORD redeems his servants; no one will be condemned who takes refuge in him" (34:22). Those who respond to the Sovereign Lord in humility find the right to intimacy.

Lord, Teach Us to Pray

To this point, I have referred to the psalms as speech to God and have emphasized that speech cultivates intimacy. But the psalms are really prayers. In using these psalms, we avail ourselves of instruction on what to pray and how.

The what and how are brought together in psalmic prayer when the one praying brings to God the most intimate needs and emotions: (1) praise and thankfulness, (2) lament and need because of danger or loss, and (3) humble confession of sin and pleas for mercy and forgiveness. In each case we see dynamic, expectant speech fueled by the certainty of covenant relationship. We have already noted the constant claim of the psalms that God rules over all. The believer recognizes this and prays accordingly. Humility naturally follows the assumption that God is sovereign. But does humility impede intimacy? Must the one praying cower and speak in halted words? The psalms say no.

The prayers of praise and thanksgiving do not appear to be spoken in tones of subdued ritualism; to the contrary, one gets the feeling that the psalmists can hardly contain the emotion. Everywhere there is the piling up of accolades and calls for others to join in. Repetitions of the imperatives "sing to the LORD" and "praise him" for his mighty acts rise and soar throughout the pages of the Psalter. There is no loss of the sense of reverence, but the singer sings with all his might. Even when the prayers are full of complaint and question, God is still held as sovereign, but the lamenter assumes that he can speak plainly. He refuses to accept his suffering as random coincidences of life on the earth. In the context of belief, he cries to God, "Why?" This is

the bold language of belief, belief that things should not be this way in God's good creation, and belief that God sees and knows and can bring healing to the situation. Surely the ancient people experienced the agony of God's negative answer, and yet the prayers continue. There is the eschatological intonation that someday God will right all wrongs.

The prayers of praise and lament are hung together in the Psalter. Human experience denies a one-sided approach to expression to God. Life is not always the way it should be, and praise is not always the heart's first impulse. That life often delivers disorientation and disappointment needs no documentation. We stumble about in the fallen world reaping the harvest we and our sinful neighbors have sown. We are powerless to change this situation; we cannot secure ourselves in a fallen world. The psalms of lament give voice to this reality; they teach us to admit the futility of allegiance to people or things that cannot deliver and urge us to go to the One who can. Sometimes the prayers of thanksgiving are offered in response to deliverance, but sometimes the psalmist sings in the dark, believing that the light will someday dawn. So the psalms teach us that prayer is an intimate, truthful language that does not shrink back from emotion.

The penitential psalms (6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143) are usually grouped with the psalms of lament. This is appropriate because these psalms realize that the relationship between God and the psalmist has been skewed. This is indeed a lamentable situation for the one who believes that all of life hangs on God and that "the face of the LORD is against those who do evil" (34:16). The psalms of confession teach us what is wrong with us and what the solution is. What is wrong is that sin has warped the relationship, and confession is a movement toward "straightening out the warp."⁵

Perhaps confession is the ultimate expression of intimacy: "against you, you only, have I sinned" (51:4). One who has been in covenant with God is known in the deepest places of the soul, so when sin threatens that relationship, every other relationship pales. The one concern is for that singular relationship. The psalms are written against the backdrop of torah (Psalm 1). Steeped in the faith and tradition of God's righteous word, the Israelite felt acutely the pain of having wandered from the ways of God. The confession "against you and you only have I sinned" is spoken in the context of David's

sin against Bathsheba and Uriah, but David is compelled to admit that ultimately, the sin is against God. The belief is that confession clears the way for a renewal of the relationship. Psalm 32 bears out the validity of the belief:

While I kept silence, my body wasted away
 through my groaning all day long.
 For day and night your hand was heavy upon
 me;
 my strength was dried up as by the heat
 of summer.
 Then I acknowledged my sin to you,
 and I did not hide my iniquity;
 I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the
 LORD,"
 and you forgave the guilt of my sin.
 (32:3–5 NRSV)

There is no pause between the psalmist's confession and the forgiveness received, but he does not arrive here cheaply. There is considerable anguish while the sinner contemplates keeping the sin to himself, seeking to control his own life with its failings. But this is impossible. Erosion of the body and psychological brokenness are proofs of a futile plan to deny and conceal the sin. But just as sure as is the anguished journey toward penitence, equally sure is the complete forgiveness of God. God moves decisively to take away guilt. The intimacy here is indisputable, if at first a fearful exposure. The sinner is laid bare, diminished of body and soul, calling out to God. It is the psalmist who paints this humble self-portrait. God simply responds. The pitiful state of the sinner is not hidden from God's omniscient sight, but God is not repulsed; he forgives.

Intimacy with God cannot avoid this situation of being known at our worst. Our worst selves must be admitted and emptied before the mercy of God. This is the only way to freedom from guilt. Intimacy with God is to be both desired and feared. It is fearful to realize that nothing is concealed from God's view, that there is nowhere to hide the secret sins and doubts. Ministry that seeks to heal the soul by some easier method is not ministry; it is deception.

Conclusion

It is emotionally daunting to imagine relationship between the holy and the unholy. It is intellectually perplexing to imagine any level of affinity with One "who stirs up breezes and the waters flow" (147:18). How can relationship be possible, and what sort of relationship will it be? Though such questions and fears haunt us, as they did the psalmists, still we find ourselves longing for a place to lay our burdened selves. We want to be able to shed the weight of our failings and rise up with a chance to start again. We want to argue out our cases; we want to speak to Someone who can really do something about the situation we are in. We want Someone to whom we can whisper our secret joys and to whom we can shout our loudest praise. The psalms show the way to break the silence of our uncertainty. The way is in yielding to God's sovereignty. Though the world is not impressed with this kind of self-relinquishing, true praise and lament is the voice of the one who knows that there is nowhere else to go.

Intimacy with God is transforming. Nearness to him pushes us off the narrow ledges of our self-absorption, and we join with God in his search for others who long for intimacy. Now that we have been to the place of healing and freedom, we cannot live indifferently to the pain and injustice all around us. God's regard for the poor and the needy becomes ours. We join with the psalmists in singing their songs of praise and lament, calling other pilgrims to hear and take part in speech to our God. He has heard us; he will hear them.

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Notes

¹ Patrick D. Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 151.

² Scripture quotations not otherwise noted are from the New International Version.

³ James L. Mays, *The LORD Reigns: A Theological Handbook to the Psalms* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), 58.

⁴ Patrick D. Miller, *They Cried to the Lord: The Form and Theology of Biblical Prayer* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 74.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 248.