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## Jesus and the Psalms



Have you ever gone on a trip, and when you arrived at your destination, realized that you had forgotten something important? It seems to be a regular habit of mine to forget to pack something necessary and vital. I've forgotten to pack my husband's glasses on more than one occasion. I have also forgotten cell phone chargers, medications, and most recently, a booster seat. We end up using valuable time and

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money going to the store and replacing the forgotten items. It gets us off track and delays our journey.

When it comes to our journey with the psalmist, before we move into the laments, bringing our emotions with us, we don't want to get too far without being adequately prepared. Like any journey we travel, we want to be prepared, knowing where we are going and having what we need with us. So before we look at the Psalms of Lament in particular, we want to look at the book of Psalms and understand its place in the context of the big picture of Scripture.

The Psalms are part of the genre of wisdom literature. If you spent any time in Sunday School as a child, you quickly learned to find the Psalms smack dab in the middle of our Bibles, situated alongside the other wisdom books of Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon. The Psalms are a collection of poems, written by a variety of authors including Moses, David, Solomon, the sons of Korah, among others. Besides the laments, there are also psalms of thanksgiving, praise, confidence, confession, and remembrance. The book of Psalms was used in Hebrew worship and sung to God in the same way we sing hymns in church on Sunday morning.

### **The Psalms Whisper Jesus' Name**

While it's easy to read a psalm and immediately apply it to our struggles in our daily life, we also have to take into account the way the psalm fits into the greater story God has written. The Bible isn't

a series of disjointed books that have nothing to do with one another. Rather, the Bible is one big story about God's redemption of His people through His Son, Jesus.

Jesus is the big picture. The Bible is about Him. The Old Testament points forward to Him and the New Testament points back to Him. Jesus is the One promised in Genesis 3:15, 'I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.' He is the One that Moses spoke of when he said, 'The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen' (Deut. 18:15). He is the One the Israelites waited for and the One the prophets promised would come. As the subtitle of the *Jesus Storybook Bible* says, 'every story whispers his name.'

This is what Jesus Himself attested. After Jesus rose from the dead, He met a couple of disciples on the road to Emmaus. They didn't realize at first that it was Him. Thinking He was a stranger who didn't know all that had happened, they explained to Him about Jesus and His crucifixion saying, 'But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel' (Luke 24:21). And Jesus said to them, "'O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself' (Luke 24:25-27). Later, when

Jesus appeared in a home where these disciples had gathered with others, He said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled” (Luke 24:44).

Jesus Himself said that the book of Psalms was ultimately about Him. To read the Psalms without that understanding is to read them contrary to how Jesus told us to read them. As the *Gospel Transformation Bible* puts it, we need to understand that the book of Psalms ‘plays a contributing role in the history of redemption that culminates in Jesus. The Bible is in essence a message of what God has done to redeem and restore sinners, and this is done preeminently in the person and work of Christ. Each book of the Bible carries forward the supreme redemptive purpose, a purpose that comes to a decisive climax in Jesus.’<sup>1</sup>

The book of Psalms contains the heart cries of God’s covenant people. As Christians, as believers in Jesus Christ, the promised Messiah who came to deliver His people from sin, we know that Christ fulfilled all the heart cries of God’s people. The *Gospel Transformation Bible* says it best, ‘Jesus is God’s definitive answer to the cries of his people.’<sup>2</sup>

### **The New Testament and the Psalms**

Reading the Psalms through a Christ-centered lens is not just some trendy way to read the Bible. It’s the way the New Testament writers viewed the Psalms.

1. *Gospel Transformation Bible* (Chicago: Crossway, 2013), p. 653.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 654.

In fact, the Psalms are referenced more than any other book in the New Testament. Paul quotes the Psalms often in his letters. Sometimes he quotes the Psalms in order to teach truths about Jesus, and other times it is to teach specific doctrines. For example, in Romans 3, Paul refers to several different psalms when he discusses the doctrine of total depravity. Quoting Psalm 14, he says, 'No one does good, not even one' (Rom. 3:12). And in Acts 13:33, Paul quotes Psalm 2:7 and applies it specifically to Jesus, 'You are my Son; today I have begotten you.' Paul, like the other New Testament writers, 'read the Psalms from a Christian perspective and saw Jesus.'<sup>3</sup>

In another example, Peter, preaching to the crowd in Acts 2, quoted David in Psalm 16 and applied it to Jesus. Speaking about Jesus' death and resurrection, Peter said, 'For David says concerning him, "I saw the Lord always before me, for he is at my right hand that I may not be shaken; therefore my heart was glad and my tongue rejoiced; my flesh also will dwell in hope. For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One see corruption. You have made known to me the paths of life; you will make me full of gladness with your presence"' (Acts 2:25-28).

Paul also preached on this same passage when he was in Pisidian Antioch in Acts 13. To the Jews gathered there and the God-fearing Gentiles, Paul quoted Psalm 16:10, "'You will not let your Holy

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3. Longman, Tremper III. *How to Read the Psalms* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), p. 66.

One see corruption.” For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep and was laid with his fathers and saw corruption, but he whom God raised up did not see corruption.’ (Acts 13:35-37). Paul here asserts that Psalm 16 can’t be ultimately about David because David was dead and buried. It was Jesus who fulfilled this verse when He rose from dead.

The Psalms, like the other Old Testament books, all look forward to Christ. However, they also have an immediate, here and now meaning for the author and original readers. These poems are heart cries of real people who went through real struggles and real trials. They were hurt and afraid. They felt abandoned, sorrowful, and angry. At the same time, the Psalms also have a deeper theme, that of Jesus Christ.

For example, in Psalm 16 which I mentioned above, David wrote it as a song of trust in the midst of an illness. He was sick, but trusted God that the illness would not kill him. However, as Acts 2 says, David knew that his psalm also pointed to the Messiah to come, ‘Brothers, I may say to you with confidence about the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants on his throne, he foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption.’ (vv. 29-31). As Christians, we can read this psalm and see Jesus. We can also see that the psalm applies to our own lives. We know that because of Jesus’

resurrection, we have a confident hope in eternity. Because of Jesus, we know even more than those in the Old Testament did what happens to us after we die.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, as we read the Psalms, we need to remember the redemptive purpose and Christ's fulfillment of the psalm while at the same time also applying the psalm to our own life.

Now that we know that the Psalms, like all of Scripture, are Christ-centered and ultimately fulfilled in Him, how do we read the Psalms in light of that?

### Words by Christ

In Colossians 3:16, Paul encourages us to let the Word of Christ dwell in us, by singing 'psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.' 'Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.' Mark Futato, in reference to this passage, says that the Greek words Paul uses for 'psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs' are all used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. 'These three words are used in the titles to various psalms. So while "the word of Christ" includes more than the Psalms, the Psalms are "the word of Christ." "The word of Christ" here would mean "the word spoken about Christ" in the first place and "the word spoken by Christ" in the second place. When reading a psalm, it is helpful to read that psalm as speaking about Christ and to read it as being spoken by Christ.'<sup>5</sup> He goes on to say that

4. Longman. *How to Read the Psalms*, p. 68.

5. Futato, Mark D. *Joy Comes in the Morning: Psalms for all Seasons* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2004), p. 14.

the Psalms of Lament in particular can be read as though they are being spoken by Christ. 'When we sing or read the laments, we are singing and reading about Christ, who has gone before us and sung the laments for us.'<sup>6</sup>

Hebrews 5:7 tells that Jesus did sing and pray the laments, 'In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence.' We remember Jesus' heart cries on the night of His betrayal, how He sweated drops of blood as He anticipated what was to come when He would lay down His life for His people. There on His knees in Gethsemane, Jesus voiced His own lament, 'Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done' (Luke 22:42). From the cross, He quoted David's lament in Psalm 22:1, 'And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"' (Mark 15:34).

We know from the last chapter that Jesus knows what it is like to live in this sin-stained world. He endured the pain, sorrow, suffering, rejection, and temptation that we have endured, yet never sinned. 'For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near

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6. Futato, Mark D. *Joy Comes in the Morning: Psalms for all Seasons*, p. 14.

to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need' (Heb. 4:15-16). It is because of Jesus and through Jesus that we can come before the Father in confidence and pour out our hearts at His feet.

When we open the book of Psalms, we must remember its place in the context of the story of redemption. We can't read them apart from Christ. The laments in particular remind us that Jesus walked the journey of the laments before us. When we read the words of David, we can remember Jesus, 'How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?' (Ps. 13:2). We can remember that He was the Man of Sorrows, familiar with suffering. We can remember that He was despised and rejected. We can remember our Savior, who lived a life of sorrow and suffering for us so that we could be freed forever from the curse of sin.

### **Songs to Our Savior**

In addition to reading the Psalms of Lament as the words spoken by Christ, we can read them and use them in our own songs and prayers to Christ. We can claim the words of the laments as our own and cry out to Christ, just as the psalmist cried out to God.

This is because Jesus is God the Son, the second person of the Trinity. He was there at the beginning. 'He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all

things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.’ (Col. 1:15-20). While during the Old Testament era, the Psalms were sung to Yahweh, God the Father, it is appropriate for us as Christians to sing and pray these Psalms to Jesus the Son.<sup>7</sup>

As we journey into the Psalms of Lament together, expressing our own sorrows and fears to God, we will be looking at the Psalms in the way I’ve discussed in this chapter. We will claim them as our own and use them to cry out to Christ for help and we will look to see how Christ fulfilled the psalm and our heart’s cries at the cross.

### ***For Your Heart***

1. What does it mean to you that Jesus has fulfilled the heart’s cries of His people at the cross?
2. Can you see how every story, including the Psalms, whispers His name?
3. Read Psalm 27. Take some time to consider how you can relate to the psalm. Then meditate on how Christ has fulfilled the psalm.

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7. Longman. *How to Read the Psalms*, p. 69.