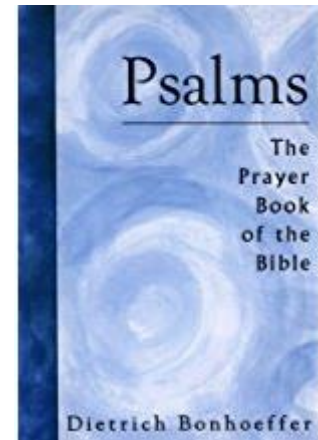


Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Psalms : The Prayer Book of the Bible

Augsburg 1970 (1966)

Notes Alison Morgan May 2018. Very short (65pp)



Lord, teach us to pray!

It is a dangerous error to assume the heart can pray by itself; prayer does not mean simply to pour out one's heart, but to find the way to God and speak with him; and for that we need Jesus. We must *learn* to pray.

Learning to pray in the name of Jesus

There is a book in the Bible which contains only prayers – the psalms. As it is through Jesus that we pray, our first question must be, what do these prayers have to do with Jesus? How do we understand the psalms as God's word? It's not enough that the psalms express that which we feel at a given moment in our heart. We need to pray not just what we want to pray (give us our daily bread) but what God wants us to pray (all those other things too). The psalms are given so that we may learn to pray them in the name of Jesus Christ.

Every prayer is contained in the Lord's Prayer; whatever is not included there is not a prayer. Luther said that the LP penetrates the psalter and the psalter penetrates the LP.

Who prays the Psalms?

150 psalms. 73 are from David, 12 from song master Asaph appointed by David, 12 from the Levitical family of the children of Korah working under David, 2 from Solomon, and 1 to music masters Heman and Ethan probably employed by David.

Following his secret anointing as king, David drove evil spirits away from Saul by playing the harp (1 Sam 16); perhaps this was the beginning of the writing of the psalms. David was a witness to Christ, a prototype of Christ, a prophet. Christ prayed these prayers through his forerunner David.

Names, music, verse form

The title of the psalms also means hymns. Ps 72 refers to all previous psalms as 'the prayers of David.' Psalter originally meant a musical instrument, and only later a collection of prayers offered to God in the form of songs. They are mostly set to music for liturgical use, and probably sung antiphonally. They are not meant to be read in haste!

Congregational worship and the psalms

The psalms can be appreciated only with daily use; it's helpful to read and pray several per day.

Classification

The psalter deals with the following subjects: creation, law, holy history, Messiah, church, life, suffering, guilt, enemies, the end.

The creation. The psalms honour God as Creator of heaven and earth.

- Psalm 8 – God as creator and man as the crown of his work
- Psalm 19 – the splendour of the movement of the heavenly bodies and of the revelation of God's law
- Psalm 29 – the power of God in thunder, the peace he sends on his people
- Psalm 104 – the fullness of the work of God

The Law. Psalms 1, 19, 119 seek to show us the blessing of the law

Holy History. Psalms 78, 105, 106. We pray these psalms when we regard all that God does once for his people as done for us, confess our guilt and his grace, hold God true to his promises and request their fulfilment, and when we see the history of God with his people fulfilled in Christ.

The Messiah

- Psalms 22 and 69 are the passion psalms. Jesus prayed the beginning of Psalm 22 on the cross; vs 8 and 18 are predictions of his crucifixion.
- Psalms 2 and 110 witness to the victory of Christ over his enemies.
- Psalms 20, 21 and 72 refer originally to the earthly kingdom of David & Solomon; we pray for the victory of Jesus in the world.
- Psalm 45 speaks of love to the messianic king; it is the song of the love between Jesus and his church.

The Church

Psalms 27, 42, 46, 48, 63, 81, 84, 87 et al sing of Jerusalem, the city of God, of festivals, temples, worship.

Life. Many are struck by how often the petition for life and good fortune occurs in the psalms. This is the petition for daily bread; it's OK. God wants the devout to prosper on earth – Psalm 37. And yet Psalm 63 reminds us that God's gifts are better than life.

Psalm 103 teaches us to understand the entire fulness of the gifts of God as a unity; cf also Psalm 65.

Suffering

The psalter instructs us how to come before God in the proper way; all conceivable perils are known by the psalms: 13, 31, 35, 41, 44, 54, 55, 56, 61, 74, 79, 86, 88, 102, 105 and others. They do not deny it; they allow it to stand as a severe attack on faith. There is no quick and easy resignation to suffering; there is always struggle, anxiety, doubt.

If I am guilty, why does God not forgive me? If I am not, why does he not bring my suffering to an end? Ps 38, 44, 79.

There are no answers in the psalms to these questions. The lamentation psalms have to do with complete fellowship with God; Jesus accompanies us in our prayer, for he has suffered every want and brought it before God. There is no suffering on earth in which he will not be with us; and on this basis the psalms of trust develop – 23, 37, 63, 73, 91, 121.

Guilt

Most psalms assume assurance of forgiveness; we are supposed to confidently leave behind sin for the sake of Jesus.

There are 7 repentance psalms: 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143; these lead us to the confession of guilt and direct our confidence towards the forgiving grace of God. Luther calls them the Pauline psalms. They are driven by serious guilt (32, 51) or unexpected suffering (38, 102).

Other psalms also lead us into the depth of recognition of sin before God – 14, 15, 25, 31, 39, 40, 41 et al).

Sometimes evangelicals worry about the statements of innocence in the psalms; but the believing Christian has to say something not only about his guilt but also about his justification; *there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.* We are not only permitted but obligated to pray *I was blameless before him and I kept myself from guilt* (Ps 18.23). We stand in the community of the cross of Christ, and suffer innocently at the hands of the enemies of Christ.

The enemies

The imprecatory psalms cause most difficulty today. They penetrate the entire psalter: 5, 7, 9, 10, 13, 16, 21, 23, 28, 31, 35, 36, 40, 41, 44, 52, 54, 5, 58, 9, 68, 69, 70, 71, 137 et al. How can we call for the wrath of God against our enemies when Christ teaches us to pray for them?

The enemies in question are enemies of the cause of God, who lay hands on us for the sake of God. The psalmist does not seek to take revenge into his own hands; his prayer is for the execution of his righteousness in the judgment of sin. I stand under this judgment; I have no right to want to hinder it. God's judgment did not strike the sinners, but Jesus on the cross; so these psalms lead to the cross – I cannot forgive the enemies of God out of my own resources, but only through the crucified Christ. I leave vengeance to God and ask him to execute his righteousness to all his enemies.

The End

The hope of Christians is directed to the return of Jesus and the resurrection of the dead. The psalms request fellowship with God in the earthly life, but know that this fellowship is not completed in earthly life but continues beyond it – Ps 17. Death will come – Ps 39, 90. But beyond it is the eternal God – Ps 16, 49, 56, 73, 118. The psalms of the final victory of God lead us into thanksgiving – 2, 96, 97, 98, 110, 148-50.

Petition for the Spirit of Life

It would not be hard to arrange all the psalms mentioned according to the LP. But all that matters is that we pray them with confidence and love in the name of Jesus. We should pray them each morning; the entire day receives order and discipline when it starts with prayer and continues with work.