

The life of prayer in the times of life

Using the Psalms to develop our prayer life

Introduction

It was Church leader John Calvin who described the Psalms as 'an anatomy of all parts of the soul'. It was C.S. Lewis who wrote on the Psalms 'no historical readjustment is required. We are in the world we know.' which is true when we think about the prayers that we find in the Psalms.

The author Kathleen Norris wrote that "to your surprise you find that the Psalms do not deny your feelings, but allow you to reflect on them, right in front of God and everyone." It is no surprise therefore that people instinctively turn to the Psalms when they are under pressure of suffering, for in the intense language of poetry they address God with frankness and urgency. They give voice to our inner turmoil. They teach us to talk to God about life's deepest needs and longings.

The Psalms offer us gifts of expression, and the gift of raw honesty. The Psalms give us permission to talk to God without holding back. They give us powerful words and images, which express our heart cry to God. The Psalms give us the gift of courage, particularly the courage to acknowledge our vulnerable dependence on God. The Psalms also give us the gift of celebration. They call us to shout sing and dance our gratitude and praise to God. The Psalms help us come into the presence of God as vulnerable, honest, needy, spontaneous, joyful people God made us to be. The Psalms are both a tutor and a guide to us.

There are times when we do not know how to pray, and prayer is difficult for us. The prayers we find in the Psalms are weighty enough to hold us and cavernous enough for us to hide in them. So as we look through these prayers we should be asking God to bring us new depth and vitality in our relationship with Him.

Study 1
Prayer in a time of dependence
Psalm 86

Introduction

The ideal relationship of a man to *God* is that of a child to a parent, sheep to a shepherd, creatures to the Creator. We are dependent on *God* for life, for breath, for sustenance, for help in trouble, for mercy, for love, for forgiveness. We may like to think of ourselves as independent and self-sufficient, but we are not. We need *God*. It is vital that we acknowledge our need because this is the beginning point of our relationship with him.

The big picture

1. Take a few minutes to think about a young child and loving parent that you know currently.
 - A. What kind of help does the child need from the parent?
 - B. What is it like to watch a child depending on their parent?
 - C. Share your thoughts one with another

2. Think of a time when you needed to rely on someone for emotional or physical support. What feelings did you have about depending on that person for help?

The biblical picture

Read Psalm 86

3. What is the overall sense you get about the nature of the psalmist's relationship with *God*?
4. What appeals to you about the Psalmist's relationship with *God*?
5. List the many requests the Psalmist makes of *God*?
6. The psalmist describes himself in the first verse as 'poor and needy'. What is he saying about himself?
7. What reactions would you have to describing yourself as poor and needy?
8. Why does the Psalmist need *God's* help?
9. What are some of the specific statements the Psalmist makes about *God*?
10. How would you summarise the Psalmist view of *God*?
11. How does the Psalmist show his dependence on *God* throughout this Psalm?

Being in the picture

12. When is it difficult for you to depend on God?
13. How might the Psalmist's dependence on God encourage you to depend more fully on God?
14. In what areas of your life do you need to acknowledge your dependence on God?
15. Can you think of a time when you experienced God's help and presence? Can you turn this into a prayer, which thanks God for this memory, and expresses your need for God today?

Study 2

Prayer in a time of God's silence

Psalm 44

Introduction

Not all of us like the German Pastor Helmut Thielicke, have lived through the atrocities of war. Thielicke wrote, 'Is not God silent about Stalingrad? Where is the voice of God? When we think of God, is it not suddenly so quiet, so terribly quiet, in the witch's kitchen of this hell, that one can hear a pin drop even though the grenades are bursting around us? There is neither voice nor answer.'

The silence of God is perhaps one of life's most frightening experiences. What do we do? How do we proceed when God is silent? Do we withdraw in fear? Do we give up hope? These are certainly temptations that are before us.

The big picture

1. Think of a time when a friend did not respond to letters, e-mails, phone calls, text messages for a long time. What was your reaction to his or her silence?
2. Think of a time when you asked for God's help and did not sense any response or help from God? Offer two or three words that describe some of the thoughts you felt at the time.

The Biblical picture

Read Psalm 44

3. What anguish do you hear in this Psalm?
4. How does the writer contrast God in the past [vs. 1-8] with God in the present [vs. 9-16]?
5. What strikes you as you read the writer's description of God's care?
6. What strikes you as you read the writer's description of God's silence?
7. The psalmist argues with God that the situation he and his people find themselves in is not fair. How does he express this? [Verses 17-22]
8. What is the significance of this plea for fairness and justice?
9. The Psalmist summarises his accusations against God in verses 23 and 24. What does he accuse God of?
10. What would it be like for you to talk to God in this way?

Being in the picture

11. Think of a time when it seemed like God was silent. How did your experience at that time compare with the experiences described in this Psalm?
12. Think of a time when you experienced God's unfailing love. How would you describe that experience?
13. What encouragement does this Psalm offer you for times when God seems silent?
14. What might help you hang on to your faith when God seems silent?

Study 3
Prayer in a time of longing for God
Psalm 63

Introduction

There are times when we can feel separated from God. During such times it can feel like a small child feels when they are separated from their parent in a busy shop, frightened, angry. We may feel this intense longing for our parent [God] to return to us.

Many things can create this separation from God. It might come as a result of a loss or a crisis in our lives, which leaves us feeling forgotten or uncared for by God. It might come during a time of personal sin or failure when we struggle with fear that God might condemn or reject us. It might come as a result of being removed from our community of faith due to illness or distance due to the illness of others we are caring for.

Whatever the reason, a sense of separation from God can generate an intense longing for God.

The big picture

1. Have two people from the group perform a 'living sculpture'. Have them standing in the middle of the room back to back. With arms folded. Then have one of them turn and face the other's back with their arms reaching out. Finally have the two of them face each other with arms reaching out to each other.

After this has group members share what it might feel like to be each person in each sculpture. Take some time to discuss the feelings shared regarding the experience of reconnection.

2. Think of a time when you felt especially close to God. What was the experience like for you?

The biblical picture

Read Psalm 63

3. How does David's present experience of God differ from his past experience? [vs. 1-2]

4. The Psalmist describes his experience of longing for God in verse 1 with the strong physical metaphor of being thirsty in a desert with no sign of water. How is this image an appropriate description of what it feels like to be separated from God?

5. In verses 2 and 3 the Psalmist describes how in the past, he experienced God's presence. What did he experience of God?

6. Verse 1 describes a soul that is thirsty, with no chance of finding water. Verse 5 describes a soul that is satisfied with the richest food. These pictures contrast the experience of being separated from God and experiencing being close to God. What words or images would you use to describe times when you have felt separated from God?

7. What words or images would you use to describe times when you felt close to God?

Being in the picture

8. Because of his longing for connection with God, the Psalmist says he will seek, remember, and cling to God. The first action he seriously takes is to seek God v1. What does it mean to you to seek God?

9. The second action he takes is remembering. Where, when, how and in what ways does the Psalmist say he remembers God [verses 6-7]?

10. What value is there in remembering past experiences of God when we feel separated from him?

11. The third action he takes is clinging. In verse 8 he describes how he clings to God and how God holds him. What is your response to the image of clinging to God?

12. In the final phrases the Psalmist responds in joy to the hope of once again experiencing God's presence. How has a sense of God's presence led to joy in your experience?

13. As you think about the actions of seeking, remembering and clinging to God, which of these most closely describes what would be most helpful to you at this time? Explain.

14. Based on this study what actions do you think you should take when you next feel separated from God?

Study 4
Prayer in a time of Trust
Psalm 62

Introduction.

As humans we arrive in the world as vulnerable creatures. We arrive completely dependent on our parents for our survival. For people to develop a healthy capacity of trust, they need to experience an emotional attachment to a nurturing parent. If children are not greeted with nurturing, empathic responses to physical emotional and social needs, or if the relationship is disrupted, then the attachment will be threatened, and the capacity to trust will be damaged. Later in life it may well prove to be begin to develop a trust in God.

The good news is that God can heal our wounds. One such wound has been called 'the orphan heart.' The orphan heart is a condition caused by the loss of love which has affected the very core of a person's being. This primal wound affects just about everything in a person's life, from their thoughts and feelings, to their words and actions. God is able to heal such a distressed and disintegrated central wound.

The big picture

1. We all have insecurities in our relationship with God, but we rarely talk about these feelings. Take three or four minutes to quietly reflect on your fears and insecurities in relationship to God's trustworthiness. Share what you have thought as you feel comfortable.

2. What makes a person trustworthy?

The biblical picture

Read Psalm 62

3. How does the Psalmist contrast God and humanity?

4. The Psalmist talks about resting in God. What picture comes to your mind with these words?

5. How is resting in God a picture of trust?

6. In verse 8 the psalmist draws a parallel between trusting in God and pouring out one's heart to God. How are these related?

7. Verse 10 warns against trusting in material wealth. How would you paraphrase what was being said here?

8. Why is this such a strong temptation?

9. Where else might you be tempted to place your trust, other than in God?

Being in the picture

10. The last two verses depict God as strong and loving. What images of a strong and loving God are presented in this Psalm?

11. What images might you use?

12. How does seeing God as strong help you to trust him?

13. How does seeing God as loving help you to trust him?

14. Something practical. Write a short Psalm expressing your current feelings about trusting God. Include any fears, hesitations, longings, hope or gratitude you may have.

Study 5

Prayer in the time of distress

Psalm 57

Introduction

C.S. Lewis famously wrote in his book *A Grief Observed*, that 'when life is so good, we may be tempted to forget our need of God'. But there are times in our life when we are acutely aware of our need of God. In times of distress, when we are threatened with loss or harm or even with death, we remember our need of God and we turn to him with great urgency.

There are some people who feel that they cannot bring their troubles to God, they argue 'How can I turn to God in distress when I have never turned to him before.' Or 'I haven't been talking to God for a long time, how can I turn to him now'. Or 'I can't bother God with this, there are many people hurting more than I am'. However God invites us to talk to him when we are in distress. Repeatedly in Scripture we hear God say to us 'Call on me in the day of trouble and I will answer you.'

The big picture

1. Which of the pictures of God described above in the introduction do you relate to and why or why not?

2. In times of distress do you generally seek out other people or do you withdraw? Explain what you do, and discuss why you might choose these particular behaviours.

The biblical picture

Read Psalm 57.

3. Describe the picture of God's comfort David paints in verse 1.
4. What images come to your mind when you think of the experience of being comforted?
5. In his time of distress David cried out to God verse 2. What does it mean to cry out to God?
6. What metaphors does David use in verse 4 to describe the danger he finds himself in?
7. What feelings do these images evoke?
8. How does God intervene for David in his time of distress verses 2-3, 6?
9. David responds to God's care in verse 7 by saying that his heart is steadfast. What is the significance of this response?
10. David also responds with praise to God. Paraphrase the words of praise David offers to God [verses 5, 9-11]
- 11 1 Samuel 24 tells the story behind this Psalm. Read Ch 24; 1-7 and 16-20. How did God take care of David in this time of great distress?

Being in the picture

12 Hopefully our times of distress will not be as dramatic as David's. However any time of distress is a time when our awareness of our need of God may be heightened. Can you think of a time when you were in distress. Were you able to cry out to God for help at that time? Why or why not?

13. What was your experience of God like during that time?

14. How might this Psalm encourage you in times of distress?

Study 6
Prayer in the time of gratitude
Psalm 65

Introduction

The truth is that when we are unable to receive his gift of thanks or appreciation from others, we cheat them and we cheat ourselves. When we are able to say thank you for gifts given, we are able to take the gift in, and enjoy it, and engage in a personal, intimate way with the giver of the gift. In the same way, when we express our gratitude to God for his gifts to us, we enter into a full cycle of joyful relating with him.

The big picture

1. Put the names of the people in the group into a hat. Each group member draw a name out [make sure no one draw their own name]. Take a few minutes to write a note of specific gratitude for the person whose name you drew. Read your notes [either one on one, or in the whole group.]
2. What is it like for you to receive a gift or a compliment? What is it like for you to offer a gift or a compliment to someone else?

The biblical picture

Read Psalm 65

3. List four categories of gifts this Psalm expresses gratitude for?
4. God's great power is acknowledged in this Psalm. How is God's power a gift to us?
5. In verse 5 God is called 'Our Saviour, the hope of all the ends of the earth and to the farthest seas'. In what ways is God the hope of all the earth and the seas?
6. In what ways is God the source of your hope?
7. The Psalmist mentions several of God's awesome deeds on verses 6-7. What other awesome deeds might you add to this list?
8. Verse 8 offers a picture of the fears and joys common to all people of the earth. How do God's wonders cause us to experience fear?

9. How do God's wonders call forth songs of joy?

10. Verses 10-13 describe the specific ways in which God tenderly loves and cares for the earth. What thoughts and feelings does this description evoke?

11. What implications does God's care for the earth have for the ways in which we treat the earth?

Being in the picture

12. What personal value does expressing gratitude to God have for you?

13. What are you grateful for today?

Study 7 Prayer in the time of grief Psalm 102

Introduction

C.S. Lewis wrote in *A Grief Observed*. 'Grief feels like fear. Perhaps, more strictly like suspense. Or like waiting, just hanging around waiting for something to happen. Her [his wife] absence is like the sky, spread over everything.' Grief is an experience of deep sorrow over a significant loss. Whether that loss is the loss of loved one, a job, health, the physical, emotional and spiritual suffering is intense. Grieving is an important spiritual and emotional process that allows us to feel the impact of the loss on our lives so that we can slowly take in the reality of our loss and make painful, necessary adaptations. As part of the process, we need to find people to express our feelings to. And we need to express our feelings over our loss to God.

The big picture

1. List on a piece of paper all the losses big and small you have gone through in the past few years. Share as much as you want with the group

2. How would you describe the experience of grief as you have experienced it physically, emotionally and spiritually?

The biblical picture

Read Psalm 102

3. What emotional response do you have toward the Psalmist as you read this psalm?
4. How does this psalm contrast the fleeting nature of human life and God's eternal existence?
5. What is the psalmist saying with this contrast?
6. In verses 1-2 the psalmist pleads for God to hear him. Why is this need so urgent in times of grief and distress [vs. 1-2]?
7. How does the psalmist describe his current physical and emotional state [vs. 2-11]?
8. What is it about grief that creates this kind of experience?
9. How do the writer's descriptions of suffering compare with your experience of grief?
10. Focus on one of the powerful images the writer uses in verses 3-11 to express his suffering. What meaning does the image convey?
11. The psalmist seems to be blaming God and pleading with God at the same time. What does he blame God for [vs. 8,10,23]?
12. What does the psalmist plead for [vs., 1-2, 24]?
13. The psalmist seems to have mixed feelings about God. What positive perspective does he express about God [vs., 12-22, 25-28]?

Being in the picture

14. Mixed feelings about God are common in times of suffering and grief. What is it about times of grief, which might cause these mixed feelings?
15. How could this psalm help you in your time of grief?

Study 8
Prayer in a time of hope
Psalm 130

Introduction

It was John Bunyan the 17th century Christian who wrote Pilgrims Progress who also wrote 'hope is never ill when faith is well. The Biblical scholar Walter Bruggeman reminds us that 'hope is then central subject of the Bible'. Hope is necessary it gives us the strength to go on through the tough times in life. Much of popular literature is not filled with hope, George Orwell's 1984 Aldous Huxley's Brave New World, Anthony Burgess Clockwork Orange Neville Shute's On the Beach, they are all books filled more with doom rather than hope. Yet the Bible is full of the good news of hope. Hope gives life joy and meaning in the good times, but sometimes it is hard to hold on to.

The big picture

1. Think back over the week's news, if you can think of images of hope and hopelessness what stories have struck you that have created either situations of hopelessness or hope. Take time to discuss each story. If appropriate bring the paper cutting with you to the group meeting.
2. How would you personally describe the experience of hope? How would you personally describe the experience of hopelessness?

The biblical picture

Read Psalm 130.

3. The Psalm begins with a cry to the Lord from out of the depths. What pictures come to mind as you read this phrase?
4. What emotions is the writer expressing in this phrase?
5. The psalmist's distress seems to be related to a struggle with guilt '[vs. 3]. How can guilt lead to hopelessness?
6. Verses 3-4 tell us that God forgives. How does the promise of forgiveness contribute to hope?
7. Verse 5 says 'I wait, my soul waits' what is the relationship between waiting and hope?

8. The psalmist uses the metaphor of watchmen [vs. 6] to describe the experience of hope. What does he convey with this image?

9. The psalmist struggles between hopelessness and hope. Why is it sometimes a struggle to hope?

10. What reasons does the psalmist give for hoping in the Lord [vs. 7-8]?

Being in the picture

11. What reasons do you have for hoping in the Lord?

12. What areas of life are difficult for you to be hopeful about?

13. How have you grown spiritually as you struggled to wait with hope for the Lord?

14. How might this psalm help you to hope in the Lord?

Study 9
Prayer in a time of joy
Psalm 66

Introduction

Life is not intended to be a joyless ordeal. The theologian James Houston puts it that 'for the Christian who lives closely with God, life is like a festival.' To have a God honouring life we need to combine a healthy attitude towards self-discipline and a healthy appreciation of acceptable pleasures and delights. We need always to be asking if we have got the balance right between pleasures and prohibitions. As much as it might surprise us it is actually God's desire for us to experience joy. Joy is an act of relating to God with vulnerable unselfconscious gratitude for the good gifts he gives. Joy comes when we experience and acknowledge God's love and care for us, when we allow ourselves to express our gratitude for his love with emotional and physical energy. Joy is the celebration of God's love.

The big picture

- 1 Plan ahead to have a time of celebration. Bring food and drink and also bring some words of gratitude for what you have experienced from studying the prayers in the Psalms

2. Think of a time when you experienced joy. What evoked this feeling in you? How would you describe the experience of joy?

The biblical picture

Read psalm 66

3. The writer calls us to action vs. 1.2.3.5.8.16. What does he call us to do?

4. How are each of these behaviours related to the experience or the expression of joy?

5. What does this section in the middle of the Psalm [vs8-12] tell us about the cause for this particular expression of joy?

6. How might this kind of experience lead to joy?

7. Verses 13-15 talk about offering animal sacrifices as an expression of joyful worship. A person's livestock was the equivalent of a person's bank account. How can giving materially be an expression of gratitude and joy?

8. Verses 16-20 are a more personal account of what the Lord has done. What does the writer say the Lord has done for him?

9. How might this kind of experience lead to joy?

10. In addition to the actions listed in question 2, what ways of expressing joy to God are described in this psalm?

11. What other ways of expressing joy could you add?

12. In what ways are joy, praise and worship related?

Being in the picture

13. It is important to realise that this Psalm is not about pretending to be joyful when it is more honest or appropriate to be grieving or angry. What dangers are there in pretending to be joyful when we are not?

14. Why is it important to allow us to experience and express joy?

15. What joy would you like to express to God?

16. Either now or later make a list of all the gifts God has given you that contribute to your joy.