# The Psalms as an Invitation into a Spiral Relationship with God

Where did you learn to pray? Maybe you learned from your mother, or from your church’s way of praying, or from doing what come naturally, or from a book about prayer, or from something your Sunday School teacher told you such as the acronym ACTS – adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication. Where does Scripture suggest you learn to pray?

The last two chapters of Ephesians include two exhortations about prayer. In Ephesians 5:19-20: ‘Be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making music in your hearts to the Lord, giving thanks always for everything in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ, to God the Father.” In Ephesians 6:18-19: “In every prayer and request, praying at all times in the Spirit, and to this end staying alert with all perseverance and request for all the people who belong to God, and on my behalf, that the message may be given me when I open my mouth.”

The fact that these exhortations start by referring to psalms suggests they would be thinking at least in part of *the* Psalms, the book of Psalms, the Psalter, and it would make sense if they assumed that *the* Psalms were the church’s resource for prayer and praise. This would fit with the fact that it was some centuries before Christians started composing a lot of Christian hymns. There are one or two compositions that you could call Christian hymns within the New Testament, such as the songs of Mary, Elizabeth, Simeon, and Anna in Luke 1 – 2, but it’s also significant that these are rather like psalms. When the Holy Spirit inspired those people to give praise in connection with Jesus’ coming, they did so in a way that fitted the way the Holy Spirit had inspired the people who praise and pray in the Psalms, which is not very surprising. Suppose we were to try out the idea that the book of Psalms is in the Scriptures to teach us how to pray, too?

I can imagine the guys who put the book of Psalms together now rolling their eyes, because they themselves gave us some signals that they did their work in order to teach Israel how to pray. They signaled that the Psalter is a book of teaching. One marker of this fact is the way the Psalter actually comprises five books. You will see that before Psalms 42, 73, 90, and 107 it tells you that you are about to begin Book 2, 3, 4, or 5. At the very beginning of the Bible, in Genesis to Deuteronomy, there are five books of teaching about what God did in creating the world and restoring Israel and about the response God looks for in people’s lives. And here in the Psalter are five more books of teaching, about praise and prayer. Indeed, the very first psalm is an exhortation to pay attention to Yahweh’s teaching, which either suggests a link between paying attention to that teaching in the Torah and our reading of the Psalms, or it directly suggests that the Psalms themselves are teaching, Torah.

Now one of the reasons why I enjoy lecturing on the Psalms is that in studying the Psalms it’s very easy to make links between academic, critical study and devotional, prayerful study. With lots of aspects of biblical study, critical theories are at best totally useless to anyone who wants to know what the Bible has to say to us; at worst they make it harder if not impossible to find that out. With the Psalms, many of the critical theories are really helpful, and that has been so since the time of the man who started off modern study of the Psalms a century ago, a German called Herman Gunkel. Up till his day, people had assumed that the key question in understanding a psalm was “Who wrote it, when, and why?” And for many parts of the Bible, such as the Prophets and Paul’s letters, that’s a great question. The trouble with asking that question about the Psalms is that they are very sparing in giving you the answer, and often every scholar had a different theory.

(Maybe you assume the answer to the question who wrote the Psalms is obvious, because it was David, wasn’t it? Let me say one or two things about that. First, while it says “Psalm of David” at the top of half the psalms, it doesn’t say that at the top of the other half. Second, David lived a long time, and knowing when and why he might have written a particular psalm is usually just guesswork. The information is still sparing. And third, it’s anyway not clear that the expression “Psalm of David” means he wrote it. It might as easily mean it belonged to a collection associated with him – he is the great sponsor of psalms in the Old Testament. Or it might really mean “psalm for David.” Further, the “David might be the original David or it might be a later Davidic king. So just go with me for a while and imagine that we don’t know much about who wrote the Psalms and when.)

Gunkel thought this was the case, and therefore suggested trying a different question. He noticed that there are quite a small number of different types of Psalms that keep coming in the Psalter – prayers and praises and thanksgivings and so on. Suppose we focus on collecting together the different types of psalm and seeing what we learn from that exercise? And instead of asking about the particular person and context that a psalm came from, suppose we ask about the way the Psalms were used in Israel on a regular basis, and see what we learn from that exercise?

Asking the first of those questions, about the types of psalm, generated some interesting answers. I am going to give you the Goldingay version of it, so don’t imagine you are getting pure Gunkel. Most of the Psalms illustrate four main ways of speaking to God. First, said Gunkel, there are psalms of praise. Second, there are actual prayers. Third, there are psalms that declare our trust in God. Fourth, there are thanksgivings or testimonies to God answering your prayer. In a psalm of praise, you say “You’re great.” In a prayer psalm, you say “Help!” In a psalm of trust, you say “I trust you.” In a thanksgiving, you say “Thank you!” I want to suggest that those are the dynamics of a life of prayer and praise. It is a continuing movement between praise, prayer, trust, and thanksgiving.

## 1 Praise psalms

First, praise. Here’s a typical simple example of praise.

Shout for Yahweh, all the earth, serve Yahweh with joy, come before him with resounding.

Acknowledge that Yahweh is God, he made us and we are his, his people and the sheep he pastures.

Come into his gates with a thankoffering, into his courts with praise, honor him, worship his name.

Because Yahweh is good, his commitment lasts forever, his truthfulness to all generations.

That’s Psalm 100. Gunkel noticed that hymns of praise in the Psalms typically have two parts. There’s a challenge or an invitation to praise – shout, serve, come, honor, worship. And then there are the reasons – God made us, we belong to him, he is God, his commitment lasts forever, and so on. There’s a challenge to praise God, and then there are the reasons for praising him, which comprise the contents of the praise. This psalm goes through the sequence twice – challenge, then reasons, then more challenge, then more reasons. It’s as if saying it once can’t be enough. Then it’s noticeable that the first of these features, the challenge, implies that you don’t praise God on your own. We encourage one another to praise. It fits with an odd note in those exhortations in Ephesians, where Paul bids people to speak to one another in psalms and hymns and so on. They are speaking to God, but they are also speaking to one another. These psalms of praise do the same. Many of them do say directly to God, “You’re great.” But many of them involve people saying to one another, “Isn’t God great?” Because saying it to one another brings God glory. One other aspect of the challenge. It makes clear that praise is noisy. It involves shouting and resounding – that’s a word for ululating, for going nananana. The word for “praise” itself, which is related to the word “Hallalujah,” suggests going lalalalala. Praise is not something you just do in your heart. It involves the whole person. The same is actually true about all the other ways of praying that the Psalms illustrate. The Psalms have no ideal of silence. Western ideas about prayer often emphasize silence, and maybe they need to, because we are surrounded by noise. But it’s not an ideal we get from the Bible. In the Bible, praise and prayer involve noise.

It’s because praise and prayer involve the whole person that praise may also involve not merely thanksgiving but a thank offering, an offering that expresses our praise outwardly and concretely. David once said that he refused to make an offering that didn’t cost him anything. Our worship doesn’t cost us anything. Indeed, for us the question is more, what does our worship give us? What do we get out of it? The psalms wouldn’t think that kind of praise was worship. They would think it was just self-indulgence.

One comment about the content of the praise. It’s that God is our maker, and God is our shepherd. It’s about God’s commitment and God’s truthfulness. It’s about the fact that Yahweh is God. Yahweh is the particular name of the God of Israel – in English translations, it’s usually changed into “the Lord.” But in the translation I read just now, I left the name Yahweh as it was in the psalm itself. God revealed his name to the Israelites and invited them to speak to him by name. They had a personal relationship with God. But that didn’t mean they were the only ones he was interested in. Yahweh wasn’t just God for the Israelites. Yahweh was God – period. That’s why the psalm begins by inviting all the earth to worship Yahweh. Yahweh *is* God.

Now none of this praise is about what God has done for me personally. We will come to that kind of praise in the Psalms in due course, but it’s worth noting that there are these psalms of praise that focus on who God is, on how God created us, and on the way God has consistently related to his people. In this respect, too, they pull us away from talking about ourselves. When I praise God, I get myself out of the picture.

## 2 Prayer psalms

That’s praise. Secondly, prayer. Here is an example.

My God, my God, why have you abandoned me, far away from delivering me, from the word I yell?

My God, I call by day but you do not answer, and by night – there is no quietness for me.

But you are enthroned as the holy one, the great praise of Israel.

In you our ancestors trusted – they trusted and you rescued them.

To you they cried out and they escaped; in you they trusted and they were not shamed.

But I am a worm, not a person, an object of scorn for humanity, an object of contempt for the people.

All who see me mock me, open their mouth, shake their head.

“He should commit it to Yahweh, he must rescue him, he must save him, because he delights in him.”

That’s the beginning of Psalm 22. Maybe you recognized the beginning, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” They are the words Jesus uttered on the cross. But they didn’t start off life as a prophecy of the Messiah. They started off life as a prayer that any Israelites could pray when they had the sense of being abandoned by God, when they were overwhelmed by sickness or poverty or fraud or attacks by other people. There are lots of psalms of this kind. Gunkel called them “laments,” and I sometimes call them “protest psalms,” and you can see why. They spend much of their time describing what has gone wrong in their life and protesting to God about it. Indeed, in those eight verses that I read, there wasn’t any actual prayer at all, in the sense of a request for God to do something. In the next ten verses, there is only one line of prayer. That’s not particularly unusual; prayer psalms give a lot of space to describing, lamenting, and protesting about the situation we are in.

So there’s an interesting difference between the way we usually pray and the model the Psalms give us. We don’t spend much time describing the situation. Maybe we assume that God knows about it, so we don’t need to tell him. Yet oddly, we don’t mind telling God what we think he should do about a situation – Lord, give the surgeons wisdom, Lord give my friend peace, Lord help the Congress to see that they should be taxing the rich not cutting benefits to the poor. That logic I was just referring to might make you think that God could discern what to do. The way the Psalms work is by being very general in what they ask God to do – listen to us, rescue us – but very detailed in their description of our situation and need. Of course the description of the situation is in another sense very general, or rather it tends to use picture language. Psalm 22 later talks about being attacked by dogs and lions and bulls, rather than describing what the literal problem was. If it was more literal, it would be less useful to people who were praying about a need that was not literally the same. But the Psalms are there to be used by people in lots of different situations, which links with the fact that they don’t tell us much about when they were written. When they were written is irrelevant to their purpose.

Maybe we also think that complaining or protesting to God is inappropriate. In contrast, the Israelites knew that God was like a father or a mother or a teacher or a boss, and they knew that if you have a good father or mother or teacher or boss, you can go to them and tell them how terrible things are and appeal to them to do something about it. Now of course sometimes there are considerations other than your need of relief that a father or mother or teacher or boss needs to take into account in deciding how to respond to your plea. The same is true with God, which is one reason why God doesn’t necessarily do what we ask in our prayers. But the Psalms assume that if we do want our parent or teacher or boss, or God, to act, then we need to make it crystal clear to them how tough our situation feels, in the hope that they may then decide that our need does take priority over other considerations they are aware of.

But then in those verses that I read, while some lines were protesting at how things were for the person praying, other lines were declaring truths about God. God is the one who is enthroned in Israel, the one who rescued Israel from its enemies. In fact, lines of this kind in the psalm are saying the kind of thing that a psalm of praise says. It turns out that praise and prayer are closely related. You can’t understand prayer unless you understand praise. That’s why it’s fortuitous that Gunkel started his analysis of the Psalms with the psalms of praise. And one reason why you can’t understand prayer without understanding praise is that prayer starts when the things you say in praise aren’t being born out in life. In praise we say that God is faithful and always near us. In prayer, this kind of protest prayer, we say that this isn’t how things are turning out. “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?”

Yet at the same time, we don’t simply abandon the praise. When your life falls apart, it’s tempting to react in one of two ways. Either you deny that it’s really happened, or you give up on the truths about God that you used to affirm. The Psalms model a third way, which involves looking steadfastly in the face two sets of facts. There are the facts about God’s faithfulness and power and mercy, and the facts about our experience of abandonment. It’s hard to hold onto both sets of facts, but that is what many psalms model.

In the psalms, one key to holding onto two sets of facts is to insist on looking to the future as well as to the present and the past, and in due course the last third of Psalm 22 is given to describing what things will be like when God has answered the psalm’s prayer. That leads into a further comment on the prayer psalms. When they think of God answering prayer, they imply that it has two stages. Answer to prayer stage one is when God listens to the prayer and says “Yes, I will do something about that need of yours.” Answer to prayer stage two is when God actually acts and does it. There are lots of prayer psalms that already begin to praise God for answering the prayer, and you could get confused about whether the person praying is still in the mess that the earlier part of the psalm described. The answer is that they are still in that mess, but they now know that God has listened to their prayer and that he is going to get them out of it. It hasn’t happened yet, but they know it’s going to happen. They haven’t yet received answer to prayer stage two, but they have received stage one. In a sense their relationship to the two sets of facts is now more complicated. You could even say there are three sets of facts. There are the facts about God who God is, the facts of the situation as it is, and the facts about what God is going to do but has not yet done.

A fine illustration of the dynamics of this process is the story of Hannah in 1 Samuel 1. Hannah has been unable to have a baby. In her culture as in ours, that’s a very painful experience. For some women it doesn’t matter, but for many women it’s agonizing. We know the extraordinary lengths a woman may go to in order to be able to conceive. In Hannah’s culture, there is the extra level of significance to her infertility. The best answer to the question how Eve was created to be a help to Adam is that he couldn’t serve the garden on his own and he couldn’t have children to help him. In a situation where a nation needs children in order to be able to make the farm work, a woman’s ability to have children is key to her place in the society. As Israel grows into full possession of the land of Canaan, a woman’s ability to have children is key to the fulfillment of God’s purpose through Israel.

So not being able to have children has devastating implications for Hannah. Her husband takes another wife as well as her, which was the ancient equivalent to artificial insemination. This second wife has children at the drop of a hat, which solves the problem for her husband, but isolates Hannah some more. So she goes to the sanctuary to pray, and she pours herself out to God. It’s a holiday time and there is an amusing scene where the pastor misinterprets the fervent nature of her prayer and thinks she is drunk, but she protests and the pastor gets his act together and tells her that she can go home in peace and that God is going to grant what she has asked. She went her way, the story says, and her face was no longer downcast. Now the thing to note is that she is no more pregnant than she was when she arrived at the sanctuary. God has not answered her prayer in the sense of causing her to conceive. She has received only stage one of an answer to her prayer. She knows God has heard her prayer and said yes to it. But this is enough to change the look on her face.

The family all go home after the holiday and Elkanah and Hannah make love, and (the story says) “Yahweh remembered Hannah.” She conceives and has a baby son. She has now experienced stage two of the answer to prayer.

One final comment about the prayer psalms. I used to wonder why there were no intercessory psalms, psalms that pray for other people, or hardly any. I also used to wonder what you were supposed to do with all these psalms of lament and protest if you had nothing much to lament or protest about. Then I realized that the answer to both questions was that the prayer psalms are also the way we pray for other people. My wife’s daughter and her husband work with Darfuri refugees from Sudan, with their horrifying stories of oppression, rape, torture, murder, and dispossession. How can we pray for them? Each dinner when we are home, we pray one of these protest and lament psalms on behalf of the Darfuri refugees.

## 3 Psalms of trust

That’s prayer psalms. Now psalms of trust. Here’s a familiar example, Psalm 23, but I’ll give you my translation again, so it becomes a bit less familiar.

My shepherd being Yahweh, I do not lack; he enables me to lie down in grassy pastures.

He leads me to waters that are totally still; he restores my life.

He guides me in faithful tracks for the sake of his name.

Even when I walk in a deathly dark canyon, I am not afraid of disaster,

because you are with me; your club and your cane – they comfort me.

You spread a table in front of me in full view of my enemies.

You have bathed my head in oil; my cup fills me up.

Yes, goodness and commitment pursue me all the days of my life.

I will return to Yahweh’s house for long days.

This is a psalm that knows all about what it’s like to be surrounded by enemies. To be more metaphorical, it knows what it is like to be a sheep in a dark canyon where there might be a lion or a bear or a snake hiding behind the next tree. It’s the kind of prayer you could pray when that’s the kind of situation you are in. And that makes it both just like a prayer psalm even while it ‘s also unlike a prayer psalm. Because whereas a prayer psalm expresses a sense of panic and abandonment by God, a trust psalm is dominated by confidence in God and faith in God. The situation is the same; your feeling or attitude is different. Confidence and faith are usually there in a prayer psalm, of course, but there’s a sense in which you have to wrestle for them. God has to give you the gift of faith. In a psalm of trust, God has done so already.

So one neat feature of the life of prayer that the Psalms invite us into is that you don’t have to be in a particular state of mind or state of heart or state of spirit in order to pray. This fact, too, links with the Psalms’ implication that coming to God in prayer is like coming to your father or mother. You don’t have to get ready to talk to your father or mother. At least, when the relationship is healthy you don’t have to do so. If you do have to get into a certain frame of mind or heart, it’s a sign that there is a problem about the relationship.

It’s nice that Psalm 22 and Psalm 23 stand next to each other. Faced with the possibility that there may be a lion around the corner, some people may find it possible to trust God, other people may panic – God can handle either reaction. There is an old book called *Prayer* by Otto Hallesby which I have been in the habit of coming back to sometimes when I find I am in difficulty about praying, and I feel helpless to pray. “As far as I can see,” Hallesby says, “prayer has been ordained only for the helpless. It is the last resort of the helpless.... We try everything before we finally resort to prayer.... Prayer and helplessness are inseparable.”[[1]](#footnote-1) So when I feel helpless, or guilty, or doubting, or dishonest, or depressed, that isn’t something that has to stop me praying. It’s my way into prayer.

That’s also part of the answer to a question that often vexes people about the Psalms, which is the way they often express anger and a desire for God to put people down. Why would God want to have prayers like these in his book? Now I suspect that there are various answers. One is that it may indicate that God prefers us to urge him to put people down than that we try to put them down ourselves. In other words, the Psalms are about the most pacifist book in the Bible. But related to that possibility is the fact that we do have violent desires in our hearts, so the question is, what do we do with them? We do have some violent desires in our hearts that are right desires. We wish to see evil put down and punished. The New Testament affirms that desire as much as the Psalms do. But we may not be able to trust our discernment about whether our desires are right or wrong, and maybe it doesn’t matter too much, because the Psalms imply that the thing to do is express them to God and then leave it to God to decide what to do about them. So anger and hatred is not a barrier to prayer, but our way into prayer. And that’s how anger relates to trust. There is a real trust involved in expressing our anger and hatred to God rather than expressing it on the people we feel it for. Walter Brueggemann has commented that “it is an act of profound faith to entrust one’s most precious hatreds to God, knowing they will be taken seriously.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

I guess we would like to be people who can trust God with our hatred and our anger, as we would like to be people who respond to the possibility of meeting a lion with trust rather than panic, and one significance of the psalms of trust is to give us resources to make that possible. But we do need to turn to those resources before we are consumed by anger or fear; when we confront things that make us angry or afraid, if may be too late. It’s a bad idea to tell people who are suffering that they should read the Book of Job. The people who need to read Job are the people who aren’t suffering, so that it shapes their reactions when trouble does come. Similarly, the time to read the psalms of trust is when you are not walking up a dark canyon. You can then discover from them what we can trust God for (for God to watch over me, to protect me, to put the wicked down). From them you can remind yourself of bases for trusting in God that lie in your own experience – the way God has spoken to you, the presence of God in worship, the way God has kept you safe in the past, God’s material provision for you, your own commitment to God, the stand you have taken against wrongdoing. You can also remind yourself of bases for trusting in God that lie outside your own experience – God’s power and love, God’s creation of the world, God’s acts of redemption, and God’s specific promises. Those realities are all present in the psalms of trust. Studying them when you are not on your way up a dark canyon has the potential to reframe your thinking so as to change your reaction if a lion appears. It’s the kind of study of Yahweh’s teaching that the very first psalm encourages us to undertake. You don’t have to worry if it turns out you are still in a state of panic and you need to pray in the Psalm 22 way not the Psalm 23 way. God may roll his eyes, but he will still get his club out and whack the lion. But if it turns out that you are a Psalm 23 person, he will do so with a grin, and you will grin too.

## 4 Thanksgiving psalms

Fourth, thanksgiving psalms. I talked about the Psalms implying that there can be two stages to God answering prayer. First God says, “Okay, I’ve heard, I’ll do it.” Then God actually does it. There may be no space at all between the two stages to the answer, or there may be quite a gap, which is why some psalms carry on praying when it looks as if God has *said* yes, though he has not yet acted. If you become aware of God saying yes while you are praying, then you say thank you there and then – that’s why some psalms end with praise. But in due course God acts, and that’s when you pray a different way, the way that’s embodied in a thanksgiving psalm.

I spoke just now about Hannah. Her story goes on to illustrate the nature of this process. After she has had both stage one and stage two of her answer to prayer, she goes to the sanctuary again and she prays a kind of thanksgiving psalm; it comes in 1 Samuel 2. It’s a distinctive kind of thanksgiving psalm in that it sets the answer to her prayer on a broad canvas, because her son is no ordinary gift to an infertile woman. Her son is Samuel, who is going to be the prophet who anoints Israel’s first king, Saul, and who then anoints David. But arguably she thereby illustrates something that’s characteristic of answers to prayer. They come not as merely part of something private going on between us and God. They play a part in God’s wider purpose for the world.

In a looser sense that’s true of thanksgiving prayers in the book of Psalms. Here’s Psalm 30.

I will extol you, Yahweh, because you put me down, but you did not let my enemies rejoice over me.

Yahweh my God, I cried for help to you, and you healed me.

Yahweh, you brought my life up from Sheol, you kept me alive from going down to the Pit.

Make music for Yahweh, you who are committed to him, confess his holy remembrance,

Because there is a moment in his anger, a life in his acceptance.

In the evening weeping lodges, but at morning there is resounding.

I – I had said when I was at ease, “I shall not collapse ever.”

Yahweh, in your acceptance you had established strength for my mountain.

You hid your face; I became distraught.

To you, Yahweh, I would call, to my Lord I would plead for grace.

“What would be the gain from my being killed, from my going down to Sheol?

Can dirt confess you, can it declare your truthfulness?

Listen, Yahweh, be gracious to me; Yahweh, be my help.”

You turned my lament into dancing for me, you undid my sackcloth and girded me with joy,

so that my heart might make music and not stop; Yahweh my God, I will confess you forever.

A year ago I met, fell in love with, and proposed to Kathleen, who is here with me. Then I discovered I had prostate cancer, and I arranged to have surgery this past June, a few months after our wedding. We had a very moving prayer time in church and I knew God had heard people’s prayers. It was stage one in having a prayer answered, in the way the Psalms portray it. It means you start praising God for answering your prayer, but you recognize that stage one is only stage one. Only after stage two, when you have seen God’s answer and not merely heard it, do you stop praying and start simply praising. For me, even that process felt a bit more complicated, in that the doctors were very pleased with themselves after the surgery, and in this sense you could say stage two had come; but for me, getting back to feeling normal took a few more weeks, and the real stage two came when I had the test a few weeks later that established that the level of the relevant antigen in my blood was now right. Then I *really* knew God had answered those prayers. (Well, unless you hear in a year or two that I have died of secondaries….)

Psalm 30 illustrates the way you pray after stage two – or rather, it illustrates the way you thank God for answering your prayers and other people’s prayers after stage two, and the way you give your testimony to what God has done. I use the word “testimony” as well as the word “thanksgiving” because thanksgiving involves telling a story. This kind of testimony, in other words, isn’t you telling the story of how you got converted ten years ago. It’s you telling the story of something God did for you this week. The story characteristically comes in three parts. You relate how things went wrong for you, how you prayed, and how God answered that prayer. Psalm 30 has a feature in common with the psalm with which we started, Psalm 100: it says what it needs to say, but then it says it again. It could have stopped after the first half, and we wouldn’t have thought that it was truncated, but then it starts again, as if the psalmist felt that what the first part says just wasn’t enough to do justice to what God had done. So the second half of the psalm tells the story again, and gives us more information on how fine things were before trouble struck, and on the way the psalmist prayed.

When you offer a thanksgiving prayer, you are not the only person it affects. That’s part of the way in which answers to prayer are not merely something private going on between us and God. A thanksgiving psalm is also a testimony psalm because it is designed for other people to hear and for them to join in with, because the facts about God that it illustrates are as relevant to the rest of the congregation as they are to the person who is healed or rescued. In other words, you can no more thank God silently than you can praise God silently. Psalm 30 thus has something else in common with a praise psalm like Psalm 100, and something that fits with the way Ephesians speaks about prayer. Thanksgiving is a way we speak to one another as well as to God, because it is testimony.

In our church on Sunday we try to give space to people to tell us what God has done for them this week. It’s only a little church, so we can do this in a way that you couldn’t in a big church. We don’t get contributions every week, but we do some weeks, and it’s something that gives glory to God and upbuilds the congregation. Obviously there is a sense in which we should have things to thank God for every week – we have a lady who always thanks God that she woke up this morning. But the psalms think of thanksgiving as relating to special things God does for us, which won’t happen to everyone every week, but it would be nice to think they would be happening to someone most weeks. Hearing their testimony then upbuilds us all.

The psalm illustrates two other interrelated aspects to giving thanks to God. First, experiencing God’s deliverance isn’t something that just affects you at the time. It changes you, and it changes the way you pray, forever. And that is so, second, because experiencing God’s deliverance is not a mere once-off, odd event. It constitutes a concrete illustration of who God really is. Psalm 30 says that God is one who puts down, but that God’s anger lasts only a moment, and that God’s loving acceptance of his people is more characteristic of him.

Now once you are affirming characteristics of God like those, you are actually back where we started, with Psalm 100. You are making the kind of statement you make in a praise psalm. One significance of a thanksgiving psalm is that it enables you to sing a praise psalm again. You have completed the circle of the life of worship and prayer as the Psalms picture it. You move from praise to prayer or protest to trust to thanksgiving or testimony, and then you are back at praise again. These are the dynamics of life with God as the psalms portray it.

Admittedly, what you mean by your praise is probablymore subtle now than it was before. When you say “God’s faithfulness stands forever,” what you now mean by those words is more nuanced than it was before you experienced God’s abandoning you and God’s acting to deliver you. So the circle of praise and protest and thanksgiving isn’t really a circle; it’s more a spiral.

That fact links with another feature of the life of prayer that the Psalms point to. You don’t go around that circle just once. After you get back to praise, something else is likely to happen to drive you to prayer or protest and trust, and when God answers, that experience will again push you into thanksgiving and testimony, and thus back to praise which is now even more nuanced. That is the spiral life of prayer into which the Psalms invite us. To judge from individual psalms, you can come into that spiral at any point and go as far around the spiral as you need to or can on that occasion.

Three footnotes. First, I have said nothing about confession of sin, because the Psalms say very little about confession of sin. There are one or two psalms that major on confession and a few others that refer to our sinfulness, and if you add to the Psalms the prayers in other Old Testament passages such as Ezra 9, Nehemiah 9, and Daniel 9, then you get more of an understanding of the significance of confession, but the Psalms’ own emphasis is that if you want to praise God or pray, you had better be a person of integrity, not a person who needs to go in for a lot of confession. Its further significance for us is that the Psalms don’t give much basis for what a therapist friend of mine calls “worm theology.”

That fact links to the way the Psalms do stress the importance of being people of moral integrity. That’s where the Book of Psalms starts; Psalm 1 implies that you can only praise and pray if you are someone who walks Yahweh’s way, not someone who walks in the way of the faithless.

And that fact links in turn with the presence in the Psalter of a number of Psalms that speak from God to us rather than from us to God. The vast majority of Psalms, maybe one hundred and thirty out of the one hundred and fifty, speak from us to God, in praise or in prayer or in trust or in thanksgiving. Someone summed up the point by saying that the rest of Scripture speaks *to* us; the Psalms speak *for* us. But there are ten or twenty that speak *to* us. The very first psalm issues a challenge about our lives as praying people, and there are more of those later in the Psalter. The second psalm makes promises to us about God’s involvement in politics, and there are more of those later in the Psalter.

The challenges about our lives and the promises about politics need to be part of our prayer lives, along with the confession of our sin. But if you want to know what are the basics of the insight about praise and prayer that emerges from the Psalms, it’s that they invite us into a spiral relationship with God in praise, prayer, trust, and thanksgiving.

1. *Prayer* (London: IVF, 1948), p. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), p. 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)