

GOD'S PEOPLE, GOD'S WORLD

Psalms 1 and 2 • Char Brodersen

Introduction: Good morning, Church! If it's your first time joining us, welcome! As many of you know, we're spending this year building out our biblical theology—seeing how the whole story of Scripture fits together and finds its fulfillment and goal in and through Jesus Christ. This morning we come to what is commonly called the Wisdom Literature.

The Wisdom literature includes Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Solomon's Song of Songs. Biblical Wisdom literature is different than the rest of Scripture in that it engages with some of the great questions and difficulties that humans face in this life and how we live in the gray head on. It often answers our questions with deeper heart-probing questions by considering universal truths from human lives and the world around us. It offers language and companions for our journey through both the difficulties and joys of life. Ultimately biblical wisdom literature is concerned with how to live well, even flourish, in a world that is broken, unjust, and feels chaotic and haphazard.

This morning we want to consider the Psalms together.

It has been said before that whereas Scripture speaks *to us*, the Psalms in particular speak *for us*. In them we find: Delight. Fear. Anger. Joy. Grief. Depression. Gladness. Loneliness. Love. And Loss. And this is just a small sampling of the range of emotions in life, ones that the Psalms fully describe.

The Psalms are beautifully complex in the same way that life in this world is complex. We can relate with the Psalmist as he contemplates the path of wisdom and the path of folly. We can empathize with him when he cries out "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" Or as he prays, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me." Or, "avenge me because of my enemies." He has high highs and low lows. He has moments of great faith and deep pits of depression and doubt.

The Psalms give us language and permission to express our raw, unfiltered emotions to God, yet they simultaneously seek to shape *and redirect them* into righteous ones. With the Psalms, we can approach God with brutal honesty, seeking to be rooted in truth and ready to submit to him.

The Psalms give us permission to pray our anger, to pray our hate, to pray our fears, to pray our failures, to pray our delight, to pray our thanksgiving, to pray our doubts, confusion, and questions.

Do you have murderous thoughts of revenge?

Do you ever have jealous thoughts of people's prosperity and wish their demise?

Are you angry at God?

The Psalms say—You are not alone.

But what do you do with your anger, your hate, and jealousy? The Psalms instruct us to direct them to God. He can take them and he can transform our hearts and redirect them into his truth and his way.

Structure

Now where the Psalms do contain doctrine about God—we can study them, we can teach from them—they are not primarily for teaching but for worship. The five books of songs correlates to the five books of the Law (Torah), which implies that the Scripture is for dialogue with God. It is meant to be conversational. Five

books where God speaks his character, his will, and instruction to us and five books given to us in order to respond and wrestle in prayer. Outside of the five books of praise correlating to the five books of instruction, it's hard to find a clear structure to the book of Psalms (Psalms of David, book 1 and 2; Psalms of ascent group together, etc., not totally clear what the layout intends).

One fascinating note is that each of the five books ends in a psalm of praise. And the fifth book ends in escalating praise. The last seven psalms are a progression of praise which ends with—**“Let everything that has breath praise the Lord!”**

The structure gives a clear message: All the prayers of God's people will be finally answered. All prayer ends in praise. Praise has the final word over the life of God's people.

Applying the Psalms

The Psalms open with two poems, or songs, that are by definition not Psalms. They are not praise, they are not thanksgiving, they are not prayer, confession, lament, or petition. They are in fact poems or songs of Wisdom. They are for deep contemplation, and they serve as an introduction or preface to the Psalms. They could be titled: “How to read and approach the Psalms,” or “How to use this book.” The pictures they paint are very black and white in their view of the world. In Psalm 1 we have the flourishing tree and the perishing chaff, the enduring righteous and the forgotten wicked. Two kinds of people, two kinds of paths—all centered around who we listen to and obey.

In Psalm 2 we have the kingdom of YHWH and his Messiah versus the kingdoms of this world and the picture of the futile attempts for the powerful and cunning to overthrow God's plans and his reign, with a final warning to either recognize, honor, and serve YHWH or to receive his judgment and destruction. Two ways, two responses, two ends or results.

These are a kind of gate, or passageway, of the Psalms—enter into God's truth, God's reality; see things from his point of view as you enter this book. Everything else found in the Psalms is how we walk through this world when everything seems to be in contradiction to these introductory truths. The Psalms are an encyclopedia of how we wrestle with God in conversation, song, and prayer.

This morning we want to consider these first two Psalms of Israel's song and prayer book so we can properly understand and engage with this beautiful book of prayers.

I. The Posture of the Psalms

- A. Psalm 1 is in fact a guide to making sense of the rest of the Psalms. It suggests that before authentic praise, before passionate and expectant prayer, there is a deep need to ponder who are we as we come to this book. (*Note: Psalm 2 is also a part of this intro.* Psalm 1 is the choice and requirements to enter. Psalm 2 is the reality of the rule and judgment of God.)
- B. Psalm 1 gives two distinct paths, that of the “righteous” (or faithful) and that of the “wicked” (or faithless).
- C. Psalm 1 acts as the “literary gatekeepers to the congregation.” What follows (Psalm 3–150) are for use in the congregational gathering of God's people, not for just anyone's use.
 1. Meaning the book of Psalms reflects an intimate relationship with Yahweh and the “faithless” can go no further into the book.
- D. Psalms assumes an obedience to Yahweh's commands and ways, so when we read the rest of the Psalms, we remember Psalm 1.

II. **The Blessed One.** The way the book of Psalms opens is with this pronouncement of blessing or flourishing!—"O how joyful, how flourishing, how at peace are those ..." Who in the world that does not want joy and flourishing? Who doesn't want a fulfilling life? (It immediately calls into question—what truly brings the good life, true flourishing, and peace?)

A. **Negatively**—First is a description of what the truly flourishing person doesn't do.

1. **Does not walk in step with the wicked.**

2. **Does not stand in the way that sinners take**—the meaning is kind of lost in translation. It means to walk in someone's shoes or walking in their way ... practicing the counsel or advice of the wicked.

3. **Does not sit in the seat of scoffers.**

a. These three complete phases show three aspects of departure from God by portraying conformity to this world at three different levels:

(i) Accepting its advice, its values, its goals.

(ii) Joining in its ways, following in what everyone else does.

(iii) Adopting the most fatal of its attitudes—mocks God's wisdom, his ways, his truth, his power, his love and care, and especially his existence. The one who scoffs at God is one who is far from humility, repentance, and God's wisdom.

III. **Positively—what he or she does do.**

A. "... Whose delight is in the law (Torah) of the Lord, and who meditates on his law (Torah) day and night."

B. The flourishing man or woman's heart and life are set on God—his character and person first (Exodus 34), then his wisdom, instruction, and knowledge that flows from his character.

C. They delight and meditate on his instruction. Remember the Law or Torah laid out God's standard of right, of justice, of goodness for his people, Israel, that would result in Shalom (Peace in every aspect of life). The Law was a vision and implementation of God's kingdom culture practiced by his people, and it could be summarized in two commands—love and allegiance to YHWH and love of neighbor.

1. The flourishing one is the one who delights in Torah or God's instruction. The root word of Torah is *Yarah* which means to throw. Eugene Peterson, in his book *Answering God*, says that the word *Yarah* has with it the idea of a javelin being thrown or an arrow being shot. So then if the instruction of God is like a javelin or an arrow being shot, the target is our very heart and person. The idea is that God's Word or instruction is not just another piece of advice to take or leave; it is the Truth of the universe being aimed at your heart, at your very person. It isn't just something to learn about facts, peoples, places, things. It is God's truth that is to be contemplated, meditated on, assimilated into our lives, and incarnated into every area of our daily living. And the righteous man or woman is humble and corrected by God's instruction—eager to know God's instruction and to live it out.

IV. **The Result of Torah/Biblical Meditation.**

A. "That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers."

B. Regardless of life's varied experience, the tree always shows signs of life and bears fruit in the correct seasons of life.

- C. Here is flourishing in biblical terms: Rooted. Never moved, fruitful in all the right places and seasons. Never lacking, never drying up. Always prospering. Fulfilled and at peace in every sense of the word.
1. The flourishing one is the one who meditates and delights in God’s instruction—this is the posture for all who enter this Book of Psalms, and it is the posture that the Psalms cultivate.

V. Psalm 2—The World and Reality of the Psalms.

A. A Different Type of Meditation.

1. The verb that dominates the action of Psalm 1, “meditate,” is picked up again in Psalm 2, but used in a context that requires the translation, “plot.” “Why do the nations conspire, and the peoples plot in vain?” “Mediate” in Psalm 1 and “plot” in Psalm 2 are the same verb. And it is the same action: a murmuring, absorbed, ruminating interest over the Word of God, realizing that this is the most important word, THE WORD that determines all existence.
2. But while Psalm 1 directs us to approach this word with delight, receiving it as life-giving, Psalm 2 shows people plotting against this word, devising schemes for getting rid of it so that they can be free of all God-interference in their lives. These people see God’s words not as javelins penetrating their lives with truth (Torah), but as chains that restrict their freedom. They put their minds together to rid themselves of this word so that their words can rule.

B. The Raging Nations.

1. These aren’t just any people; these are powerful, impressive people. They are both numerous (nations and peoples) and prominent (kings and rulers). These people command most of the armies of the world, direct the advances of science, run school systems, preside over governments, and rule in the marketplaces.
2. I imagine that no one in this room fits into those categories. This psalm is written for the little people. Some might read this psalm and feel like they are reading about the angry, judgmental God of the Bible they’ve always suspected. But nothing could be further from the truth (Exodus 34). This God is one who loves the little weak people, the fatherless, the widow, the poor, the disenfranchised and one who opposes oppressors, injustice, and unrighteousness.
3. So this psalm again is written to people who are under these kind of rulers and kings. What can we do? Don’t you feel helpless, weak, insignificant??
4. My life, your life—good or bad, righteous or unrighteous, just or unjust—is just a drop in the bucket. What can I do, and what difference does it make anyway? And the resounding answer seems to be—nothing.
5. The issue here is size or perspective. We often see reality through a small porthole window, and not the whole picture.
6. This psalm calls us to an act of imagination that enables us to see that the world of God is large—far larger than the world of kings and princes, prime ministers and presidents, far larger than the worlds reported by news and social media, far larger than any philosophy. Far larger, in fact, than anything we can imagine.
 - a. “We need a way,” says Eugene Peterson, “a convincing, usable, accessible tool for realizing the largeness of God in the midst of the competing bigness of the world. If we fail here, prayer will be stunted; we will pray huddled and cowering. We will pray without faith.” — Eugene Peterson, *Answering God*

7. Psalm 2 answers our need by presenting Messiah (God's anointed one). Eugene Peterson calls Messiah God's person in history. God's invasion of the secular, his entry into the world where people go to school, go to work, go to war." And Messiah may not look like much to the watching world. Think of Moses, or David, obviously Jesus the ultimate Messiah—what did people say about him? **"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"** He had no form or beauty that we would desire him, the prophet says, there was nothing kingly about his appearance; he wasn't impressive or intimidating to look at. Yet he is power, wisdom, and righteousness, God incarnate. By means of Psalm 2, we are introduced to Messiah, God's king and God's kingdom—**God personally involved in this world, often incognito, but here and ruling. Immanuel—God with us!**
- a. Psalm 2 is connected with the cross of Jesus Christ by the apostle Peter in Acts 4:25–28, which means that the final way in which we see "the powers that be" formed against God and his anointed was when Rome and Jerusalem met in the middle of history, at the center of the world to destroy God's anointed, Jesus Christ.
8. Peter and the early church prayed this prayer in the face of persecution from the same powerful religious leaders who crucified Jesus,

"Sovereign Lord, you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: 'Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed one. (Messiah) Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.' After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly."

—Acts 4:24–31

- a. Sometimes we wonder what we can possibly do against the powers that be. There are times and seasons in life and in the history of the world when it seems that God is not present, or that he is silent. We wonder what is going on in the world; does God care? Who is running this world, where is God—The world has gone mad!!
- (i) Do you ever feel this way? It's Beyoncé's world, and were just living in it. You hear the philosophies and observe the lifestyles of the richest, most powerful and influential people in the world—and you think—God help us! These are the people who are in control of the world and the course of history! The world is ruled by those swimming in self-indulgence, decadence, and debauchery, and we are just a bunch of pawns in their game. What can the little people do??
- b. We come back to the reality of God's world, God's kingdom, God's king! When we look at Psalm 2 and Acts 4, they call us back to a robust trust in the sovereignty of God, of God's world, God's reality. Sovereignty doesn't mean that God causes all things to happen. Sovereignty means,

"God does what he pleases, but not everything that happens pleases him. He is the one who sets the guidelines, and everyone ultimately answers to him."

—Gerry Breshears

- c. *Sovereignty means—he will accomplish his purposes, and nothing can stand in his way.*

- d. In his prayer, Peter highlights that the rulers of the world didn't know it, but they were playing right into God's plan. They were crucifying God's Messiah and simultaneously crowning him King over the nations. Think about the purple robe, the crown of thorns, the declaration in Greek, Latin, and Aramaic, declaring to the whole world at the time—This Jesus is THE KING OF THE JEWS—the One who would rule the nations. As Jesus was being crucified as King of the Jews. God was at that very moment setting his king on his holy hill—establishing Jesus's kingdom over all kingdoms!
- (i) Even when the greatest powers of the world, the greatest political power, the greatest religious power, the devil, and the demonic realm aligned to destroy Messiah and snuff out the redemptive work of God, three days later, Jesus rose, triumphant over the grave. Peter is showing us something we overlook or forget—it wasn't in spite of all of this that God did his work, but through all of it that he accomplished his will! So when we fear the darkness and sense it engulfing our lives, our hopes, we remember—**Our God does his best work in the dark!**
- (a) **“He who sits in the heavens laughs ...”** It's no wonder this attempt to throw God's authority off makes God chuckle. Think about how mind-blowing this is, that in Jesus's weakest, most vulnerable moment, he was in fact destroying the power behind the unrighteous and unjust kingdoms of this world and the powers that held the world in captivity under sin.
- (b) “What looks like (and indeed was) the defeat of goodness by evil is also, and more certainly, the defeat of evil by goodness. Overcome there, he was himself overcoming. Crushed by the ruthless power of Rome, he was himself crushing the serpent's head. The victim was the victor, and the cross is still the throne from which he rules the world.”—John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*
- (c) “For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.”—1 Corinthians 1:25
- e. Our God is a God that brings light out of the blackest darkness. God turned the greatest defeat the world has ever seen into the greatest victory the universe has ever known. He took the shamed and crucified Messiah and set him on the throne of the universe!
- f. Here is the good news: even when it feels hopeless and darkness seems all around us, God is at work. Even though at this moment, you cannot see it, God is always present, and NEVER absent, even when his presence isn't obvious. Even in the midst of faithlessness, God is faithful. Though we don't deserve it and our conscience may deny it, he is faithful. So when we see things arise that might threaten the church or the work of God, when enemies seek to overtake and snuff out the gospel, whether in the third world or right here in our own state; although it seems God is absent and all hell has broken loose, God is ultimately in control. Remember, God is sovereign and at work behind the scenes. This is the world, the reality, and the confidence of the Psalms—everything else is wrestling in order to live in that reality.

Conclusion

In order to understand and use this powerful, beautiful prayer book properly, we must understand and accept our identity as the blessed people of God. We're the people who study and meditate on his Word, his disciples who hang on his every Word and practice his way. We are also then the people who get to wrestle with God—to question, to complain, and protest, to lament and curse, and God takes it all. Like a good parent who wrestles through the difficulties of life with their coming-of-age children, God our Father wrestles with us.

I've mentioned this before but it's worth noting again the psalmist never questions God's existence or character but actually takes God's existence and God's revealed character—of faithful love, justice, mercy, and asks the Lord—"How Long O Lord?" How long till you bring it to me in my situation—to my injustices, to my brokenness, to my need for healing and help?

In fact the frequent truths and biblical themes that are revisited in the Psalms are—**God is King; our destiny is glory and blessing; our King is coming; the Lord is our refuge; the nations will be blessed.** The psalmist is an insider, not an outsider, one who is in conversation with God, wrestling with God's reality versus his lived experience. One who is looking and waiting for God's salvation and relentless in their wrestlings until it comes.

How can I be certain that I am in the company with the righteous? One who is truly blessed and has access to God in this way?

Of course, this depends on us and how we answer these questions:

(1) Do you trust in God or reject God's ways? You have a choice.

(2) Do you allow God to alter your story or do you let the influence of the "wicked" direct your story? Do you want to abide in God's instruction to delight in his Word?

Even if we can answer in the affirmative, the only assurance we have comes from the only truly blessed person who ever lived, Jesus—who delighted and meditated on the instruction of the Lord and also wrestled with God. There on the cross, Jesus cried out to his father using the language of Psalm 22, "My God, My God why have you forsaken me?" (It's possible that Jesus actually was reciting the Psalms during the whole of his suffering beginning at Psalm 22 and ending at Psalm 31, "Into your hands I commit my spirit.")

It is really quite an incredible statement to consider that there on the cross, the Son of God, the one who had lived in eternity past and deepest relationship with the Father, cries out in agony of his God-forsakenness. What is happening here? Is Jesus, the beloved Son, truly being forsaken by the Father? Many of our songs make mention of this. We sing in celebration of Christ atoning work for us, "The father turned his face away as wounds which mar the chosen one bring many sons to glory." We say things like, Well God cannot look upon sin and so there on the cross, when Jesus became sin for us, the Father forsook him. Is that true? Or rather is Jesus here taking up the mantle, the place, the cry of every human being, since our first parents, Adam and Eve, when it comes to our own mortality, suffering, and impending death? Could it be that here, Jesus takes up the weight, the burden, the debt of humanity, and as the writer of Hebrews tells us, because of his godliness he was heard; because of his godliness, he was not forsaken.

"During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission."

And because Jesus was heard by the Father, because he was not forsaken, we can be assured that the Father hears every cry of despair, every woe, grief, and lament of those who (belong to) are in Jesus.

Again the writer of Hebrews says,

"Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. Such a high priest truly meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself."

Jesus is our once-for-all representative before the Father. Taking up the cry of humanity. Through Jesus, we are heard. In Jesus, God is with us in all our distress, in all our suffering. He hears us, he is with us in our pain, he will not leave us or forsake us. Even today, bring your cry, your complaint, your distress, and lay it on Jesus! You are heard. He is with you.

Thanks be to Jesus for this indescribable gift of his suffering with us and his suffering for us.

Communion

As we come to the table of the Lord this morning, we're reminded of the fellowship and communion we have with our Lord Jesus Christ, our Savior. We are reminded of his sufferings, of his wrestlings, of his doubt, and fears and yet his faith and trust in his Father's sovereignty and plan. Jesus suffered immensely for our sake, but that is not the end of his story. He rose triumphant over the grave, and he is Lord over all. Glory, honor, and praise have the final word over Jesus's story and our lives as well. And we invite you to celebrate that today. Let Jesus meet you in your suffering; let his wounds speak to your wounds, and let his resurrection power give you life!

This table is a weekly physical reminder—of God's presence in your suffering and in your wrestlings. He is with us. He is our refuge. God is king. Our end is glory.

We know that because of human sinfulness and brokenness, there is not one of us who has lived up to the ideal of what God created us for—to love him supremely and to love our neighbor as ourselves. So as we come to the table this morning, we come as a people in need of forgiveness and in need of redemption and salvation. And that is what Jesus offer us at this table—forgiveness, redemption, and salvation. His life for our life; his righteousness for our sin and brokenness.

Prayer

Most merciful God,

we confess that we have sinned against you

in thought, word, and deed,

by what we have done,

and by what we have left undone.

We have not loved you with our whole heart;

we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.

We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.

For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ,

have mercy on us and forgive us

that we may delight in your will

and walk in your ways,

to the glory of your Name. Amen.

Appendix

Note and helpful insight on emotions from Old Testament scholar and theologian, Tremper Longman III.

“The Psalms put us in touch with our deepest emotions. As readers of the Psalms, we can ‘feel [ourselves] understood and explained’ by them. They also make us sensitive to the emotional struggles of others. The Psalms teach us that our emotions are grounded in our faith, our covenant faith. This contradicts our mistaken belief that emotions are something over which we have no control. Contrary to this, notice how in the Psalms the composer’s feelings are associated with his relationship to God. When God is distant, the psalmist is sad, afraid, ashamed, doubtful, even angry. When God is near, he is happy and secure; he even expresses his love. It is simply not true that our emotional life is something over which we have no control. The Psalms can help us to discipline our emotions. This does not mean that we should repress our emotions; far from it, if we follow the example of the psalmist. The Psalms are an honest expression of emotions. We get a privileged insight into the negative feelings of the psalmist to which we can all relate. In the Psalms, however, the negative always leads to the positive. Doubt leads to trust; anger toward God turns to love; sadness to joy. But we must remember that the Psalms aren’t magical incantations. It sometimes appears that the psalmist changed his negative feelings to positive ones in a brief moment, but this isn’t how it happened. The Psalms compress time in such a way that what was a long process appears as a sudden insight. Honest emotional struggle stands behind the Psalms.

“In conclusion, remember that emotions aren’t a separate compartment in our lives. What we know often affects what we feel; what we feel often determines what we select to know. Also, feeling often leads to action.”

—How to Read the Psalms, Tremper Longman III