

Praying the Psalms: Integrating our Passions, Probity, and Prayers

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Integrating our passions, probity, and our prayers can be accomplished by praying the psalms. These Old Testament prayers serve as examples of powerful petitions filled with passion and probity and often centered on social justice which can serve as patterns of prayers for us to incorporate into our own devotions.

Our passions are often powerful feelings that move us as individuals and become persuasive when we try to move others especially when we hear, see, or read about social injustices, and/or experience social injustice and seek social justice for ourselves and/or others. Once our passions become intense, they will likely penetrate our inner being as was the case with Christ.

Jesus' prayers were as intense, powerful, passionate, and often filled with as much emotion, as many prayers within the Psalms. The passion narratives in the Gospels note that while praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus "fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will (Matthew 26.39)" and "And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground (Luke 22.44)."

Hebrews 5.7 states the following,

"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."

Some of his fervent cries and tears are noted in the Gospels and include:

- "As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it (Luke 19.41);
- He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. (Mark 3.5);
- But the synagogue official, indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, began saying to the crowd in response, "There are six days in which work should be done; so come during them and get healed, and not on the Sabbath day." But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites, does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the stall and lead him away to water him? "And this woman, a daughter of Abraham as she is, whom Satan has bound for eighteen long years, should she not have been released from this bond on the Sabbath day?"... (Luke 13. 14-16)."

Also, Christ's last words before his resurrection were fervent cries as recorded in the passion narrative of the Gospel of Mark:

- "And at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" (which means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?") (15.34);

- “With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last (15.37).”

Probity, like our passions, should also penetrate our inner being. A Christian’s probity should not only imply integrity but also proven diligence and morality. Like God who proclaims “For I, the LORD, love justice (Isaiah 61.8a),” the Christian should be one who passionately loves justice and declares the same. Isaiah wrote

- “This is what the LORD says: “Maintain justice and do what is right, for my salvation is close at hand and my righteousness will soon be revealed. How blessed is the (one) who does this, And the (one) who takes hold of it; (Isaiah 56.1 – 2a).”

A Christian’s probity, however, should not only assert one’s love for justice but stress the misfortunes of injustice as noted in various verses in the Holy Scriptures. “Whoever sows injustice reaps calamity (Proverbs 22.8a) is one such verse.

Praying the psalms is a spiritual practice that encourages us to stress our love for justice and disdain for injustice, for the psalms contain prayers that express a full range of human feelings about justice. As a matter of fact, the psalms make it apparent that prayer remains in part a shallow affair if we leave out the full range of our feelings. More authentic prayer emerges when we dare to express our pain and raise before God our deepest questions and concerns as did the Psalmist:

“Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice.
(Psalm 130.1)

“O Lord, God of my salvation, when, at night, I cry out in your presence,
let my prayer come before you; incline your ear to my cry,
For my soul is full of troubles”
(Psalm 88.1-3a)

The Psalms are often written using couplets, i.e. paired lines that bear close relation to each other. Quite often this relationship is synonymous, that is, the word order and vocabulary of the second half of the couplet mirrors that of the first half. The second part of the couplet frequently intensifies or heightens the meaning of the first part of the couplet as follows:

“My throat thirsts for you,
My body aches for you”
(Psalm 63.1b)

Psalms using couplets to intensify or heighten justice for those in need include:

“God heals the brokenhearted
and binds up their wounds”
(Psalm 147.3)

“The Lord is near to the brokenhearted,
and saves the crushed in spirit”
(Psalm 34.18)

“For the needy shall not always be forgotten,
nor the hope of the poor perish forever.”
(Psalm 9.18)

I just finished teaching a class at Fuller Theological Seminary that required each student to identify an area within a city or region (in which they lived, worked, worshipped, recreated, socialized, and/or served) and ascertain a social justice issue or condition within their chosen area that they would like to see solved. This was the basis of their final paper.

The areas and the seemingly intractable social injustices or issues that they chose included:

- Homelessness in Los Angeles’ Skid Row and other geographical areas in Southern California;
- Educational inequality, drug abuse, and marginalization in neighborhoods in the Yau Tsim Mong district of Hong Kong;
- People infected with HIV in Kawale, Malawi;
- Christians living in Internally Displaced Persons camps in Adamawa, Nigeria, after fleeing the terror of Boko Haram; and
- Neighborhood disinvestment in neighborhoods of various cities throughout Southern California that has resulted in drug sales and use, violent crime, prostitution, and human trafficking.

Each week we focused on a means to help solve the problems. The course required students to describe how they would solve the problem in their final paper. I am glad I taught this class. It helped me deal with my own frustration and even my anger towards the injustices and issues that they described, in addition to those that I am personally trying to solve through public and private partnerships throughout Southern California.

I have felt such anger towards injustices and issues for years as you likely have as well. Praying the Psalms has provided me with a spiritual practice to express my anger with God.

As a matter of fact, expressing my anger with God has helped me come to terms with verses throughout the Psalms and in other books of the Bible that express God’s anger, which at times can be a very intense anger. I can think back to the time when I did not know what to do with these verses and basically avoided them. Such verses included:

- He rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath (Psalm 2.5);
- It is you alone who are to be feared. Who can stand before you when you are angry? (Psalm 76.7); and
- If only we knew the power of your anger! Your wrath is as great as the fear that is your due (Psalm 90.11).

Of course, I still like to balance my spiritual practice of praying the Psalms with verses that describe God's mercy and forgiveness such as

- Have mercy on us, LORD, have mercy on us, for we have endured no end of contempt (Psalm 123.3);
- If you, LORD, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand? (Psalm 130.3); and
- Do not bring your servant into judgment, for no one living is righteous before you (Psalm 143.2);

Thus, the Psalms model a type of prayer with which we may not be totally comfortable. On the one hand, the Psalms are filled with pleas for social justice that we may feel comfortable incorporating into our own prayers. Examples include:

- . . . bring justice to the orphans and the oppressed, so mere people can no longer terrify them (Ps 10.18);
- Do not let the oppressed retreat in disgrace; may the poor and needy praise your name (Ps 74.21);
- Defend the weak and the fatherless; uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed (Ps 82.3).

The Psalms are also filled with verses that call us to act because God will hear, never forget, and protect the poor. Examples include:

- But God will never forget the needy; the hope of the afflicted will never perish (Psalm 9.18);
- You, LORD, hear the desire of the afflicted; you encourage them, and you listen to their cry (Psalm 10.17); and
- "Because the poor are plundered and the needy groan, I will now arise," says the LORD. "I will protect them from those who malign them (Psalm 12.5);

So, praying the Psalms provides us with opportunities to pray with a full range of human feelings that integrate our passions, probity, and desires while seeking justice. Praying the Psalms allows us to express our love for justice and our anguish and anger when there is a lack of it. As a result, the spiritual practice of praying the Psalms will call us to act on behalf of justice and begin, or continue, to change our lives forever.