

90 Days of Worship – Reading and Praying through the Psalms

1) Introduction to the Psalms

Beginning January 3, 2022, City Reformed Church will be reading the Psalms together with the purpose of seeking revitalized worship. We are seeking revitalized worship in our Sunday morning worship services as a congregation, but also as individuals, in our families and in our small group settings. On Sunday night, January 9, 2022, we will replace our normal evening worship service with an interactive seminar on “90 Days of Worship” in which we introduce this reading program. (Originally, we had planned to do this on Sunday, January 2, but illness forced a postponement.

The event will be available on livestream and will be posted on our YouTube page afterwards.

The 150 Psalms in the Psalter (the collection of Psalms in the Bible) have long been used by the church as a tool for worship and prayer. We believe that there will be great benefit in committing ourselves to reading them together. However, our goal is more than just reading. We hope that our time spent with the psalms will spur us to richer and deeper interactions with God. Toward that end, we will orient our preaching series in the morning service around themes of worship, as the preaching in the evening service follows along with the weekly psalms. The daily readings that we do will have abbreviated liturgies for personal and group (or family) worship. These liturgies will be linked to our Sunday order of service so that our worship throughout the week will be connected to what we do as a congregation on Sunday mornings. We hope that our entire church will find ways to participate in this 90-day program.

Worship and Prayer in the Psalms

The psalms are poetry that could be set to music. Many of the psalms include instruction for musical leaders. They could be sung together in group worship, or individually. Unlike other parts of Scripture, the “voice” of the psalms is often one in which the speaker is directing their attention to God. (Compare that to the “voice” of wisdom literature, history books or the prophets – which most often have the voice of God speaking to people.) As a result of this Godward perspective, the psalms are easily used for prayer and worship. When we use the word “worship” we often think of singing praises to God, but the biblical use of the word worship can be much bigger. If you think “singing to God” when you hear the word worship, you are not wrong and the idea helpfully gets us in the right ballpark. But, worship includes more than just singing. And not all singing is “worshipful.”

The root idea of worship is that we celebrate God’s bigness by embracing our smallness. The Greek word most often translated as “worship” literally means to “bow down before.” It is not necessary for our physical posture to change when we worship – though that can be helpful. Rather, our spiritual posture needs to change. For that reason, our worship includes various acts of humility (confession) and celebration of God in song. In practice, the line between praying to God and worshipping God in song is often quite blurry. For that reason, the psalms are models of prayers and for songs.

Psalms in History

In the Old Testament, the Psalms were used in temple worship and for personal devotion. The Psalms of Ascent (Psalms 120-134) were used by religious pilgrims who walked up toward Jerusalem for religious festivals. The Psalms celebrated the powerful work of God in creation, the exodus from Egypt, as well as many events in the life of Israel and their kings. The largest number of psalms are attributed to King

David, and many reflect his personal experiences. Others reflect the experience of God's people in exile as they long for restoration and reflect on the faithfulness of God in the past.

In the New Testament, the psalms are sung by Jesus and the disciples and frequently quoted. Psalm 110 was used by Jesus in dispute with the religious leaders, and Psalm 22 was found on his lips during his crucifixion. When the early church faced persecution, they gathered in prayer and lifted up to God the words of Psalm 2, "Why do the nations rage?" The New Testament authors frequently quote from the psalms and also urge the church to sing to one another "psalms, hymns and spiritual songs" (Col 2:16).

In the history of the church, the psalms have been an important tool for personal devotion and church worship. To list but a few examples, many monastic groups would recite the entire psalter on monthly or weekly rotations. Also, when the reformers sought to restore singing to the congregation and incorporate biblical ideas into their corporate worship, they used the psalter as their hymnbook. Many of our modern hymns and spiritual songs use the language of the psalm to direct our praises to God. Psalm 23 ("the Lord is my shepherd") has been one of the most familiar and beloved selections of scripture.

Christ in the Psalms

The New Testament directly connects Jesus to many of the Psalms. Sometimes, it places the words of the psalm in the mouth of Jesus (Psalm 22), and in those circumstances, we are directly led to think of the psalms as prayers that Jesus said. In other examples, the psalms are said to be about Jesus. For example, in Hebrews chapter 1, Psalms 2, 104, 45, 102, 110, and 8 are all presented as having reference to Jesus. Because of this, some psalms are spoken of as being "messianic." But, the connection between Jesus and the psalms goes far beyond those psalms that are explicitly said to apply to him. Though the connection is not always obvious, Jesus presented himself as the central message of Scripture and told his disciples after the resurrection that all of Scripture, including the psalms was centered on him (Luke 24:44).

The Challenge of the Psalms

While many psalms are very accessible and easy to use for spiritual benefit, some are more difficult. Some psalms simply direct our attention to the greatness of God and describe his attributes. For example, psalms 146-150 close the psalter with a chorus of praise, repeating "Praise the Lord, Praise, the Lord, Praise the Lord." Other psalms (like psalm 51) lead the speaker into confession and give words to our humility before God. Most difficult are psalms that express the righteousness of the speaker, or call for punishment on the enemies of God. The "imprecatory psalms" are ones which ask God to bring harsh judgment on enemies. It is not easy to know what to do with all of the psalms or how to relate them to the admonition of Jesus to "love our enemies." Part of our reading program will offer daily reflections on the psalms. As we move through the various types and face various challenges, we will explore how the church has benefitted from this diverse section of Scripture that is always powerful and sometimes challenging. We can be assured that as we explore the psalms our prayer life will be stretched and we will be led to worship God in the fullest range of expression. We will find that God himself has given us words that we can say back to him in the widest assortment of human experiences.

2) How to use our "Daily Devotionals"

Included on the City Reformed website is a blog named "Daily Devotionals." The devotionals are scheduled to be posted on the website each morning at 12:30 am and will be available for that day. Scrolling down will reveal the posts from prior days.

Each daily devotional includes a number of parts. They are designed to be used as part of a personal or small group worship service. We hope that our families will try to use this for daily worship together. We also hope that other people in the church can find ways to connect with others in the church around these liturgies. Please be creative. Maybe you work near others you can occasionally meet with for lunch. Maybe you connect on the phone or through a streaming service.

It may also be best to do parts of this alone, and parts with other people. We recognize the wide range of circumstances of our members mean that people benefit from engaging with this material in a wide range of ways. Please don't view this as an exact recipe that must be followed. Rather, think of this as a buffet table of helpful worship resources. For example, the section of the daily devotional called "Abiding" contains material that many people will find easier to do alone. We created the daily devotional liturgy with the idea that people could mix and match, doing some parts together and some parts (or perhaps all of it) on their own.

Each daily devotional is centered around two different things. First, there is a weekly Psalm of Ascent that shapes the flow of the liturgy for the week. For the 15 weeks between January 3 and Easter we will focus on one Psalm of Ascent for each week (see above.) The Psalms of Ascent are helpful to use in this manner because they are generally shorter and have historically been associated with pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The term "ascent" refers to the upward journey toward the mountainous city of Jerusalem from the surrounding lower regions. As we make our metaphorical pilgrimage to Easter, we will be led to focus in greater depth on the 15 Psalms of Ascent. During each week, the many aspects of each liturgy will be shaped by this weekly psalm. The call to worship, the confession ("Gathering"), the sending, and the weekly songs will all be related to the weekly psalm of ascent. In particular, the section of the devotional labeled "Abiding" will offer people the opportunity to go into a little more depth. In this section, participants will be led to memorize the psalm throughout the course of the week as they examine it in greater detail. In this part of the liturgy we will be experiencing what the psalmist often refers to "meditating on your word." Our hope is to weave God's word into our daily lives in an experiential way.

The second part of each daily devotional rotates around a different axis. While the Song of Ascent will remain the same throughout the week, the daily readings will each be different and move us through the entire Psalter. The section of the daily devotion labeled "Word" will have two readings. The first reading will always be a psalm, and in many cases the second will be a related psalm. (In order to get through the entire Psalter – minus the weekly psalms of ascent – in 90 Days, we will need to do more than one daily psalm. However, about one third of the time, we will focus on only one psalm and instead choose a second reading that shows how this psalm relates to other parts of the bible. Most often that other part is a New Testament passage that quotes from the psalm or show how it connects to our redemption in Christ. Again, there are wide range of ways to do these readings. As a minimum, someone could read the introductory verse and the daily reading and get great benefit from it. It is more beneficial to read both of the readings in their entirety and then read the summary. What is most important is for people to engage in some way as they are able within their own constraints.

Finally, you will notice that there are six readings for every week. The 90-Day schedule allows for a day off on Sunday. This is because, the Sunday liturgy is essentially the liturgy that we do together in our Sunday worship services. We will be looking for ways to incorporate our weekly Psalm of Ascent into the

Sunday worship services. The Sunday morning sermon series will follow general themes of worship, and the Sunday evening sermon series will follow along from the various psalms that we are reading together. Also, if you find that you have fallen behind the reading, then Sunday is a good day to catch up. But one of the things that we learned last year is that when people fall behind in the readings, it is sometimes better to just skip ahead to the most recent reading and try to stay current. Feeling like you have to catch up on endless reading can be a discouragement that stands as a barrier to participating. In summary, it is far better to read a little... than to read nothing at all!

3) What is “Worship”? (Abridged)

The larger theme of this reading plan is to encourage our church toward revitalized worship. Reading through the psalms is a large part of how we will do that, but our goal is to see an even bigger picture. In the Sunday morning sermon series, we will be tackling the large-scale question of what it means for us to worship God and how we can seek to revitalize that experience. Our hope is that we do more than just *read* the psalms and learn information. But we hope that the daily devotionals will lead our congregation to engage in worship as they follow the liturgy throughout the week. We desire more than just cognitive knowledge *about* worship, but we want to *engage* in worship experientially.

A short summary of worship can be found below, and a longer summary of biblical teaching (“*What is Worship?: Worship in the Bible*”) is being prepared and will be available on the website as we begin to move through this series.

In short, worship is the way in which creatures experience fellowship with their creator and redeemer, the living triune God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. There are many ways in which our fellowship with God can be characterized. In his first epistle, John writes:

That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. (1 John 1:3-4)

It is pretty remarkable for John to say that our “fellowship is with the Father and with his Son.” Surely John was prompted to write this way because of how Jesus, himself, spoke about salvation. When he addressed his disciples on the night of his betrayal he invited them into the fellowship that he had known with the Father from all eternity.

That they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. (John 17:21)

In other places, the Scriptures speak of our experience of being God’s children and being recipients of his lavish grace toward us. Jesus himself spoke to his disciples as being primarily viewed as “friends” and not “servants” because he had invited them into the knowledge of his salvation plans for the world.

So, on many levels, we see that the fellowship we have with God as his adopted children has a remarkably exalted status. And yet, even for redeemed humans who are children of God, we remain creatures. We do not become “little gods.” The creature-creator distinction remains. The language of servant continues in the New Testament and is frequently held in high honor by the apostles as a term of self-description. We are – at the same time – children and servants. Our experience of being a creature and a servant is augmented by our experience of being a child of God – and vice versa.

The language of worship in the Bible flows out of the paradigm of servant-master and the creature-creator relationships. In the Bible, the terms and images of worship are formed with the language of bowing down, service, and sacrifice on behalf of the worshipper; and exaltation and glory directed toward the one being worshipped. It is not proper to worship any created being with the type of worship that is due to God alone. (We will examine all of this more in the coming paper titled, “*What is Worship?: Worship in the Bible*”)

However, one of the main themes that we will attempt to hammer out again and again throughout this series is the necessity of viewing our worship within the larger framework of redemption. It can be a dangerous trap for Christians to encounter the complex of worship language and concepts that are found in the Bible and engage with them outside of the larger framework of salvation by grace. We can think of worship through the lens of works-righteousness just as we engage in any good works. Because the language and concepts of worship so often run along the servant/master and creature/creator axis, we can forget the larger picture of salvation by grace and stumble our way forward acting as if our salvation was a matter of our own works an achievement. Furthermore, the experience of worship involves intentional activity. It often feels (at least in part) like *work*. The actions of worship in the OT include “bringing sacrifices”, “serving God in various activities”, “bowing low”, “singing praises,” and “saying prayers.” Furthermore, all of these things are necessarily connected with a life lived in obedience to God. (See Is. 58, Ps 15:8-9, Mt 12:6-8.) However, all of these things can make it seem like worship is a “work” and we can fall into the same traps that always snare Christians in regard to works-righteousness. The end result of worship is that we experience God as a spring of reviving water through Christ. When we glorify God, we also find deep enjoyment in him. (WSC #1.) But getting there can feel like work, and if we approach in with the wrong mindset it will become a dry and laborious activity rather than a refreshing celebration of God’s splendor.

If we conceive of worship as something that we do for God and apart from the indwelling power of God... without recognizing that all of our good works – including worship – are doing in union with Christ, by the power of the Spirit, then we will end up doing worship in our own strength. Our worship will essentially become an act of works righteousness that is severed from the power of the gospel.

There was a lot in that last paragraph, let me unpack this just a little.

It is accurate for us to think of worship as a *response* to the salvation that God provides for us by grace. In Romans 12, Paul calls us to offer the entirety of our bodies as living sacrifices as a response to “God’s mercies” which were expounded through the first 11 chapters of that letter. (Rom 12:1-2)

But even our responses to God are not something that we do apart from him. Even our responses are done in his power and in the imputed righteousness from Jesus. When Paul writes...

“I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”
(Gal 2:20)

... the “life he now lives” includes worship.

Our prayers are an important part of worship. They are made “in the name of Jesus”, which means they are connected to the saving work of Christ. Right now, our Jesus our priestly mediator, and he is praying for us – interceding for us – whenever we pray. (Heb 7:25)

Therefore, we can see from just these two examples, the position of our worship must always be “in Christ.” It is not something we do apart from God, on our own, and in our own strength. Rather, it is done in the strength that God offers and it is received in the righteousness of Christ that is ours by faith.

Or, to look at it another way. Consider the way in which the Westminster Confession describes our good works. Certainly, worship is similar to “good works” in that it is a similar response to God’s gracious salvation. In our worship and good works, God kindly allows us to participate in the heavenly drama of redemption by doing things that matter and that are pleasing to God. But, look at how the WCF guards against importing the wrong motive for our good works. Certainly, the same paradigm exists for our worship:

WCF 16:5-6

(5.) We cannot merit the pardon of sin or eternal life at the hand of God by our best works,

- *because of the great disproportion between them and the glory to come,*
- *because of the infinite distance that is between us and God, whom we can neither profit by them nor pay for the debt of our former sins, but when we have done all we can, we have only done our duty, and are unprofitable servants,*
- *because if they are good, they proceed from his Spirit,*
- *and because they are done by us, and therefore are defiled and mixed with so much weakness and imperfection that they cannot endure the severity of God’s judgment.*

(6.) Nevertheless, because believers are accepted in themselves through Christ, their good works also are accepted in him, not as though they were wholly blameless in this life and irreproachable in God’s sight, but because he, looking on them in his Son, is pleased to accept and reward all that which is sincere, although accompanied by many weaknesses and imperfections.

By following this pattern we can confidently say that even our best worship could never earn anything from God. But, when we are connected to Jesus by faith, our worship is “accepted in Christ.” What encouragement this gives us as we seek to revitalize our worship! We want to have a greater awareness of God with us and a greater joy in celebrating his excellent character. But growing in our worship simply means that we are growing *into* an awareness of what Jesus has already done for us. This growth leads to greater joy in God as we celebrate him. It brings revitalizing energy to our spiritual lives as we fulfill the function that we were created to do. This is something that we are called to grow in. Just as the life of ongoing Christian sanctification means growing through grace to do “good works”, so to our Christian life is an ongoing journey to grow through grace to have vital worship. Our very ability to worship, and the righteous standing in which our worship can be accepted our themselves gifts from God. How encouraging it is to realize that he has already done all that is necessary for our worship to be acceptable! How encouraging it is to realize that God delights in our worship, even when it is “accompanied by many weaknesses and imperfections!”

There is much more that we will say about this in the coming months. But for now, let us rest in the foundation of grace as we seek to have revitalized worship together. It has been a long two years full of distractions and difficulties. Many of our patterns of worship have been interrupted. It will take intentional effort to reengage in ways that lead to greater spiritual health and vitality. But as we seek to

do this, we can have confidence that God is for us and that what we are seeking is not only in his will (Romans 12:2), but also able to be done in his power (Col 1:29.)

- *Matt Koerber, Sr. Pastor, City Reformed (12/31/21)*