

OT Essentials: the Psalms

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We're mixing things up a little bit this morning in our OT Essentials series. We're not highlighting a person like we've done before. We're not highlighting a time period or theological concept from the OT. Instead, I want to draw your attention to the book of Psalms. And, of course, by including Psalms in this particular sermon series, I'm calling Psalms essential.

Every book in the Bible is essential; it's all God's word after all. But the Psalms are particularly important for our NT faith for the following reasons (so here is a little outline for our time in God's word this morning)

- For our worship
- For our understanding of Christ
- For our emotional life

I'm going to somewhat breeze through the first two reasons and focus mostly on that last reason. It's not that our emotional life is more important than our worship or our understanding of Christ, per se; instead, I want to focus on it so closely this morning because, in my view, we're struggling so much today with how to interact with and manage our emotional life.

I apologize for how quickly I'm going to work through these first two reasons, but they are certainly worth talking about now and more at length later. Psalms is essential for our worship. The word *Psalms* means *to sing praise* - that's worship. At the beginning of many psalms you see instructional information about how to use them in worship. Look at the start of chapter 4; it says, "To the choirmaster: with stringed instruments. A Psalm of David." Likewise in chapter 5. And so the Psalms are praise songs that were sung in public services of worship. Chapter 30 was a song performed at the dedication of the temple. In the NT, the Apostle Paul commands the churches he planted to sing the Psalms when they gather to worship Jesus. So, it's pretty clear that the psalms are intended to guide and encourage our worship to God.

I see two benefits of making sure we keep the Psalms essential in our worship. First of all, the psalms will keep us directed towards the Lord in our worship through our wide range of human experiences and emotions. We'll talk about this later, but it's pretty easy to get down and out on life when its difficulties find us. When we sing and read the psalms, which gets very honest about the struggles we all have in life, they give us language to use to express our thoughts and feelings to God while remaining focused on him. In Psalm 31, for example, the psalmist talks about his trouble saying things like, "my bones have wasted away." When I hear that, I hear a man expressing pain that goes deep to his soul. But along with these earnest and raw expressions of pain, he says a few verses later (vs. 14), "But I trust in you, O Lord; I say 'You are my God.'" Our worship to God is helped by this kind of authenticity.

Secondly, the Psalms emphasize the communal element of worship, which I think is really important, too. "Let us make a joyful noise to the Lord! The Lord has done great things for

us!” In a very me-and-Jesus world, the Psalms remind us, “you are a part of a people, a community, of faith. All of you, lift up your praise with one voice to your God!” I do think we could use a little course correction to our faith: from me-and-Jesus, to Jesus and his people, which he invites me into. Truly, when you’re struggling with motivation to come to church on a Sunday, tell yourself, “Today is our day to worship God together. I have a duty and a delight to join the choir of voices in our adoration of God.” The psalms were essential to the worship of God’s people and they still should be today.

Ok, let’s move onto the second reason the Psalms are essential. Did you know the book of Psalms is the most quoted or referenced book of the OT in the NT? Most of those references have to do with Christ. Over and over again, NT writers quote the Psalms to demonstrate or prove that Jesus is the Christ; that he has authority; that he is royalty; that he is eternal; that he has the power over death; that he is unmatched and glorious. So often, when the NT writers want to highlight something great about Jesus and how he fulfills what God has promised about his coming Messiah, they quote a psalm.

Let me give you just one example. In Hebrews 2 when the author is trying to highlight the unmatched supremacy of Christ he quotes Psalm 8:4-6. All of creation was put under the care of humanity, and because Jesus is the first of all mankind, all things are perfectly and totally subject to him. Jesus himself and the NT writers refer to the Psalms this way over and over again. This is an important reason why the Psalms are so essential to our NT faith. Really, I would say it’s the most important reason - confirming that Jesus is indeed the Christ. I hope hearing this provokes you to slow down when you read the Psalms and look for the many promises God offers in them about his Chosen One.

Now, let’s move onto the final focus of the Psalms - for our emotional life. Many people have said this to me over the years: I just don’t get the Psalms. I don’t understand what I’m reading and I when I do I don’t get why it’s important. One of the main reasons for this, I think, is because the Psalms are poetry, which means it is the language of emotion. This might take some time for you to ponder (so let this linger for the next week or two), but I believe there are verses, words, in the Bible that God has given to us not primarily to learn truthful information, but to truthfully express our heart to God (REPEAT). We usually look at our Bibles and think, “This is where I find truthful information.” Yes, it is. But that’s not the full story. Some of the words in the scriptures are meant to help you express your heart, your emotions, to God. We not only use words to convey facts and info; we also use words in our attempt to touch the transcendent. That’s why we have poetry; even more, it’s why we put poetry to music. Those artistic uses of language aren’t meant to simply convey information; it’s to articulate our hearts.

We actually use language like this all the time. When you’re in the stands watching a HS football game and the Raiders, the Bluejays, the Hawks score a go ahead touchdown and you jump and yell, “That touchdown was amazing! We’ve got this!” your primary purpose in saying those words is not to inform those around you that the touchdown was amazing and now you’re more likely to win this game. No! You’re expressing your emotions! You’re exuding your delight

and your happiness! Emotional expression is sometimes the primary reason we use words and, I would say, that's true with the scriptures sometimes; it's true with the psalms. God has given us the Psalms (and other poetic works in the Bible) to help us connect what is true to our hearts so that the majesty, glory, and truthfulness of God reaches not just our mind, but our entire selves.

We are an emotionally confused people, if I can be so bold to say. I see two primary ways we struggle with our emotions. The first problem we have with our emotions is we're disconnected from them. Some of us treat our emotions like they are distant relatives we'd prefer not to see too often. They are a part of who we are, but they are a pain in the backside more than anything. If that's our view of emotions, we usually suppress or ignore them. But we can't truly get rid of our emotions; it's a part of the human condition. Emotions are little windows that reveal our souls. But it's a scary thing to think others can just look into our windows and see what's going on in the interior of our lives so we run all over the house closing the shades. But even we don't like looking into those windows. It's too painful even for us; we're reminded of past trauma or unmet expectations. So, when we read the book of Psalms which is primarily interested in talking about God, about life, about troubles *emotionally*, we really don't know what to do with it; it seems so foreign to us. So, the Psalms seem irrelevant to our lives.

Others of us, though, have a different problem: we're too dependent on our emotions. We trust our emotions; they are the compass of our lives. Some of us take orders from our emotions like a new army private taking orders from his drill sergeant. Our emotions say, "You're scared, start eating," and we just start eating. "You're unhappy, get a divorce" and we get a divorce. "You're bored; California doesn't look boring" and we move to California.

For some of you, your feelings, your desires, - in today's lingo - your heart is your Lord. In dutiful obedience, some do whatever their emotions, their hearts tell them to do forgetting that the Bible says that the heart is deceitful and that "following your heart" is Jeremiah's favorite way of describing what it looks like to disobey God.

The Psalms helps us strike the right relationship with our emotions. Here's how I would say it: **we are to listen to our emotions, but not obey them.** We listen to our emotions like we listen to a weather radio; our emotions give us important real-time information about our soul so we can discern and see how both the joys and tragedies of life are impacting our inner life. So, we want to be in touch with our emotions; we want to be very much aware and even invite them into our mode of being. But we don't obey our emotions; instead, we obey God. While our emotions help us see our inner life they do not tell us what to do about what we see. You know, the Bible talks about the law this way; the law tells you what's right and wrong, but it gives you know power to do right and avoid wrong. That's a good analogy for emotions; they are informative, but provide no wisdom, guidance, or help in navigating life. I love the way Psalm 130 strikes the balance I'm talking about; let's read it together (READ).

In vs. 1-2, we see the blood-earnest cry of the Psalmist. “Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord!” He’s low. He’s struggling. These struggles seem to be the result of his own sin. I bet you can relate to that. Because of some stupid, sinful decisions you found yourself in the pit of despair. The author is being very honest about not just his predicament, but his feelings about it? “I’m stuck, God! Hear me! Don’t turn a blind eye! I know I have no recourse, no standing before you. Listen to me, God!”

The psalms invite you to express every emotion you have to God. Joy. Sadness. Confusion. Anger. Even frustration with God himself. In 44:12 the psalmist mocks God as a bad businessman saying “You have sold your people for a trifle, demanding no high price for them.” He’s angry with God that the Lord would allow his people to be victimized so brutally.

There’s something really important about our relationship with God that we see in the blunt honesty the authors of the psalms have with God: an authentic relationship with God requires us to genuinely express our heart to the Lord. The Lord already knows how we feel; why not be honest about that with him? Actually, what’s usually the case is we don’t know what’s in our hearts. God does, but we don’t. So, really, getting honest with our emotions to God is actually a way for us to learn what’s going on inside of us. This emotional cry to God from the psalmist in 130 is actually good for his relationship with God, not bad. This illustrates what I was talking about earlier: God has given you your emotions so you can discern what’s going on inside your heart and soul.

But look what the psalmist says next. In the following couple of verses he meditates on the greatness of God’s forgiveness. That orients his heart to trust in God in the midst of the trouble that he’s encountering because of his sin. Then look at vs. 5, “I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope.” Now get this: Do you see how in vs. 5 the word *wait* is mentioned twice and the word *hope* once? All 3 of those words are getting at the same thing. I’m waiting, hoping, I’m staying on the Lord and on his word. I’m not budging from God’s word! I will be patient with God!

I hate to admit this about myself, but I’m kind of impulsive. I’m a go, go, go kind of guy. My wife and I will talk about something and 20 minutes later I’ll do it and she’ll say, “What just happened? We’re not even done talking!” Most of us are like that with our emotions. We’re feeling anxious, we’re feeling stress. Troubles coming and we can feel the heart starting to pound; our imagination is starting to run wild. And when that happens, our emotions start screaming, “Get going! Have a drink! Dump your husband! Send that nasty text, you’ll feel better.” We’re so tempted to *obey* our emotions. The psalmist is giving us the opposite direction and wisdom. I’m staying on the Lord. I’m waiting on him. I’m not budging despite how I feel. But what does that actually mean? How do you wait on God? What would I actually be doing if I waited on the Lord? That last phrase gives us the answer. *In his word I hope*. That’s waiting on the Lord. Relying on God’s word is how you wait and stay on the Lord when your emotions are moving.

What might that look like? Here are a couple of examples: you're frustrated in your marriage. You've been dissatisfied for a while. You've had this numb feeling for who knows how long. And then one day, an old boyfriend finds you on facebook. It's exciting. You remember all those good times and how you felt with him. And so, you feel like you want to contact him; to rekindle the relationship. Don't obey your feelings; obey the words of God.

Or what about this: You used to love going to church. Every time you stepped into the sanctuary you could feel the Holy Spirit. But lately, going to church is like a chore. It's so much more exciting watching your kids baseball game. Don't obey your feelings; obey the words of God, which say, "Don't neglect meeting together." That wasn't the Holy Spirit in the first place; that was the bass. And we don't have a relationship with God to feel him; our goal is to know him, know the power of his resurrection, to share in his sufferings, to become like him in his death that by any means possible you may attain the resurrection of the dead yourself. The journey to get to that place includes a lot of silence from God just like God was silent for all those 40 years while the people of God wandered in the desert. I'm not thinking in year 15 of 40 they were feeling God much. It felt really ordinary, really... blah. But that was the point: God was testing them; "will they obey my voice." He was there the whole time. And he's here with us no matter our feelings.

My dear brothers and sisters, you will save yourself so much heartache if you learn to only listen to your feelings, and not obey them. The Psalms can help you and me honestly express our emotions while still seeing God and his word as our hope.