

How to Grow in the Spiritual Life

Timothy Project

Student Manual

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LESSON

1

A LIFE OF PRAISE

Theme text: *“Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens. Praise him for his acts of power; praise him for his surpassing greatness” (Psa 150:1-2).*

I

THE RELEVANCE OF THE PSALMS

There are two reasons why the Book of Psalms is an excellent place to begin a study of the importance of growth in our Christian lives:

(a) The psalms gave rich expression to Israel’s faith; these songs are public affirmations of truths they believed to be of first importance in life. Reading them is our immense privilege because they expressed Israel’s priorities in corporate worship recorded in their hymn or song-book. Here is the kind of faith that encourages growth. Luther called the Book of Psalms a unique collection of ‘Little Bibles’; ‘every man on every occasion can find in it Psalms which fit his needs...as if they had been set there just for his sake.’

(b) Moreover, a large number of psalms are personal confessions of trust or hope in God in tough times. They record the deep longings of individual believers during serious trouble, intimate prayers such as might be included in a contemporary spiritual journal, expressing a wide range of highly personal experience from overwhelming despair to exuberant joy.

2

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PSALMS

The psalms were highly important in the spiritual life of Jesus. Like other people (Mt. 21:9), he committed many of them to memory, quoting them in everyday conversation (Mt.21:16), public preaching (Mt.21:42; 22:44) and in agonised (Mt.27:46) as well as trusting (Lk.23:46) prayer. His disciples also treasured the psalms (Jn.2:17), and the gifted preachers (Acts2:25-28, 34; 4:25-26; 13:33, 35) and writers of the New Testament (for example, Jn.19 24, 36; Rom.4:6-8, 8:36; 1 Cor.10:26; 2 Cor.4:13; 1 Pet.3:10; Heb.1:5, 7, 8, 10, 12; 7:17; 10:5; Rev.2:27) used them to expound, confirm, amplify and illustrate their teaching. If they were of such value to Old Testament believers, more significantly to our Lord, and in the lives of the earliest Christians,

they are surely important for our spiritual development also. We need to follow their example in using this impressive collection of public and private praise and prayer to enrich our own daily spiritual lives.

3 THE TEACHING OF THE PSALMS

The apostle Paul was convinced that these great Israelite songs have incomparable teaching value. He maintained that, as a specially treasured part of the Old Testament, they were ‘written to teach us’; when he shared that conviction (Rom.15:3-4), he had just quoted from a psalm! One of the great truths the psalms want us to learn and apply is **the crucial importance of praise**.

We are not urged to praise God because He needs it; we do! We cannot possibly grow in the Christian life without it; a life without praise can become self-absorbed, self-directed and self-motivated. Praising God identifies our priorities, expresses our debts, and acknowledges our continuing dependence on Him. It needs to be a deliberate act of our personal daily worship, which means ‘acknowledging His worth’. The Greek word *axios* (‘you are worthy’, Rev.4:11) was the repeated shout of the exultant crowds at the Greek games (‘Axios, axios’) as the winning athlete ran the lap of honour at the close of a successful race. Deep appreciation is a natural part of shared enjoyment (‘Wasn’t that wonderful?’, ‘Isn’t that magnificent?’, ‘Aren’t they lovely?’) so, out of an overflowing sense of gratitude and wonder, we long for others to share our joy: ‘Glorify the Lord with me; let us exalt his name together’ (Psa.34:3).

Respond: What persuades you to make daily use of the Old Testament psalms in the development of your spiritual life?

Although the word ‘praise’ features in **Psa. 22** (3, 22, 23, 25, 26) we might regard it as an unusual choice for the ‘Praise’ theme since the psalmist is here in deep anguish, and these are not peripheral troubles. This surely reminds us that praise is not to be confined to life’s happier days. Even in extreme darkness, we will be wise to turn our minds to those things for which we can always magnify God, however grim the adversities of life. Jesus thought about this psalm as he bore our sins on the Cross and its opening words gave startling expression to his anguish in the most harrowing hours of his life (Psa.22:1; Mk. 15:34).

Whatever the circumstances, the true worshipper **praises God for WHO HE IS**. We grow as Christians when we deliberately focus not, initially or primarily, on our variable failures, needs, troubles, hopes, desires, or aspirations but on God’s unchanging nature, character and attributes such as

His eternal rule (3) The psalmist is utterly downcast by the insults of his opponents (6-8), his emotional frailty (11) and physical weakness (14-18) ‘yet’ (3) he realises

that God is ‘enthroned’ in heaven. In his sovereignty, all things are ultimately under His control and he can transform the most hazardous distress into something that can be to our inestimable benefit.

His unfailing faithfulness (4-5, 9-10) to others (4-5 who cried, trusted and were saved) and to himself (9-10), from infancy. The distressed man who has ‘no-one to help’ realises that in the past innumerable others proved God as their dependable helper and he has too.

His sufficient strength (19) - though human strength ‘dries up’ (15), divine strength is assured. Paul experienced that in prison (Phil 4: 13) and in pain (2 Cor.12: 9-10. So, even in these fierce adversities the psalmist can praise, and his deep trouble will turn to testimony (22-24 ‘to my brothers’) and thanksgiving (25-31). The psalm that began with a bewildered ‘Why’ (1) concludes with the repeatedly (22, 25, 26, 27, 29, 30, 31) confident ‘will’ of divine certainty.

Psa 89 is another psalm that emphasises the importance of ‘praise’ in the context of stress, possibly here with the king’s national (38-45) rather than personal troubles. In these adversities the ‘praise’ focus is particularly on:

His unchanging love – the Hebrew word *hesed* (occurring about 250 times in the Old Testament) is variously translated (in 1, 2, 14, 24, 28, 33, 49, as ‘love’ or ‘great love’), and elsewhere in the OT as ‘steadfast love, ‘devotion’, ‘faithfulness’ or loving-kindness (Jer.31:3); it describes a totally dependable love that is based on a firm covenant agreement – God resolutely commits himself to his people, that He will always (28) love us and never let us down because He has promised to take us, for better or worse (33), if we lovingly and dependently commit ourselves to Him. This same word is found in another exhortation to praise in **Psa. 145** (see v.8) in a psalm equally rich in descriptions of God’s nature.

Many other psalms urge us to ‘Praise’, this important yet frequently neglected dimension of prayer, as they focus on rich aspects of God’s character, for example **Psa.67** with its reminder of his grace (1) universal love (2-4a), justice, guidance (4b) and generosity (6, ‘harvest’). And the book of Psalms closes with the repeated invitation for everyone (**Psa. 150**) to praise God with a wide variety of instruments, using different musical gifts to exalt a God of immense ‘power’ and ‘surpassing greatness’.

Respond: Prayerfully read Psalm 145 and list those descriptions of God’s character that encourage us to praise Him.
