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PSALMS

SUMMER SERIES

Written by Anita Benson

Talking to God

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Talking to God

1. When He answers my cry. Psalm 116

Ice breaker : How do you react when God answers your prayer?

Background : The author of Psalm 116 is unknown. The writer describes going to the temple in Jerusalem (v19) to offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving for his deliverance from some very grave danger. This is his individual thanksgiving and public testimony in response to what God has done for him.

Read this psalm and then look at each section more closely.

Remembered Distress (vs 1-4)

1. What difficult circumstances has the writer of this psalm been through?
2. How did he react? What happened next?

Psalms 113-118 are collectively known as the "Hallel" (praise) psalms. They are associated with celebrating the Passover. Jesus and his disciples were likely to have sung 113-114 before the Passover meal and 115-118 would have been the 'hymn' mentioned in Matthew 26:30.

Remembered Deliverance (vs 5-11)

3. As a result of his experience, what does the writer declare and celebrate regarding God's character?

4. "Come back, my soul, to your resting place.."(v7) How does this, along with verses 8-9, paint a picture of salvation?

5. If we think that true Christians don't struggle with doubts and discouragements, what do we learn from vs 10-11?
Do you ever tell God exactly what you are thinking and feeling? Why, or why not?

A Right Response (vs 12-19)

6. What is the writer's response to God's goodness towards him?
(v13-14, 16-19, 2)

7. What vows or promises have **you** made to God? (Think, for example, of promises you made at your baptism or your confirmation.)

What would fulfilling these look like in your daily life?

Notes

v13 - "**to lift up (take) the cup of salvation**" is to receive what God has done and all that He supplies.

v15 - the word translated '**precious**' (yaqar) means something like "costly". In other words, everyone's life is valuable to God and He does not casually permit anyone's death. Here, the psalmist celebrates deliverance from death, but he knows that death is still a reality for every one of God's people. When death approaches, God holds his people as precious and does not lightly permit the death of those who are devoted to him. (also Ps 72:13-14).

8. Verses 15-16 may seem odd here. However, in this psalm about God's rescue, what do we find at the heart of the section about praising God?

Respond

A. Think about which verse or phrase in this psalm is most meaningful to you. Write it down in the box below. Share with one another why it resonates with you.

If time permits, also choose one of the following questions to discuss and apply:-

B. The writer says "Come back to your rest" (v7). In other words, "Don't let the storm cause you to drift from your spiritual moorings - come home to God."

Is there an area of your life where you need to do this?

C. *"How can I repay? .. I will receive/take the cup of salvation ..."*

Make a list of the things you have received from the Lord and use this to gratefully praise Him.

D. Discuss your response to the following quote in the light of verse 15.

"God is particularly close to his people when they stand at death's door. God watches over his people when they are sick or dying, coming close to them and making his presence known so that they have comfort in death's hour. He also frequently intervenes and does not allow them to perish. In either case, the Lord does what is best" (James Boice, Commentary on Psalms)

Conclusion

This psalm describes how the writer responds when God answers his cry for help. He comes out of a testing time loving God more than ever – more aware of His grace, righteousness and compassion (5); more disciplined in walking in His presence (8-9), more determined to keep promises made (14,18); more public in testimony (18-19) and drinking ever deeper from God's cup of salvation.

When God answers our prayers for help, may it lead to a similar response from us.

Talking to God

2. When I need God's forgiveness. Psalm 51

Ice breaker : What words do people use to try and make their wrong words or actions appear less serious?

Background The context of this psalm (mentioned in its heading) is David's confession when his affair with Bathsheba and his contract killing of her husband Uriah is exposed by the prophet Nathan. [2 Samuel chapters 11-12] The psalm is David's response and meditation on God's mercy to him in 2 Samuel 12:13.

An individual's repentance (vs 1-6)

1. This psalm opens with a prayer for forgiveness. Why does David feel able to approach God? What does he plead with God to do?

2. In these verses, David uses three different words to describe his sin -

Sin = a specific offence committed, whether of thought, word or deed.

Iniquity = deviancy; a twist or warp in human nature from which wrongdoing emerges.

Transgression = a wilful, deliberate rebellion against God's ways.

What is David's attitude towards his sin?

3. "Repentance is a candid acknowledgment and an ongoing awareness of sin. It affirms what the 'real' offence is: we 'sin' against the Lord and commit 'crimes' against people. In repentance we acknowledge how right and just the Lord is (v4b)" [J.A. Motyer]

Have you experienced repentance like this?

The nature of repentance (vs 7-12)

The depth of self-knowledge in verses 3-5 might have led David to despair. Instead, it enlarges his praying.

4. David longs to be right with God. Look at his list of requests and explain them in your own words. What is David asking God to do in each instance?

v7 cleanse/wash me ...

v8 let me hear

v9 blot out ...

v10 create/renew ...

v11 do not remove ...

v12 restore/uphold me ...

5. Which of these requests most fully expresses your own desire at the moment?

The results of repentance (vs 13 - 19)

6. What does David promise to do as his response to God's forgiveness and renewal? (vs13-15)

7. Have you ever thought that, because you have messed up in the past, you can never speak up for God? Yet, how might a forgiven sinner more effectively teach others of God's ways?
8. Verses 16-17 point out the shortcomings of a religion based on rituals (such as animal sacrifices). What different kind of sacrifices does God want us to make in our lives? (See also Hebrews 13:15-16)

David was a king as well as a private individual, and his repentance and desire to live differently impacted the whole nation. The psalm ends with a whole community involved in living to please God (vs 18-19)

Respond

- A. Think about which verse or phrase in this psalm is most meaningful to you. Write it down in the box below. Share with one another why it resonates with you.

- B. Pray for each other, based on what was mentioned in Question 5.

Conclusion

King David had sinned in spectacular fashion. When confronted by the prophet Nathan, he admitted and took responsibility for his sin, and cast himself on the mercy and steadfast love of God. His repentance was deep and sincere. He longed to be right with God and asked God to make him a new person. He also declared what he would do when he was restored.

His response gives us an example to follow when we sin against God, whether in 'big' or 'small' ways.

Talking to God...

3. When I see the Splendour of the King.

Psalm 45

Ice breaker: When someone mentions a royal wedding, what images come into your mind?

Background

This is a wedding song, originally to commemorate the marriage of a king, probably Solomon, and describes the king in all his glory. It was possibly used by successive kings on the day of royal weddings.

It is regarded as a Messianic psalm that looks forward to the coming of the Messiah; and as a prophecy about Christ and his bride, the church. This is particularly clear from Hebrews 1:8-9 which quotes verses 6-7 and specifically relates them to Jesus and His eternal kingdom.

The psalm begins with a personal note from the author who is bubbling over with enthusiasm.

The Bridegroom (vs 2-9)

1. What do these verses say about the bridegroom's

- appearance
- speech
- character
- deeds

2. What astonishing words are addressed to him in verses 6-7?

3. In this wedding ceremony we have a window into something of greater significance. The king reminds us of Jesus – the greater King

to come. What hints and glimpses of Jesus can you find in these verses?

Notes

v8 - **Myrrh, aloes and cassia** are expensive spices. Their fragrance is present on the king's robe as he marries his bride. They are also burial spices (John 19:39-41)

The bride (vs 10-15)

4. What advice is the bride given? (vs 10-12)

5. Verses 13-15 describe the wedding procession. What stands out for you?

6. What advice to the bride do we, as the bride of Christ, need to take note of and follow?

You may find it helpful to read Ephesians 5:25-27 and Revelation 19:7-9 where the picture language of the church as the bride and Jesus as the bridegroom is developed further.

God's promises (vs 16-17)

7. The psalm ends with God's promises to this mighty king. What are they?

Respond

A. Think about which verse or phrase in this psalm is most meaningful to you. Write it down in the box below. Share with one another why it resonates with you.

If time permits, choose one of these questions to discuss and apply:-

B. What does this 'maskil' [teaching psalm] teach us about

- God as our king and our bridegroom?
- a right response to Him?

C. Scripture consistently depicts a glorious God, and the church as his glorious bride.

- How much does this differ from your view of the church?
- How might regarding the church in this way affect how you behave towards other members of your church community?

This Psalm has been set to music by Matt Searle in his CD "From the River to the ends of the Earth" and can be listened to at <https://mattsearles.bandcamp.com/track/o-king-psalm-45>

Conclusion

In this psalm the message is bubbling up from a heart overflowing with passion - the writer wants us all to see the King in all his beauty. The description goes beyond an earthly wedding service. Everything said about this Davidic king is also said in the New Testament, in different words, about Jesus. The royal line of David points forward to his descendant Jesus, who really is in the fullest sense God as well as King. The marriage ceremony described here reminds us of another wedding that will take place when King Jesus comes for His bride, the church.

Talking to God...

4. When I doubt God's goodness.

Psalm 73

Ice breaker: Recall a situation where someone seemed to be "getting away with murder". How did this make you feel?

Or: Recall the last time you asked God, "Why?" (why this.., why now.., why me.) What was it about?

Background

The composer of this psalm is Asaph, a leader of one of the temple choirs (1 Chronicles 25:1,2). He also wrote Psalms 50, and 74-83.

This psalm starts with a creed that defines what Israel believes - "Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart." (v1) Then Asaph looks around him and the hard experiences of life seem to contradict this statement.

Perhaps in a similar way people after they first become Christians, feel that becoming a child of God ought to make life easier for them because they are now the object of a heavenly Father's love and care. But often, life is still tough. They may get frustrated and depressed, especially if they see that ungodly people around them are enjoying seemingly carefree lives.

This is the problem that Asaph grappled with - and his doubts almost wreck his faith. We follow his struggles through doubt and confusion towards a different perspective.

The prosperity of the wicked (vs 1-16)

1. What kind of people does Asaph struggle with, and why? (vs 3-12)

2. How has he been reacting to this? (vs 2-3, 13-15)

3. In what ways do you identify with Asaph's struggles?

For instance, like Asaph, have you ever thought - "Everything seems to go well for those who are unconcerned about God, yet as I try to live right, my life is full of trials, difficulties and discouragement. I don't understand why."

If you feel able to, describe the circumstances that caused you to feel like this.

The presence of the Lord (vs 17-28)

The key word, and pivotal point in the psalm is the word "until" ["till", "then"] in verse 17.

4. What happens for Asaph in the sanctuary (the place where he worships God)?

5. How do we "enter the sanctuary of God"?

How does going into "the sanctuary" help us to understand and handle our doubts about God and the problems we face in our lives?

**"Distress of mind is not the same thing
as loss of faith"**

Michael Wilcock , Psalms 73-150, p8

6. When Asaph looks back on his period of doubt, how does he feel about it?

7. After realising how brief the success of the wicked is, Asaph recounts the blessings of the believer. Bible commentator Derek Kidner has summarized the blessings of God's people (vs 23-24) in this way:

"We are **grasped, guided and glorified** "

(He has grasped us; He does guide us; He will glorify us)

Do you find this a helpful summary? Why, or why not?

Respond

A. Think about which verse or phrase in this psalm is most meaningful to you. Write it down in the box below. Share with one another why it resonates with you.

If time permits, choose another question to discuss and apply:-

B. The prosperity of the wicked occupied the psalmist's thoughts in the first part of this psalm (vs 1-16). The presence of the Lord occupies the second (vs 17-28). Which of these 2 is more real to you? Explain.

C. Psalm 73 shows the writer working through his doubts and questions about God.

- What doubts do you have?
- What do you do with them?
- What can you learn from this psalm about how to handle doubt and bitterness?

Conclusion

This psalm begins by looking at what other people have, and perhaps, what we wish we had (3-14). It finishes satisfied with simply having God.

In the journey from the first state of mind to the second, it encourages us to bring our doubts and complaints to God. However, it recognises that our complaints can be mixed up with sin (e.g. envy, v3) and that we may need to learn to see our circumstances from a different perspective.

God invites us to view our situation in the context of His world, and this world in the context of eternity.

Talking to God...

5. When my life seems unbearably dark.

Psalm 88

Ice breaker : Have you ever found someone's attempts to cheer you up less than helpful? When and why was this?

Or: Think of a time when you were in a bad place emotionally. What was the most unhelpful thing that someone did, or said? What was the most helpful?

Background

The writer of this psalm is Heman, a musician and one of the sons of Korah. (It is possibly the same man mentioned in 1 Chron 15:19; 16:41-42; 25:4-5). Unlike all other psalms, the mood is one of unrelieved misery.

Praying in the darkness (vs 1-12)

1. Heman is in anguish and despair; nevertheless what does he do? (vs 1-2)
2. What pictures and images does he use to convey the desperation that he feels? (vs 3-5)
3. At the end of verse 5, he addresses God and describes himself as a person "whom you remember no more". How might a fear that God has forgotten us and does not care about us contribute to feelings of despair?
4. In questioning God (vs 10-12) what point is he trying to make?

Still in darkness, still praying (vs 13–18)

5. Heman continues to pray even though God seems distant and rejecting (13-14).
- What might be causing him to continue to call out to God?
 - What is the value of continuing to talk to God even when He seems distant?
6. Heman blames God for his desperate situation.
- What does he say to God? (15-18)
 - What reactions do you have to his blaming God?
7. Most psalms which express strong doubts end with hope or praise. This psalm ends as it starts - with doubt and despair. What is it like to be left with unresolved questions?

Respond

A. Read and discuss the following reflection on Psalm 88.

"The Bible never hides its head in the sand when it comes to life's troubles! And like all the rest, Psalm 88 is written for our learning. Here is trouble without explanation: lasting as far back as the eye can see; seemingly stretching ahead without relief; and likely to be overtaken, still unsolved, by death. Should such an experience be ours, how is it to be faced?

Start where the psalm starts: by affirming what is known about our God – that he, and only he – is the 'God of my salvation', or, as we could translated it, 'My saving God' , a God whose very nature is to save his dear ones. This is the purpose of a creed – scaffolding to hold us upright when the storm comes. When everything in us cries out to moan about our lot, cry out rather that He is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, he is

... love that drew salvation's plan!

... the grace that brought it down to man!

- the God of all grace.

Then, like this lovely psalmist, don't hesitate to see your trials as coming from the hand of God. Don't bother your head with problems arising, or thought to arise, from seeing things this way. This is the truth of the matter: if we are in the soup it is he who has decided what sort of soup it is, and at what temperature, and how long, and why! He is God. Jesus has assured us that we cannot be plucked out of his and the Father's hand (John 10:28-29). Where were we when the trouble came? Why, where we always are – in his hand! Did the trial 'get in' because he let go of us? Certainly not; the trial only means that he grips us more tightly!

And thirdly, give yourself constantly to urgent prayer (1,9,13). To abandon prayer is to embrace atheism. Prayer does change things – and its transformative work is ever and also in the person who is praying. 'Whoever walks in darkness and has no light, let him trust in the name of the LORD, and lean upon his God.' (Isaiah 50:10)"

Alec Motyer, Psalms by the day, p248

B. In what ways can you support someone who is feeling deeply depressed, or cast out?

Why might this sometimes need to be done in community with others?

Conclusion

This is a psalm of unrelenting darkness that ends without relief coming, but with prayer continuing, and the sense of "I'll trust where I cannot see."

It teaches us to keep talking to God - even in the midst of despair - and to bare our anger, grief, confusion and fears before Him with honesty.

It recognises the fact that sometimes there are no quick or easy answers to hard circumstances.

Talking to God...

6. When I want to know God's will.

Psalm 119:97-112

Ice breaker : In how many different ways can you describe rain?

Background

The overall theme of Psalm 119 is what God has revealed to his people in His law - His teachings. The psalm uses many different words to describe God's law.

It is divided into 22 stanzas, each headed by a letter of the Hebrew alphabet and 8 verses long. We will be looking at the 13th and 14th stanzas, Mem and Nun.

Mem (vs 97-104)

1. List the different words used by the psalm writer to describe God's Word.
2. What does the psalmist **do** with God's word? What is the result?
3. "Your commands make me wise(r)" (v98) Can you think of a situation in your life when the scriptures gave you understanding, which then enabled you to speak, or act, well?
4. Verses 97 and 103 describe the writer's subjective pleasure in God's Word. Have you experienced this, or is bible reading only a duty and a chore?

Nun (vs 105-112)

Whereas **Mem** shows no trials or traumas, the circumstances in **Nun** are more challenging.

5. What problems are mentioned in this stanza?

6. Faced with these struggles, how does the writer respond?

7. Nun mentions “my feet ... my mouth ... my hands ... my heart...” How do each of these parts of the body express different aspects of following the Lord?

Respond

A. Decide which line in these verses is most meaningful to you. Write it down in the box below. Share with one another why it resonates with you.

If time permits, choose another question to discuss and apply:-

B. When we talk of wanting to know God's will, it is often in relation to where we are to live, what job we are to have, or how we should respond to a particular situation.

But what is God's will for us in relationship with Him?

What answer does the psalm writer indicate to us?

C. Great love and respect for the Word is shown by the psalm writer.

- How do I stand in the light of all this? Do I need to reassess myself and the daily use of my bible?
- How can we help each other to grow in our love and obedience to God's Word? Be practical!

Conclusion

What is central in these stanzas is the emphasis on careful and sustained attention to God's Word and ways.

The same truth is expressed by Jesus in John 14:15 - "If you love me you will keep my commandments."

The challenge for us is not only to know this in our heads, but to live this out in our lives every day.

These bible study notes were written by **Anita Benson** and are being used by The Groves Church with her expressed permission.