

## The Psalms as a Source for Ministerial Vitality

Ryan Swale

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D.Min. Student  
Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary

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“Vitality” has been defined as “the peculiarity distinguishing the living from the nonliving,”<sup>1</sup> or the “capacity for survival or for the continuation of a meaningful or purposeful existence.”<sup>2</sup> Applied to the Christian ministry, this means that a “vital ministry” is one that is not dead but very much *alive* and continuing the course with purpose. The basic contention of this paper is that one of the means by which such a vital ministry might be maintained is by a deep, experiential knowledge of the Book of Psalms. In a day and age when ministers are getting burnt out and leaving the pulpit at alarming rates, the Psalms provide an essential resource in maintaining real spiritual vitality.

Consider Psalm 1. What is that picture of the blessed man—who is like a tree planted by streams of water, yielding fruit in season, his leaf not withering but all that he does prospering (Ps. 1:3)—but a picture of spiritual vitality?<sup>3</sup> He is alive, and his life, nourished by deep roots, gives him purpose, so that the work which he does prospers. And yet the key to such vitality is delighting in and meditating on the *torah* (as Psalm 1:2 makes clear),<sup>4</sup> which, given this psalm’s place as the introduction to the psalter, also alludes to the Book of Psalms itself.<sup>5</sup>

The Psalms, divided into five books, are given a “torah-shape,” and the introductory function of Psalm 1 suggests that it is commanding to the reader this very collection of songs as the “torah” to be meditated on. “Why a fivefold division?” asks one Psalms scholar. “An ancient Jewish tradition points us in the right direction, connecting the Five Books of the Psalms with the Five Books of Moses: ‘As Moses gave five books of laws to Israel, so David gave five books of Psalms to Israel.’ ... The Five Books of the Psalms are fundamentally *תֹּרְאָה* (“instruction”) to be meditated on.”<sup>6</sup> And

<sup>1</sup> “Vitality, noun (2a), Merriam-Webster.” [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/vitality](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/vitality). Accessed Jan. 9, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> “Vitality, noun (2), Dictionary.com.” [www.dictionary.com/browse/vitality](http://www.dictionary.com/browse/vitality). Accessed Jan. 9, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> The CRC “Pastors’ Spiritual Vitality Toolkit” makes this exact point, saying, “Spiritual Vitality looks like the God-blessed tree of Psalm 1, flourishing on a fertile riverbank” (“Pastors’ Spiritual Vitality Toolkit”, *Christian Reformed Church*, [www.crcna.org/pastors-spiritual-vitality-toolkit](http://www.crcna.org/pastors-spiritual-vitality-toolkit). Accessed Jan. 9, 2023).

<sup>4</sup> The word translated in the ESV as “law” is literally “torah,” meaning instruction.

<sup>5</sup> On the introductory nature of Psalm 1, see Robert L. Cole, *Psalms 1-2: Gateway to the Psalter* (Sheffield, South Yorkshire, England: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013), Robert Cole, “Psalms 1 and 2: The Psalter’s Introduction,” in *The Psalms: Language for All Seasons of the Soul*, ed. Schmutz, and Howard (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2013), 183-196, and Patrick Miller, “The Beginning of the Psalter,” in *The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter*, ed. McCann, 83-92.

<sup>6</sup> Mark D. Futato, *Interpreting the Psalms: An Exegetical Handbook* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2007), 62-63 (the ancient Jewish quotation is cited from William Braude, *The Midrash on Psalms*, 5). Numerous authors make this point about the “instruction” of verse 2 being the Book of Psalms. See Gordon J. Wenham, *Psalms as Torah: Reading Biblical Song Ethically* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 7; Daniel H. Fletcher, *Psalms of Christ: The Messiah in Non-Messianic Psalms* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2018), 19-20; James A. Johnston, *The Psalms: Rejoice the Lord is King* (Wheaton: Crossway,

what is the result of such activity? The one who does this becomes that spiritually vital “tree” of Psalm 1:3.<sup>7</sup>

The object of this paper, then, is to apply this principle to the ministry, giving ten reasons why a deep experiential knowledge of the Psalms is needed for maintaining a vital ministry. Reading, praying, and singing the Psalms: (1) cultivates communion with God; (2) fosters prayer; (3) produces honesty; (4) provides a companion in suffering; (5) gives a model of faithful suffering; (6) provides a vocabulary for suffering; (7) provides an eschatological vision in the midst of suffering; (8) addresses the reality of anger; (9) reminds of the need for rest; and (10) fills the pastor with joy.

### **The Psalms Cultivate Communion with God**

Maintaining vital communion with God is of the utmost importance for the gospel minister. Archibald Alexander said, “It is the hallowed fire which should be kept bright and burning continually.”<sup>8</sup> Of course, the Psalms are not the *only* way to do this. But they are among the *best*. It has been said that “for revealing the heart of [biblical] religion, the Psalms must have pride of place,”<sup>9</sup> and, “For thousands of years, and still in the modern world, they have been able to lead people into the heart of religion, the actual practice of communion with God.”<sup>10</sup>

Matthew Henry said,

This book brings us into the sanctuary... and directs us into communion with God, by solacing and reposing our souls in him, lifting up and letting out our hearts

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2015), 1:14, 26; Dale Ralph Davis, *The Way of the Righteous in the Muck of Life: Psalms 1-12* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2020), 16; Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 513-514; Craig C. Broyles, *Psalms* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2012), 41-42. John Goldingay, *Psalms 1-41* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 84; O. Palmer Robertson, *The Flow of the Psalms: Discovering Their Structure and Theology* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2015), 55; Jamie A. Grant, *The King as Exemplar: The Function of Deuteronomy's Kingship Law in the Shaping of The Book of Psalms* (Atlanta, Georgia: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), 53; Peter H. Holtvlüwer, *Christ's Psalms, Our Psalms: Study Resource* (Carman, Manitoba: Reformed Perspective, 2020), 1:31; W. David O. Taylor, *Open and Unafraid: The Psalms as a Guide to Life* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2021), 27; Bradley Baugham, “Hearing the Canonical Voice of the Psalter,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 25, no. 3, 54; and B. Weber, “Psalm 1 and its Function as a Directive into the Psalter and Towards a Biblical Theology,” *Old Testament Essays* 19 no. 1, 249.

<sup>7</sup> This theme of vitality is by no means found only in Psalm 1, but can be traced through the Psalter. Psalm 19:7 speaks of how meditation on God’s *torah* “revives the soul;” Psalm 32:4 illustrates how the penitential psalms address the dried up “vitality” (NKJV) of the one who hides his sin (see also Psalm 38:3-4 and 51:8-12); Psalm 34:5 speaks of the faces of those who seek the Lord (i.e., through the psalms) as being “radiant;” Psalm 52:8 identifies the man who calls upon God through the Psalms as a “green olive tree in the house of God;” and Psalm 119 speaks over and over of his this word gives “life” and “revives the soul” (Ps. 119:25, 37, 40, 50, 93, 107, 144, 149, 154, 156, and 159).

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in James M. Garretson, *Princeton and the Work of Christian Ministry* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Banner of Truth, 2012), 1:256.

<sup>9</sup> John H. Eaton, *The Psalms: A Historical and Spiritual Commentary* (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 3.

<sup>10</sup> Eaton, *The Psalms*, 3. A. F. Kirkpatrick says they are of “paramount importance in the history of Christian worship and devotion... If a history of the use of the Psalter could be written, it would be a history of the spiritual life of the church. From the earliest times the Psalter has been the Church’s manual of prayer and praise in its public worship, the treasury of devotion for its individual members in their private communing with God (A. F. Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), xcvi).

towards him.... This book is of singular use with that to convey divine life and power, and a holy warmth, into our affections. There is no one book of scripture that is more helpful to the devotions of the saints than this, and it has been so in all ages of the church... So rich, so well made, are these divine poems, that they can never be exhausted, can never be worn thread-bare.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, the gospel minister (and all believers) would do well to acquaint themselves with this book, even making its language their own.<sup>12</sup>

It may be objected that the Psalms are an Old Testament document, and therefore their language, and even their subject matter, are better fit for a former age. But this would be to miss their prophetic function. The New Testament does not do away with the Psalms. It has been estimated that perhaps up to 41% of the New Testament quotations of the Old are from the Book of Psalms, most of them being applied directly to events in Jesus' life.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the book of Psalms brings us face-to-face with Christ himself.

Matthew Henry said, "There is indeed little or nothing of the ceremonial law in all the book of Psalms. Though sacrifice and offering were yet to continue many ages, yet they are here represented as things which God did not desire (Ps. 40:6, 51:16) ... and which in time were to vanish away."<sup>14</sup> But "Christ, the crown and center of revealed religion, the foundation, corner, and top-stone, of that blessed building, is here clearly spoken of in type and prophecy, his sufferings and the glory that should follow, and the kingdom that he should set up in the world, in which God's covenant with David, concerning his kingdom, was to have its accomplishment."<sup>15</sup> Thus, the minister of the New Covenant should find ample means to stoke the flames of holy heat.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 742-743. Likewise, Calvin said, "There is no other book in which we are more perfectly taught the right manner of praising God, or in which we are more powerfully stirred up the performance of this religious exercise" (John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, (Bellingham, Washington: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 1:xxxvii-xxxviii).

<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Edwards emphasized making the language of the Psalms one's own. See David P. Barshinger, *Jonathan Edwards and the Psalms: A Redemptive-Historical Vision of Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 273-308, where he demonstrates that Edwards believed "true religious affections are nurtured by imbibing Psalmic language... In Edwards' view, Christians should embrace the Psalter as their own language because it gives them the words of true love for God. The Psalms offer saints the language in which to express authentic religious affections" (ibid., 273, 278).

<sup>13</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, "Psalms," BiblicalTraining.org, 310, [https://ot561.biblicaltraining.org/Psalms\\_Outline\\_Notes-Waltke.pdf](https://ot561.biblicaltraining.org/Psalms_Outline_Notes-Waltke.pdf), accessed Jan. 9, 2023.

<sup>14</sup> Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 742.

<sup>15</sup> Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 742. On the Christocentric nature of the Psalms, see Richard Belcher, *The Messiah and the Psalms: Preaching Christ from All the Psalms* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2006); Christopher Ash, *Teaching Psalms* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2018); Holtvluwer, *Christ's Psalms, Our Psalms*; Patrick Henry Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms* (Chesterton, Indiana: Ancient Faith Publishing, 2011); and Fletcher, *Psalms of Christ*.

<sup>16</sup> Likewise, Geerhardus Vos: "The Psalter has been at all times that part of Scripture to which believers have most readily turned and upon which they have chiefly depended for the nourishment of the inner religious life of the heart. *I say that part of Scripture, not merely that part of the Old Testament, for even taking the Old and New Testament together the common experience of the people of God affirms that there is nothing in Holy Writ which in our most spiritual moments—when we feel ourselves nearest to God—so faithfully and naturally expresses what we think and feel in our hearts as these songs of the pious Israelites* (Geerhardus Vos, *Grace and Glory: Sermons Preached in the Chapel of Princeton Theological Seminary* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994), 169, emphasis added).

## The Psalms Foster Prayer

Yet it is not only the case that the Psalms convey divine life and holy heat into the believer's affections. They also instruct how to pray, which Edward Payson correctly said, "is the first thing, the second thing, and the third thing necessary for a minister."<sup>17</sup> Pastors must, first of all, be those who give themselves to *prayer* (Acts 6:4).<sup>18</sup> So, what help can the Psalms give in this most fundamental task?

Donald Whitney has written a helpful book on prayer, where he begins by admitting what is obvious to many—it's not always easy for Christians to pray. We get stuck in a rut; our minds wander; we repeat the same old things over and over.<sup>19</sup> Even pastors struggle with this. Consider the testimony of David Taylor who says, "My own prayer life comes and goes. At times I have prayed faithfully every morning before starting the day's work. At other times I have managed only tired prayers at the end of the day, and they have not been very good prayers. At still other times I have found myself without prayer, or, more truthfully, without any desire to pray."<sup>20</sup>

So, what help can the Psalms offer? Whitney then goes on to show how the Psalms are especially suited to take us by the hand in prayer, "taking words that originated in the heart and mind of God and circulating them through [our] heart and mind back to God. By this means his words become the wings of [our] prayers."<sup>21</sup> In other words, "As we pray the Psalms ... we are returning to God words that he expressly inspired for us to speak and sing to him."<sup>22</sup>

This is why Bonhoeffer called the Psalms "the prayerbook of the Bible."<sup>23</sup> Calvin said, "It is by perusing these inspired compositions, that men will be most effectually awakened to a sense of their maladies, and, at the same time, instructed in seeking remedies for their cure. In a word, whatever may serve to encourage us when we are about to pray to God, is taught us in this book."<sup>24</sup> And, more recently, Gary Millar has said, "The Psalter as a whole provides us with the most detailed and sustained treatment of how God's people can, should, and must call on him."<sup>25</sup> The Psalter is, indeed, "the prayerbook of the Bible."

As Eugene Peterson notes,

If we wish to develop in the life of faith, to mature in our humanity, and to glorify God with our entire heart, mind, soul, and strength, the Psalms are necessary. We cannot bypass the Psalms. They are God's gift to us to train us in prayer... If we are

<sup>17</sup> This quote, which I wrote down years ago when reading Edward Payson, *Memoir, Select Thoughts and Sermons of the Late Rev. Edward Payson, D.D.*, ed. Asa Cummings (Harrisonburg: Sprinkle Publications, 1987), I have been unable to track down the page number of. I have been able to find it online as well, but without citation.

<sup>18</sup> The order of Acts 6:4 is important; they are devoted first of all to prayer, then to the ministry of the word.

<sup>19</sup> See Donald S. Whitney, "The Problem," in *Praying the Bible*, 11-21 (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015).

<sup>20</sup> Taylor, *Open and Unafraid*, 39.

<sup>21</sup> Whitney, *Praying the Bible*, 32.

<sup>22</sup> Whitney, *Praying the Bible*, 48.

<sup>23</sup> From the subtitle of his book. He writes, "Now there is in the Holy Scriptures a book which is distinguished from all other books of the Bible by the fact that it contains only prayers. The book is the Psalms" (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: The Prayerbook of the Bible* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 1970), 13).

<sup>24</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 1:xxxvii.

<sup>25</sup> J. G. Millar, *Calling on the Name of the Lord: A Biblical Theology of Prayer* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 2016), 140.

willfully ignorant of the Psalms, we are not thereby excluded from praying, but we will have to hack our way through formidable country by trial and error and with inferior tools.<sup>26</sup>

The pastor who would devote himself to prayer for the church of God would do well, then, to make use of this book, praying psalm-by-psalm, day-by-day,<sup>27</sup> as the church has for millennia.<sup>28</sup>

By so doing, he guards against falling into the rut of prayerlessness, he ensures that his prayers are Scriptural,<sup>29</sup> and he is given language by the Spirit for those times “when he knows not what to pray.”<sup>30</sup> As pastor David Gunderson writes, “In this way, the Psalms provide pastors with a shepherd’s prayer book when [their] well of words has run dry.”<sup>31</sup>

### The Psalms Produce Honesty

But not only do the psalms give the pastor words to pray as he intercedes for his flock, they also help him to bare his *own* soul before God. Pastors can sometimes be good at “faking it,” as there is the unspoken expectation that they must “have it all together.” “Yet,” as Gunderson notes, “the very existence of the Psalter reveals that its authors didn’t internalize the pain or ‘fake it till they made it.’ Instead, they consistently told the truth about the world they inhabited, the burdens they bore, and the King whose dawn they hoped would heal it all.”<sup>32</sup> The Psalms produce *honesty*.

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<sup>26</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), 3-4.

<sup>27</sup> A number of helpful resources have been produced recently to encourage this practice. Trevin Wax’s *Psalms in 30 Days* is a very helpful guide to reading and praying through the Psalms in the course of a month (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2021). Other resources such as Ryan Whitaker Smith and Dan Wilt’s *Sheltering Mercy: Prayers Inspired by the Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2022) also model what it looks like to make the psalms one’s own prayer. An older work doing the same thing is Peter Martyr Vermigli’s *Sacred Prayers: Drawn from the Psalms of David* (Kirksville, Missouri: Thomas Jefferson University Press, 1996). Finally, George Robertson’s *Soul Anatomy: Finding Peace, Hope, and Joy in the Psalms* (Greensboro: New Growth Press, 2020) includes a section on how to pray through each of the twenty-five selected psalms.

<sup>28</sup> On this ancient practice, see Hughes Oliphant Old and Robert Cathcart, “From Cassian to Cranmer: Singing the Psalms from Ancient Times until the Dawning of the Reformation,” in *Sing a New Song: Recovering Psalm Singing for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Anthony Selvaggio and Joel Beeke, 1-15 (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2011); Taylor, *Open and Unafraid*, 25-37; and Peterson, *Answering God*, 6-7.

<sup>29</sup> On this, Donald Whitney writes: “I have enough confidence in the Word and the Spirit of God to believe that if people will pray in this way, in the long run their prayers will be far more biblical than if they just make up their own prayers... without the Scripture to shape our prayers, we are far more likely to pray in unbiblical ways than if we pray the thoughts that occur to us as we read the Scripture... By this means, the Spirit of God will use the Word of God to help the people of God pray increasingly according to the will of God” (Whitney, *Praying the Bible*, 37).

<sup>30</sup> One wonders if this is not what Paul meant in Romans 8:26 when he said the Spirit himself helps us in our weakness by interceding when we know not what to pray. Could it be that he does this through the Spirit-inspired Psalms, given to help us in our prayer? This seems to be suggested by J. V. Fesko in “Psalmody and Prayer,” in *Sing a New Song: Recovering Psalm Singing for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Anthony T. Selvaggio and Joel Beeke (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2011), 177; see also Reuben Bredenhof, *Hallowed: Echoes of the Psalms in the Lord’s Prayer* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2019), chapter 1.

<sup>31</sup> David Gunderson, “5 Reasons Pastors Need the Psalms,” in *Southern Equip*, April 14, 2020, <https://equip.slbs.edu/article/5-reasons-pastors-need-psalms/>.

<sup>32</sup> Gunderson, “5 Reasons Pastors Need the Psalms.”

One of the consequences of “faking it,” or being guarded in most circumstances, is not only that pastors hide from others (and even themselves), but also that they learn, ultimately, to hide from God—to never be fully open. But the Psalms understand this human tendency to hide (Gen. 3:8), and, so, teach the pastor who reads and prays them to be *honest* – both with God and with himself.

David Taylor encourages such honesty in his book, *Open and Unafraid: The Psalms as a Guide to Life*. In failing to be honest, he says, “we become cut off from our Source of life.... Kept hidden, our secrets rob us of *vitality*.”<sup>33</sup> But the Psalms offer “a powerful aid to un-hide: to stand honestly before God without fear, to face one another vulnerably without shame.”<sup>34</sup> They are for those “who know that they spend much of their life hiding secrets; they are also for those who know that standing in the presence of God ‘is the one place where such secrets cannot and must not be hidden... The Psalms invite us to, thus, to stand in the light, to see ourselves truly and to receive the reformatory work of God through the formative words of the psalmist, so that we might be rehumanized in Christ.”<sup>35</sup> Indeed, “we become whole by praying our honest joys and our honest sorrows... To pray in this way is to keep ourselves open to others and to God. In refusing the temptation to hide from others and from God, we refuse the temptation to use words as a cover-up.”<sup>36</sup>

“The Psalms make it possible,” says John Goldingay, “to say things that are otherwise unsayable... they have a capacity to free us to talk about things that we cannot talk about anywhere else”<sup>37</sup> (our sins, our sorrows, our anger, our loneliness, our fears, our shame). David Gunderson agrees: “Pastors need to be honest about [their] hearts, and the Psalms cut honest paths for our souls to walk. You can’t pray the honest prayers in the Psalms without opening your own soul, which is a big reason why pastors need the Psalms.”<sup>38</sup>

### The Psalms Provide a Companion in Suffering

Related to the above is how the Psalms also provide a companion in times of suffering. They not only teach the weary pastor how to open himself up before God, but they also show him *others* who have gone before him and done the same. As he endures various trials—be it opposition, slander, betrayal, loneliness, unmet expectations, or prolonged suffering of other kinds—he finds in the words of the psalmist an echo of his own experience. Indeed, he finds in the psalmist *a friend*.

Many pastors have spoken of loneliness, or of feeling “friendless.” The difficulties of accepting a call to a new part of the country, the awkwardness of navigating pastoral friendships and who can be trusted in a new church, the pain of friends moving away or leaving—all of these only make the problem more acute, especially in the midst of other pastoral burdens. And while no dead author can replace a living friend, “in their own way,” writes Gunderson,

the psalmists do make good literary friends, warm companions of the heart. Though dead, they still speak. Through their words, these co-shepherds help us know we’re not alone... As we travel the well-worn path of pastoral ministry, the

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<sup>33</sup> Taylor, *Open and Unafraid*, 2, 9, emphasis added.

<sup>34</sup> Taylor, *Open and Unafraid*, 3.

<sup>35</sup> Taylor, *Open and Unafraid*, 3. The quote is from Walter Brueggemann, *From Whom No Secrets Are Hid: Introducing the Psalms* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 94.

<sup>36</sup> Taylor, *Open and Unafraid*, 5-6.

<sup>37</sup> Goldingay, *Psalms 1-41*, 22-23. Cited in Taylor, *Open and Unafraid*, 8-9.

<sup>38</sup> Gunderson, “5 Reasons Pastors Need the Psalms.”

psalmists rehearse God's promises and fire up the very soundtrack we need when our friendships feel thinnest.<sup>39</sup>

John Calvin, who was no stranger to suffering, found just such a friend in the sweet psalmist of Israel. He writes, "In considering the whole course of the life of David, it seemed to me that by his own footsteps he showed me the way, and from this I have experienced no small consolation... In unfolding the internal affections both of David and of others, I discourse upon them as matters of which I have familiar experience."<sup>40</sup>

Calvin found in David a companion in suffering, for times when "the whole world, with one voice, should attempt to drive [him] to despair... and the ungodly use their endeavors to destroy [his] soul" (Psalm 3),<sup>41</sup> or when the insolence of "hypocritical mockers" made his heart feel "wounded with bitter pangs" (Psalm 35),<sup>42</sup> and even friends and fellow preachers of the gospel "should wage such nefarious war against him" (Psalms 41 and 55).<sup>43</sup> The Psalms provided Calvin a companion in suffering, and they are able to provide the weary pastor today with the same.<sup>44</sup>

Indeed, they provide him with even *more* than a friend, for ultimately the speaker of the psalms is not *just* David, but Christ himself.<sup>45</sup> Bonhoeffer writes: "What happens to him happens for the sake of the one who is in him and who is said to proceed from him, namely Jesus Christ... In the Psalms of David, the promised Christ himself already speaks... The prayers of David were prayed also by Christ. Or better, Christ himself prayed them through his forerunner David."<sup>46</sup> Thus, in the Psalms, the lonely, weary (even friendless) pastor—who bears burdens that he feels like no one else can understand—finds a friend who sticks closer than a brother, the "friend of sinners" himself. It is to this one that the Psalms re-introduce him to over and over. So, let the weary pastor take up and read, and find in these psalms a companion in suffering.

### The Psalms Model Faithful Suffering

The Psalms not only walk alongside the pastor to show him that others have suffered *like* him, though. They also teach him how to suffer *well*. Indeed, the Psalms model *faithful suffering*. And this too is because they ultimately speak of the suffering servant himself (cf. Luke 24:44). So, let the pastor who feels beaten on every side—betrayed, slandered, weary, wounded—find in the

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<sup>39</sup> Gunderson, "5 Reasons Pastors Need the Psalms."

<sup>40</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 1:xliv, xlvi.

<sup>41</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 1:29-30.

<sup>42</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 1:xlvii.

<sup>43</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 1:xlvi.

<sup>44</sup> Again, he writes: "It has greatly aided me in understanding more fully the complaints made by him of the internal afflictions which the Church had to sustain through those who gave themselves out to be her members, that I had suffered the same or similar things from the domestic enemies of the Church. For although I follow David at a great distance, and come far short of equaling him... I still feel myself tarnished with the contrary vices; yet if I have any things in common with him, I have no hesitation in comparing myself with him... It has been of very great advantage to me to behold in him as in a mirror, both the commencement of my calling, and the continued course of my function" (Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 1:xxxix-xl).

<sup>45</sup> See, for instance, Hebrews 2:12 or 10:5, where the words of the Psalmist are said to have been spoken by Christ himself, for as Peter also says, it is "the Spirit of Christ" who inspired these Old Testament writers (cf. 1 Pet. 1:11).

<sup>46</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Psalms*, 18-19. He goes on, "David did not pray out of the personal exuberance of his heart, but out of the Christ who dwelled in him. To be sure, the one who prays his Psalms remains himself. But in him and through him it is Christ who prays."

Psalms of David (and ultimately the Psalms of *Christ*) a “mentor” to walk this road not only *with* him, but *before* him.

Again, Calvin says of the psalmist,

In reading the instances of his faith, patience, fervor, zeal, and integrity, it has, as it ought, drawn from me unnumbered groans and sighs, that I am so far from approaching them; but it has, notwithstanding, been of very great advantage to me... so that I know the more assuredly, that whatever that most illustrious king and prophet suffered, was exhibited to me by God *as an example for imitation*.<sup>47</sup>

He finds in the psalmist’s faithful suffering a model for him to do likewise.

Indeed, Calvin says the Psalms

*will principally teach and train us to bear the cross*; and the bearing of the cross is a genuine proof of our obedience, since by doing this, we renounce the guidance of our own affections, and submit ourselves entirely to God, leaving him to govern us, and to dispose of our life according to his will, so that the afflictions which are the bitterest and most severe to our nature, become sweet to us, because they proceed from him.<sup>48</sup>

They teach us to say with the Psalmist, “It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes” (Ps. 119:71).

Psalm 119:65-72 is one of the clearest places that the Psalms teach what Christopher Ash calls the “adversity gospel,” where God “gives affliction as his good gift to his people to draw us into, and keep us in, the word.”<sup>49</sup> He says, “It is one of the highest marks of the love of the Father that he afflicts his child with pain.”<sup>50</sup> As Psalm 119 teaches, “Before I was afflicted, I went astray, but now I keep your word” (Ps. 119:67). Therefore, the psalmist can say, “it is good for me that I was afflicted” (Ps. 119:71a).

The Psalms remind the suffering pastor that affliction is neither evidence of God’s displeasure nor an obstacle always to be avoided, but a God-ordained means of growth, therefore to be welcomed. Ash summarizes, “Affliction from the world brings deeply home to [the pastor] where he does and does not belong. When the world is nice to [him], [he] drifts into thinking how good it would be to belong to that nice, comfortable, flattering world.”<sup>51</sup> But when he is afflicted, “the message finally gets through to [his] heart and body that [he] does not belong in this age... [but] the age to come.”<sup>52</sup> Thus, the Word of God, which is “the only sure tie between [him] and the age to come,”

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<sup>47</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 1:xxxix-xl, emphasis added.

<sup>48</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 1:xxxix. Emphasis added.

<sup>49</sup> Christopher Ash, *Bible Delight*, 94. He says God “shows his goodness by allowing his servant to be afflicted by those who care nothing for his word. The process whereby the lover of God’s word is afflicted is used by God to deepen that same love. It is not that we have to get through the affliction, and then we will get the good gift later. The affliction itself is paradoxically the good gift of God. This is a process at the heart of the Christian life and one we neglect or despise to our peril.

<sup>50</sup> Ash, *Bible Delight*, 96.

<sup>51</sup> Ash, *Bible Delight*, 98.

<sup>52</sup> Ash, *Bible Delight*, 101. This is why 18<sup>th</sup> century pastor, John Berridge, said, “A kick from the world does believers less harm than a kiss” (quoted in Ash, *Bible Delight*, 98).

becomes more and more precious to him (cf. Psalm 119:72).<sup>53</sup> The Psalms model, over and over, how to welcome the affliction God sends as his sanctifying instrument.<sup>54</sup>

This, too, was true of the Lord Jesus—“Not that he ever went astray. And yet, even though he was the Son, he ‘learned obedience through what he suffered’ (Heb. 5:8).”<sup>55</sup> Ash continues, “And we too are to learn obedience through suffering.”<sup>56</sup> This is true of all Christians in general, but of Christian ministers especially. D. A. Carson writes, “If God disciplines all his children, then the leaders of those children must not expect any less, and can frequently count on a little more. Many a great preacher has suffered prolonged affliction, doubtless part of the Lord’s merciful tempering of character.”<sup>57</sup>

May such leaders find in the Psalms a guide for receiving this affliction well. May they find in David (and in Christ, the *greater* David) a model and mentor as they walk the difficult road of pastoral suffering, and learn how to exhibit meekness (Psalm 37), how to endure betrayal (Psalm 41), how to respond when falsely accused (Psalm 35), and how to suffer without cause (Psalm 44). In short, may they learn from the Psalms to embrace the “adversity gospel.”

### The Psalms Provide a Vocabulary for Suffering

Not only will the Psalms help pastors to think rightly about suffering, but they also give them a “vocabulary” with which to respond to that suffering. One of the great blessings of the Psalter is that about 40% of it is *lament*.<sup>58</sup> Thus, the Psalms give the suffering pastor a language for sorrow.

Charles Spurgeon certainly found this to be the case. He was by no means a stranger to suffering,<sup>59</sup> and the book of the Bible that he preached from more than any other book was the Book of

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<sup>53</sup> Ash, *Bible Delight*, 101.

<sup>54</sup> Ash writes, “No man will love his Bible until God has afflicted him. He may be intrigued by it. He may have an intellectual affection for it. He may have been brought up to have a cultural affinity with it, or an aesthetic love of its verbal resonances. But he will not delight in that word above all the wealth of the world until he has felt the fragility of this world, this age, this mortal body. But when that happens, he will cling to the word as the only tie to the age to come (Ash, *Bible Delight*, 101).

<sup>55</sup> Ash, *Bible Delight*, 99. See also the discussion on Christ as the fulfillment of this psalm and of this section in particular in Christopher Ash, “2022 Bolton Conference Session 3 – The Psalms and the Scriptures of Christ (Psalm 119),” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pdAWc-O-qmU&t=232s>, accessed Jan. 11, 2023.

<sup>56</sup> Ash, *Bible Delight*, 99.

<sup>57</sup> D. A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord?: Reflections on Suffering and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1990), 80 (cf. Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry: Leadership Lessons from 1 Corinthians Together for the Gospel 2012 Edition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2012), 108). An excellent treatment of this peculiar pastoral suffering can be found in Leland Brown, “The Standard-Bearer: Pastoral Suffering in the Theology of John Calvin,” *Themelios* 47, no. 2, 326-336. He writes: “[Calvin] encourages [pastors] to see suffering as an essential feature of pastoral ministry... Calvin’s theology of ministry will help pastors be less shocked when they receive a biting piece of criticism, experience a family or health crisis, or discover that a powerful elder is after their job. If ministers will follow Calvin in seeing these sorts of things as a part of the pastoral job description (and also as under God’s sovereign goodness, working for their good and storing up for them their reward), they will bear them better” (*ibid.*, 336).

<sup>58</sup> See Appendix 2 of Mark Vroegop, *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy: Discovering the Grace of Lament*. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019), 201.

<sup>59</sup> See Zack Eswine, *Spurgeon’s Sorrows: Realistic Hope for Those Who Suffer from Depression* (Fear, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2017).

Psalms.<sup>60</sup> They gave him a vocabulary by which to articulate his pain. Writing on Psalm 88, he said, “He who now feebly expounds these words knows within himself more than he would care or dare to tell of the abysses of inward anguish... Terrors are turned upon me; they pursue my soul as the wind.”<sup>61</sup> The psalms gave him a language of sorrow by which to express his grief.

Countless others have found the same to be true. One pastor writes, “At the darkest moments, the sole reason why I felt I could still do business with God in my bewilderment was what [God] allowed to be included in the Bible. To be more precise, it was the Psalms.”<sup>62</sup> Because of their use of metaphor, they are able to express, the confusion and disorientation that God’s people—even pastors—often feel.<sup>63</sup> As one writer said, “When we look to the language of God given in the Bible, we find within it a language that the miserable would recognize as native and not foreign to the geography of their inward anguish.”<sup>64</sup>

As Martyn Lloyd-Jones says in his book on *Spiritual Depression*, while some may say that a Christian (and especially a pastor) is one who “sings all the day long... [with] never a ripple on the surface of the soul... the Scriptures are much kinder to such friends, and do grant clearly by their teaching that it is possible for a Christian [even a pastor] to be depressed.”<sup>65</sup> Thus, the Psalms give comfort when feelings of guilt for discouragement creep in. They give language to articulate that discouragement. Todd Billings writes, “They help show us that bottling up or trying to ‘fix’ those emotions ourselves is not the right way.”<sup>66</sup> As Carl Trueman said, “God has given the church a language which allows it to express even the deepest agonies of the human soul...”<sup>67</sup> “Here we have permission,” writes Calvin, “to lay open before [God] our infirmities, which we would be ashamed to confess before men.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> See David McKinley, “The Significance of the Psalms for Spurgeon,” in *The Spurgeon Center*, Nov. 2, 2021, <https://www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/blog-entries/the-significances-of-the-psalms-for-spurgeon/>. He writes: “Charles Spurgeon loved the Psalms! He preached over 400 sermons on this collection of writings during his pastoral ministry. He also invested twenty years in authorizing a seven-volume exposition entitled *The Treasury of David*. As he neared the completion of *The Treasury of David*, he wrote, ‘The Book of Psalms has been a royal banquet to me, and in feasting upon its contents I have seemed to eat angels’ food... The writing of this book has been a means of grace to my own heart...’ In light of his physical suffering, the over-whelming pressures on his pastoral ministry, and the pain of friends rejecting him, the Psalms strengthened his faith in Jesus Christ.”

<sup>61</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David* (London: Marshall Brothers, n.d.), 4:4.

<sup>62</sup> Mark Meynell, *When Darkness Seems My Closest Friend: Reflections on Life and Ministry with Depression* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 2018), 1, emphasis original. See also pages 30-37.

<sup>63</sup> See Meynell, *When Darkness Seems My Closest Friend*, 30-31; cf. Eswine, *Spurgeon’s Sorrows*, 67-74.

<sup>64</sup> Eswine, *Spurgeon’s Sorrows*, 71.

<sup>65</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Its Cure* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 107.

<sup>66</sup> J. Todd Billings, *Rejoicing in Lament: Wrestling with Incurable Cancer & Life in Christ* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2015), 41.

<sup>67</sup> Carl Trueman, “What Do Miserable Christians Sing?” *Themelios* 25 no. 2, 2. Likewise, W. David O. Taylor says the psalms offer us “prayers of lament that furnish us with language for the seemingly unspeakable. Here are songs to name the sorrow in the company of the faithful. Here are poems that give coherent shape to our in-coherent feelings in the presence of our Maker, who has, it often feels, seemingly abandoned us to our inconsolable pain...” They offer “edited language to give expression to our unedited emotions” (Taylor, *Open and Unafraid*, 69).

<sup>68</sup> Quoted in John D. Witvliet, *The Biblical Psalms in Christian Worship: A Brief Introduction and Guide to Resources* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 43. Elsewhere, Calvin says that the Psalms “call, or rather draw, each of us to the examination of himself in particular, in order that none of the many infirmities to which we are subject, and of the many vices with which we abound, may remain concealed” (Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 1:xxxvii).

Pastors, as they bear the cross along with Christ, the Chief-Shepherd, would do well to heed these words of Carl Trueman, who counsels, “Read the psalms over and over until you have the vocabulary, grammar, and syntax necessary to lay your heart before God in lamentation. If you do this, you will have the resources to cope with your own periods of suffering, despair and heartbreak, and to keep worshipping and trusting through even the blackest of times.”<sup>69</sup>

To internalize the language of the Psalms ultimately leads the one who sings them to *Christ*, for he, too, took these psalms upon his lips.<sup>70</sup> Bonhoeffer says, “they pray concerning the one who took upon himself our diseases and bore our infirmities... They proclaim Jesus Christ to be the only help in suffering, for in him God is with us.”<sup>71</sup> Thus, the pastor who would cope with suffering as he shares in the sufferings of Christ would do well to become familiar with the songs of Christ.

### **The Psalms Provide an Eschatological Vision in the Midst of Suffering**

Another thing that the Psalms consistently do is lift the eyes of the one suffering above his hurt and pain to the glory to come. The Psalms provide an eschatological vision in the midst of suffering.<sup>72</sup> Consider Psalm 73, where in the midst of the suffering of the righteous and the prosperity of the wicked, it is the hope of glory (verse 24) and the judgment to come (verse 27) that brings peace. The same is true of Psalm 37. There is consistently in the Psalms the casting of an eschatological outlook in the midst of suffering, where “the temporary rigors and disciplines necessary for walking with God... will indeed lead to everlasting gladness.”<sup>73</sup> Vos says, “The Psalter teaches us before all else what the proper, ideal attitude of the religious mind ought to be with reference to its vision of the absolute future.”<sup>74</sup> In the long sadness of the “night,” it teaches its readers to look ahead to the joy of the “morning.”<sup>75</sup>

The Psalms teach its readers to look for the coming of their king who will execute judgment (Ps. 2:9), defend the cause of the needy (Ps. 72:4), and rule in the midst of his enemies (Ps. 110:3). It teaches them to long for that day when sorrow and suffering will be no more (Ps. 126:6), but they will dwell in the land (Ps. 37:11), and he will be with them (Ps. 16:11), and they will behold his face

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<sup>69</sup> Trueman, “What Do Miserable Christians Sing?” 3. He says that, in doing this, “you will also develop a greater understanding of fellow Christians whose agonies of say, bereavement, depression, or despair, sometimes make it difficult for them to sing ‘Jesus wants me for a sunbeam’ with gusto every Sunday morning; and you will have more credible things to say to those shattered and broken individuals... to whom you may be called to be a witness of God’s unconditional mercy and grace to the unloved and the unlovely.”

<sup>70</sup> See Matthew 27:45-46. Bonhoeffer writes, of Christ: “He himself also accompanies us in our prayer. He, who has suffered every want and has brought it before God, has prayed for our sake in God’s name: ‘Not my will, but thine be done.’ For our sake he cried on the cross: ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’ Now we know that there is no longer any suffering on earth in which Christ will not be with us, suffering with us and praying with us – Christ the only helper” (Bonhoeffer, *Psalms*, 49; see also Billings, *Rejoicing in Lament*, 51-53, on praying these psalms with Christ).

<sup>71</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Psalms*, 48.

<sup>72</sup> On the eschatological themes in the Psalter, see Geerhardus Vos, “Eschatology of the Psalter,” *Princeton Theological Review*, 18 no. 1, 1-43.

<sup>73</sup> James M. Hamilton, *Psalms* (Bellingham, Washington: Lexham Academic, 2021), 2:11.

<sup>74</sup> Vos, “Eschatology of the Psalter,” 10.

<sup>75</sup> Psalm 30:5; see also Psalm 130:6. Vos argues that in the Psalms, the “morning” signifies the dawn of the new great day of Jehovah, and thus is symbolic of all hope and deliverance (Vos, “Eschatology of the Psalter,” 14-15).

and be satisfied with his likeness (Ps. 17:15).<sup>76</sup> It teaches them to long for that day when prayer will give way to praise and all creation will magnify God's name forever (Ps. 146-150).<sup>77</sup>

So, in the midst of trials, the suffering and weary pastor can be trained by the Psalms to wait for glory. Anthony Selvaggio explains, "The Psalms hold before [his] eyes the reality that God has intruded, and *will* intrude, into history in cataclysmic ways, ultimately yielding everlasting peace and rest for his people."<sup>78</sup> But, at the same time, they remind him that this peace and rest are not yet, and, so, help him to "avoid imbibing a theology of glory, and serve as a guard against the temptation to over-realize [his] eschatology."<sup>79</sup> The Psalms teach him that he must suffer now with patience until the Chief Shepherd appears when he will receive an unfading crown of glory (cf. 1 Pet. 5:4).

### The Psalms Address the Reality of Anger

There will always be conflicts, suffering, and frustrations in pastoral ministry. There will be "scoffers" like those in Psalm 1, or those who vainly plot against Christ's kingdom, as in Psalm 2. The pressures opposing the king in Psalm 3 will overflow to his people—and to ministers in particular—so that there may be times when God's servants even feel a degree of anger. And one of the incredibly comforting things about the Psalms is that they *affirm* this, and then they give instruction on how to handle it.

In Psalm 4:4, David the king says, "Be angry, and do not sin; ponder in your own hearts on your beds, and be still." Here, he is speaking to his loyal subjects who are frustrated as the enemies try to turn the king's glory into shame and plot vainly against him.<sup>80</sup> David affirms that it is right for them to be angry about this, but they must not sin in their anger.<sup>81</sup> He tells them, rather than

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<sup>76</sup> Vos summarizes, saying the eschatological state in the Psalms "is before all else a state in which the enjoyment of Jehovah, the beatific vision of his face, the pleasures at his right hand, the perpetual dwelling with him in his sanctuary, form the supreme good" (Vos, "Eschatology of the Psalter," 27).

<sup>77</sup> Commenting on the praise psalms at the end of the Psalter, Peterson says, "This is not a 'word of praise' slapped onto whatever mess we are in at the moment. The crafted conclusion for the Psalms tells us that our prayers are going to end in praise... Prayer, a praying life, finally becomes praise. Prayer is always reaching towards praise and will finally arrive there. If we persist in prayer, laugh and cry, doubt and believe, struggle and dance and then struggle again, we will surely end up at Psalm 150, on our feet, applauding, 'Encore! Encore!'" (Peterson, *Answering God*, 127). Likewise, Bonhoeffer: "The psalms of the final victory of God and of his Messiah lead us in praise, thanks-giving, and petition to the end of all things, when all the world will give God the honor, when the redeemed people of God will reign with him eternally, when the powers of evil will fall and God alone will rule" (Bonhoeffer, *Psalms*, 62).

<sup>78</sup> Anthony Selvaggio, "Psalm-Singing and Redemptive-Historical Hermeneutics: Geerhardus Vos's 'Eschatology of the Psalter' Revisited," in *Sing a New Song: Recovering Psalm Singing for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Anthony T. Selvaggio and Joel Beeke (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2011), 157.

<sup>79</sup> Selvaggio, "Psalm-Singing and Redemptive-Historical Hermeneutics," 158.

<sup>80</sup> Some commentators think that David is actually speaking to his enemies here, whom he addressed in verse 2; but it is better to take the "Selah" at the end of verse 2 as a pause and transition, where, having addressed his enemies, he now turns to the faithful (See Shikai Ronnie Poon, "The Use of Psalm 4:4 in Ephesians 4:26," (Acedemia.edu, accessed Jan. 12, 2023), 13,

[https://www.academia.edu/4370735/The\\_Use\\_of\\_Psalm\\_4\\_4\\_in\\_Ephesians\\_4\\_26](https://www.academia.edu/4370735/The_Use_of_Psalm_4_4_in_Ephesians_4_26). See also Davis, *The Way of the Righteous*, 55; J.V. Fesko, *Songs of a Suffering King: The Grand Christ Hymn of Psalms 1-8* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2014), 52; Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 2014), 56; and Holtvliwer, *Christ's Psalms, Our Psalms*, 1:100.)

<sup>81</sup> Shikai Ronnie Poon writes, "We should take this verse in Psalm 4 as a command to the faithful to respond in (righteous) anger towards the opponents, but remain cautious in their attitude so that they would not fall into sin... Anger is taken as the proper response to unrighteousness, but believers should be

acting impulsively as they may be prone to do, to quietly meditate before God, and to “put their trust in the Lord” (Ps. 4:5).

This is the beginning a theme in the Psalms of how to bring righteous anger before God and trust him to act. The very next psalm will give an example of this, praying, “Make them bear their guilt, O God; let them fall by their own counsels; because of the abundance of their transgressions cast them out, for they have rebelled against you” (Ps. 5:10).

In the face of injustice—in the face of vain plots against Christ’s kingdom, and lies, deceit, and sinful flattery (Ps. 5:6, 9)—the Psalms provide the believer with words to pray before God as they meditate and trust him to act. They keep the pastor (and believer) from a wrong reaction leading to wrong actions, and instead direct them to the prayer closet. David’s counsel would save many pastors from impulsive actions they may later regret, and from the anger that might eat them up. The Psalms (especially the imprecatory psalms) teach them “what to do with anger.”<sup>82</sup> In the words of one writer, they answer the question: “What do angry Christians sing?”<sup>83</sup>

The pastor, as he ministers to suffering saints, may witness horrific evils and grave injustices. As he serves Christ’s kingdom, he may become an object of Satan’s special hatred. Those who despise the gospel may seek to do him harm and undermine his integrity by smearing him with lies. But, for each of these situations, God has given him a song to sing. The Psalms teach him, as Christopher Ash said, to “leave room for an angry God.”<sup>84</sup>

Acting out impulsively in anger never leads to vitality; it leads to death. But praying that righteous anger before the Lord in the words of Psalm 5, or 35, or 37, leads to the kind of peace that David was able to enjoy at the end of Psalm 4 where he lies down and sleeps with more joy in his heart than when grain and wine abounded. It is the Psalms—and specifically the Psalms of anger—that allow the believer to enjoy this peace when they are caught in this conflict between the two kingdoms. It is for these very situations that God has given these psalms.<sup>85</sup>

More could be said about the imprecatory psalms. Certainly, there are ways they can be misused.<sup>86</sup> But an extraordinarily high number of psalms contain at least an imprecatory element, because God knows the war in which his people are engaged, and he wants to teach them to look to him to fight for them.<sup>87</sup>

These psalms also serve as a reminder of the very battle in which they are engaged. Jay Adams asks, “Have we lost sight of the fact that we are at war with the enemies of God? Have we been guilty of playing at Christianity in our comfortable churches, exchanging ‘warm fuzzies’ and

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watchful that they would not sin in the process” (Poon, “The Use of Psalm 4:4 in Ephesians 4:26,” 14). See also Peter Thomas O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 339.

<sup>82</sup> This is the title of George Robertson’s chapter on Psalms 129, 137, and 140 in *Soul Anatomy: Finding Peace, Hope, and Joy in the Psalms*, 200–208.

<sup>83</sup> Warren Peel, “What Do Angry Christians Sing?,” in *Gentle Reformation*, June 19, 2020, [www.gentlereformation.com/2020/06/19/what-do-angry-christians-sing](http://www.gentlereformation.com/2020/06/19/what-do-angry-christians-sing).

<sup>84</sup> Christopher Ash and Steve Midgley, *The Heart of Anger: How the Bible Transforms Anger in Our Understanding and Experience* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2021), 101, 161.

<sup>85</sup> Speaking of the calming power of these songs of Christ’s Spirit, Christopher Ash says, “I doubt if mine is the first angry heart to be quieted by the singing of God’s words with God’s people” (Ash and Midgley, *The Heart of Anger*, 172).

<sup>86</sup> Sean McGowan gives some cautions on pages 53–57 of *Psalms That Curse: A Brief Primer* (Ann Arbor: Reformation Zion Publishing, 2021).

<sup>87</sup> That’s what these psalms are; they are battle cries to the Warrior God to fight for his people. See Holtvluwer, *Christ’s Psalms, Our Psalms*, 1:20.

pleasant chit-chat? If so, it is time to wake up!”<sup>88</sup> The psalms are one of the means by which God awakens his people.<sup>89</sup> Part of maintaining a vital ministry is not falling asleep at the wheel. In providing a vocabulary for warfare and vocabulary for (righteous) anger, the Psalms remind the pastor of the seriousness of his work, but also of the one who fights for him. The imprecatory portions of the Psalter should not be overlooked.

### The Psalms Remind of the Need for Rest

The logic of Psalm 4 also suggests that the one who entrusts his anger to the Lord will be able to sleep at night because he is not fretting about the wicked. This leads to another theme in the Psalms, and one that is important for pastors who sometimes have many reasons to stay up at night. The Psalms remind the busy and burdened pastor of the vital need for sleep.

Because his frame is weak, since he is made from the dust (Ps. 90:3; 103:14),<sup>90</sup> he is not able to forego the sleep that God in heaven does not need (Ps. 121:3-4). There is only one who can go without sleep, and that is God. And, so, the Psalms remind the busy pastor that it's okay to lie down and sleep (Ps. 3:5; 4:8). In fact, they will challenge his overconfident workaholism, and tell him plainly that it's in vain (Ps. 127:2).

In fact, Psalm 127 is especially relevant for pastors, as Christopher Ash notes, because “the context in Psalm 127 is that it is the Lord, the covenant-making God of the Bible, who ‘builds the house’ and ‘watches over the city’ (Psalm 127:1); in the context of the Psalms of Ascent, the most natural understanding of the ‘house’ is the Temple, and the ‘city’ is Jerusalem.”<sup>91</sup> Ash concludes, “So, the project that God watches over is... the great project of building the people of God... In this age, that project is Christian gospel work; everything that serves the gospel of the Lord Jesus. It is in this context that we hear the rebuke to sleeplessness that comes from ‘anxious toil.’”<sup>92</sup>

According to Christopher Ash, “The rebuke of Psalm 127 is to those whose sleeplessness is caused by ‘anxious toil:’ burning the candle at both ends because *we will not trust God for the work*. Sleep seen through this lens is an expression of trust in God. You and I sleep because we do not believe that the project of building the people of God rests upon us.”<sup>93</sup> This is a reminder that pastors need—a reminder to trust God who builds his church, and a reminder that their anxious toil which keeps them from being able to rest is in vain.

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<sup>88</sup> James E. Adams, *War Psalms of the Prince of Peace: Lessons from the Imprecatory Psalms*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2016), 100.

<sup>89</sup> Says Patrick Henry Reardon, “To relinquish any one of the psalms on the excuse that its sentiments are too violent for a Christian is a clear sign that a person has also given up the very battle that a Christian is summoned from his bed to fight. The psalms are prayers for those engaged in an ongoing spiritual conflict” (Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 6). Likewise, J. V. Fesko writes, “If we think that the psalmist’s words should never be on our lips, then we fail to see the conflict that the psalmist has painted from the opening of the Psalter” (*Songs of a Suffering King*, 46).

<sup>90</sup> Christopher Ash, in his book *Zeal without Burnout: Seven Keys to a Lifelong Ministry of Sustainable Sacrifice* (Epsom, Surrey, England: The Good Book Company, 2016), makes much of the fact that man is made from the dust, and therefore these human limitations require that he care for his body in ways that he might sometimes be tempted to overlook.

<sup>91</sup> Ash, *Zeal without Burnout*, 47. See also Hamilton, *Psalms*, 2:399-403; Robertson, *The Flow of the Psalms*, 212-215; Fletcher, *Psalms of Christ*, 174-195, on the Davidic Covenant and temple-building, kingdom-building project as the background of this psalm.

<sup>92</sup> Ash, *Zeal without Burnout*, 47, referencing Psalm 127:2.

<sup>93</sup> Ash, *Zeal without Burnout*, 49.

Several times, the Psalms give this reminder to see the frailty of our human limitations and to sleep (e.g., Psalm 103:14). We must recognize that we need “to restore our energy; [and] sleep is the daily way our Father gives us to do this; and we neglect it at our peril.”<sup>94</sup> If we neglect sleep, we are saying that we do not respect how our creator has made us, and are strong enough to cope without God’s gift of sufficient daily sleep, refusing to accept our creaturely limitations and bodily needs.<sup>95</sup> This is why David Murray says, “Show me your sleep pattern and I’ll show you your theology... Few things are as theological as sleep.”<sup>96</sup> A refusal to sleep says we don’t trust God with our work, we don’t respect how God has made us, and we don’t believe that our body and soul are linked.<sup>97</sup> But the Psalms invite us to a better way.

Accepting this invitation to rest, and realizing how the body and soul are linked, also means that the irritability which come from neglecting sleep is remedied. This is another reason why heeding the Psalmist’s call to rest is needed for maintaining a vital ministry. D. A. Carson puts it this way:

If you keep burning the candle at both ends, sooner or later, you will indulge in more and more mean cynicism... If you are among those who become nasty, cynical, or even full of doubt when you are missing your sleep, you are morally obligated to try to get the sleep you need. We are whole, complicated beings: our physical existence is tied up to our spiritual well-being, to our mental outlook, to our relationships with others, including our relationship with God. Sometimes the godliest thing you can do in the universe is get a good night’s sleep... Spiritual discipline obligates you to get the sleep your body needs.<sup>98</sup>

The Psalms give frequent reminders of the need for rest—because we are human, because our spiritual discipline requires it, because God can build his church without us while we sleep, and because we can trust that, since he never sleeps, we can.<sup>99</sup> This may seem unimportant, but it is vitally connected to maintaining a sustainable ministry.

### The Psalms Give us Joy

The Psalms assist the pastor in cultivating communion with God, they foster his prayer life, they produce honesty in that prayer life, they give him a companion in suffering, model for him what faithful cross-bearing looks like, give him a vocabulary for his sorrow, cast for him an eschatological vision in the midst of it, address the reality of his anger, and remind him of his need for sleep. The last way in which the Psalms are an essential resource in maintaining spiritual vitality is that they give him *joy*. This is yet another theme throughout the Psalter.<sup>100</sup> Over and over, God makes clear that, in singing of what he has done, he imparts to his people *joy*.

<sup>94</sup> Christopher Ash, *Zeal without Burnout*, 47.

<sup>95</sup> David P. Murray, *Reset: Living a Grace-Paced Life in a Burnout Culture* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), 55.

<sup>96</sup> Murray, *Reset*, 54.

<sup>97</sup> Murray, *Reset*, 55.

<sup>98</sup> D.A. Carson, *Scandalous: The Cross and Resurrection of Jesus* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2010), 147. Quoted in Kevin DeYoung, *Crazy Busy: A (Mercifully) Short Book about a (Really) Big Problem* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 97.

<sup>99</sup> See also Adrian Reynolds, *And So to Bed... A Biblical View of Sleep* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2014).

<sup>100</sup> See Psalm 1:1; 4:7; 5:11; 16:11; 20:5; 21:6; 27:6; 30:5; 32:11; 33:1; 35:27; 43:4; 45:15; 47:1; 51:8, 12; 63:5, 7; 66:1; 67:4; 68:3; 71:23; 81:1; 84:2; 92:4; 95:1, 2; 97:11; 98:4, 6; 100:1; 105:43; 107:22; 113:9; 119:111; 126:2, 5, 6; 132:9, 16; 149:5.

Already at the very beginning of the Psalter, God has hinted that the one who meditates on this book will be “happy” (Ps. 1:1) and filled with “delight” (Ps. 1:2).<sup>101</sup> All throughout the Psalms, this proves true, as God intends to give his people joy—the kind of joy in which all of creation shares by the end of the book (Ps. 149:5; 150:4-6).

So, let the pastor who seeks that “joy of the Lord which is his strength” (Neh. 8:10)—the strength of his ministry, that which keeps him going, and that which motivates him to serve God’s people with gladness—let him meditate on the Psalms, and be like the man of Psalm 119:111 who says, “Your testimonies are my heritage forever, for they are the joy of my heart.”

Yes, may the Spirit “wash and refill the leader’s soul through the living water of the Psalms.”<sup>102</sup> Just as “every city needs a fresh water source, every pastor should draw from the clean spring of God’s inspired songs, which the Spirit uses to nourish us. This regular time in the Psalms replenishes our hearts with a strong joy that bubbles up from deep in God himself.”<sup>103</sup>

### **Summary: Pastors Need the Psalms**

For these ten reasons, the wise pastor will make frequent use of the Psalms—not only for the sake of his own soul, but also for the sake of the flock that is entrusted to him, and for the joy of the Lord that is imparted to him in the Psalms. As Gunderson writes, “The wise pastor will not leave these songs in the study, but carry them in his heart through the fields and the valleys, following his Shepherd and shepherding his sheep till the trail gives way to glory.”<sup>104</sup>

There was a time when pastors were expected to be much more familiar with the Psalms. James Jordan tells the story of an ordination examination where a candidate was asked, “If you are going to be a pastor, what would you say is the most important book of the Bible for counseling your people?” The candidate responded, “The Psalms.” And then he was asked, “If you are going to be a pastor and lead in worship, what is the most important book of the Bible for learning about worship, and for leading the people of God in?” The younger man again replied, “The Psalms.” Continuing, the older man said, “So the Book of Psalms is the most important book for you to know as a pastor for counseling and for worship, correct?” The candidate answered, “Yes, I think it is.” “Well then,” the older man replied, “beginning with Psalm 1, go through the book and give me the gist of every psalm, and don’t stop until you get to Psalm 150.” The candidate began to do just that, but faltered somewhere around Psalm 11 and couldn’t continue. He was then told, “You aren’t ready to be a pastor yet. Come back when you can do them all.”<sup>105</sup>

While this story may be a little over-the-top, the point is valid: if the Psalms are so important for the spiritual life of the church, then her pastors need to be deeply acquainted with them. Perhaps a return to the days when this was expected might yield better results in terms of ministerial longevity and vitality. As Bonhoeffer said, “Whenever the Psalter is abandoned, an incomparable treasure vanishes from the Christian church,” but “with its recovery will come unsuspected power”<sup>106</sup>—the kind of power that may give life and vitality to the ministry of Christ’s undershepherds.

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<sup>101</sup> The word “blessed” could be translated “happy” in Psalm 1:1.

<sup>102</sup> Gunderson, “5 Reasons Pastors Need the Psalms.”

<sup>103</sup> Gunderson, “5 Reasons Pastors Need the Psalms.”

<sup>104</sup> Gunderson, “5 Reasons Pastors Need the Psalms.”

<sup>105</sup> This story is relayed in Duane Garner, “Why Don’t We Sing the Song Jesus Sang?: The Birth, Death, and Resurrection of English Psalm Singing” in *The Glory of Kings: A Festschrift in Honor of James B. Jordan*, ed. Peter J. Leithart and John Barach (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 147.

<sup>106</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Psalms*, 26.

So, how might the minister incorporate this into his routine? Eugene Peterson was asked something to this effect at the end of a semester-long course on biblical spirituality. His answer: “Tomorrow, read Psalm 1. The next day, read Psalm 2. The day after that, read Psalm 3. When you get to the end, start over.” That student’s testimony? “That’s precisely what I did... and kept up the habit for several years. In time, I found that it slowly changed the way I saw my Christian faith. The language of the Psalms began to saturate my sense of self, my understanding of God, my ideas about prayer and worship, and my notion of Scripture and a faithful life.”<sup>107</sup>

Others have sought to read through the Psalter every week,<sup>108</sup> or some, every month,<sup>109</sup> praying their way through it as they do so.<sup>110</sup> Along with this, pastors would do well to make the Psalms “the soundtrack of their lives,” by also singing<sup>111</sup> and listening<sup>112</sup> to the psalms daily, that they might “dwell in their hearts richly” (Col. 3:16). Of course, they would also do well to preach through them, as there are few better ways than preaching to get to know each Psalm inside and out.<sup>113</sup> As Richard Wells notes,

There is no crash course short for pastoral formation through the psalms. It will take time and effort as the psalms remind us on page 1... There are no shortcuts, but there are a few basics: immerse yourself in the Psalms; seek to understand the Psalms one by one; identify with the psalmist; make the Psalm your own; and practice using the Psalms not only in your own life experience but in ministry – in preaching and teaching and prayer and counseling.<sup>114</sup>

And may God be pleased, as these ancient songs course through his under-shepherds, to make them like well-watered trees whose leaf does not wither, but whatever they do prospers (Ps. 1:3).

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<sup>107</sup> Taylor, *Open and Unafraid*, xx.

<sup>108</sup> This was the ancient practice of the desert father, John Cassian (see Old and Cathcart, “From Cassian to Cranmer,” 11).

<sup>109</sup> This is the approach Cranmer takes in the Book of Common Prayer. It is also the approach of Trevin Wax in *Psalms in 30 Days*.

<sup>110</sup> Donald Whitney suggests a helpful “Psalms of the Day Chart,” with one psalm being the focus for prayer each day, while making one’s way through the psalms (Whitney, *Praying the Bible*, 91).

<sup>111</sup> The “Trinity Psalter Hymnal” App of the United Reformed Churches and Orthodox Presbyterian Church is a helpful aid in doing this in family worship.

<sup>112</sup> Recently, Poor Bishop Hooper has completed a modern, somewhat folky three-year long project, singing through all 150 psalms, which can be accessed free online, and may prove to be helpful in making this Word dwell in one’s heart richly, “when you sit down, and when you walk by the way” (Deuteronomy 6:7).

<sup>113</sup> David King commends this practice, calling it “one of [his] most enjoyable seasons of preaching,” and saying, “By the end of [it], our church had a better grasp on the Psalms as a whole. More importantly, the Psalms had a better grasp on us. This rich book had expanded our vocabulary of prayer and praise and had warmed our hearts toward the Lord” (David King, “3 Reasons You Should Preach through the Psalms,” in *9Marks* Sept. 20, 2018, [www.9marks.org/article/psalms/](http://www.9marks.org/article/psalms/). See also Robertson, *Soul Anatomy: Finding Peace, Hope, and Joy in the Psalms*, ix-x, for another testimony on the benefits of preaching the Psalms).

<sup>114</sup> C. Richard Wells, “The Cry of the Heart and the Cure of the Soul: Interpreting the Psalms for Pastoral Care,” in *Forgotten Songs: Reclaiming the Psalms for Christian Worship*, ed. C. Richard Wells and Ray Van Neste (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2012), 176-177. Robert Godfrey also gives several similar suggestions in Robert W. Godfrey, *Learning to Love the Psalms* (Sanford, Florida: Reformation Trust, 2017), 255-257.