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The Prayer Life of David: From Shepherd to King

Psalm 23, Various OT passages and other Psalms of David

TOD: If David was a "man after God's own heart," why do we think it's sacrilege or even sin to express our feelings openly and honestly with God? Lori Lower

Throughout David's life, we see prayers of praise and adoration, depression and lament, guidance and deliverance, confession and repentance, bitterness and anger, as well as peace and acceptance. If David was a "man after God's own heart," as stated in Acts 13:22 "a man about whom God said . . . a man after my own heart," why do we think we need to limit our prayers? God wants to hear what's on *our hearts*, not just the things that we think He wants to hear. The prayers of David come from the nitty-gritty, down in the dirt, every day and every way of life, and rise from the deepest valleys to the highest mountains.

As I set out to prepare this message, I was determined to find out what made David "tick," how did he pray, what was his rhythm of prayer? Did he get up early and go outside to pray? Like Jesus did. Or did he pray throughout the day while doing his daily tasks? Like Brother Lawrence did. (His story is told in the book, *The Practice of the Presence of God*.) Or as Paul stated in I Thessalonians, "pray without ceasing."

So I read through the historical account of David's life, as laid out in Scripture from I Samuel chapter 16 through I Kings chapter 2. (I would suggest between now and the end of the David series that everyone of us do this at least once – maybe several times.) And you know what I found out?

There is very little actually written about David and his prayer life in these chapters of the Bible. There are about 6 or 7 short anecdotes about him asking God, the LORD, 2 or 3 simple questions, and the Lord answers him in almost Yes or No – short-answer fashion.

There are only 2 prayers of significant length included in these books. One is in II Samuel 7, verses 18-29, where David gives a prayer of thanksgiving after the prophet Nathan (Samuel has been deceased at this point in the story, I Samuel 25), Nathan tells David that God said he was NOT to build the temple. The other is in II Samuel chapter 22, which is titled as David's song (or prayer) of praise. Even though this is included towards the end of II Samuel and supposedly is during David's later years, chapters 21 and following are not in any specific chronological order.

This means what we need to study to find out about David's prayer life is the Book of Psalms, of which about half were written by David. A psalm is a sacred song or hymn, in particular any of those contained in the Book of Psalms and used in Christian and Jewish worship. Of the 150 Psalms included in the current book of our biblical canon, David is noted as being the author of 73 of them. If you add Psalm 2 and 95, which the NT writers attributed to David, that makes 75 – exactly half. 12 psalms were written by Asaph - who was a prominent Levite singer and seer, someone who "sees with spiritual eyes" in David's court and was the son of Berachiah of the tribe of Levi. He is referenced through I &

II Chronicles. He is the ancestor of the Sons of Asaph, one of the great family guilds of temple musicians. 9 Psalms were written by the Sons of Korah – another lineage of Levite priests; 2 by Solomon, David’s son. Heman and Ethan, named Sons of Korah, as well as Moses wrote 1 each. That leaves 49 (or 51 if you don’t count the extra 2 as David’s), as anonymous; there is no title or author associated with these. It is more than likely that David wrote some of these as well. When you read through them, some of these “sound” like David or were written in Davidic style. Most scholars attribute the collection of the Psalms as being put together by the scribe, Ezra around the time of the Babylonian captivity.

Just a couple of more tidbits about the Psalms. Some of David’s Psalms have instructions given for the choir director and often include what type of instrument is to be used to accompany them, which essentially makes them a song. Most of us were taught that the book of Psalms is a book of songs. I did a quick calculation of David’s psalms and found that 46 of them are marked “to be sung” and about only 6 are marked as a prayer. I found at least one, and there may be a couple more, that even though it is marked as a song, it includes the phrase, asking God to “Hear my prayer!”

I happened to pick up a book over at Ollie’s titled “100 Prayers Every Christian Should Know.” The very first entry was a hymn by Fanny Crosby who wrote well over 8000 hymns. The editorial note concerning “Why This Prayer?” stated that “So often a hymn is a prayer to be sung. The words [of this hymn] have the structure and rhyme of a poem and the **soul of a prayer.**” That’s a beautiful way to describe most of David’s “songs” as well as some of the Psalms written by other authors. I actually believe that most of the hymns in our hymnbooks are prayers that just happen to be set to music. The worship leader at Memorial Holiness Camp made reference to this when she stated that we ought to be paying attention to what we’re singing during a worship service. “Do we really mean what we’re singing?” Because we’re essentially praying while we’re singing.

But my question about David’s actual prayer “life” is essentially unanswered. Other than the fact that he was honest, brutally honest, in expressing his feelings to and toward God through his Psalms.

I want to revisit my opening statement. I had written this paragraph, or rather it *came* to me, about a month and half ago – early in June.

“If David was a “man after God’s own heart,” why do we think we need to limit our prayers? God wants to hear what’s on *our hearts*, not just the things that we think He wants to hear. The prayers of David come from the nitty-gritty, down in the dirt, every day and every way of life, and rise from the deepest valleys to the highest mountains.”

And I just sat with it for about a month. Or it sat with me . . . not sure exactly what God wanted me to do with it. I just know that in my early years in the church, I felt disillusioned about what prayer was supposed to mean.

Now I don’t know about you, but when I was growing up, while not being taught this, it seemed that we were told you don’t pray your feelings to God. You certainly didn’t yell at Him or get angry with him – at least “not to His face” and most definitely not in church. You didn’t cry and pout or yell and doubt. You see why I’m wrestling with the ways in which David prayed? Expressed his heart?

Or ask him to take out your enemies. Yeah, I know we don't live in Old Testament biblical times, but that doesn't mean we don't feel that way sometimes. So what *can* we learn from David and his prayers? Is talking – praying to God – openly and honestly, a sin?

Let's start with Psalm 23, which Karen graciously read to us earlier. This Psalm is inarguably the most well-known and well-loved psalm written by David. It's the one that people have heard recited at almost every funeral. But biblical scholars disagree as to when this psalm was written. Some say that he wrote it while out in the fields when he was shepherding his father's flocks. Others think that he wrote it towards the end of his life while having a bit of kingly nostalgia. While I think it's okay to believe that he wrote it when he was a young boy on the verge of manhood, the poetic perspective and word pictures that this psalm paints probably indicate that he wrote this after he was more mature, perhaps reflecting on the simplicity of his life as a shepherd before life got more complicated for him. One source that I consulted was a probable timeline for the writing of each of the psalms; it was suggested that Psalm 23 was "inserted" towards the end of King David's life. Unlike our modern computers, the biblical writers did not have automatic time and date stamps on their papyrus or parchment paper.

Another commentator stated "It is reported that David wrote Psalm 23 during a low point – his son [Absalom] was in the midst of a plot to murder David . . . the valley of the shadow of death. Nonetheless, despite this heavy burden, David's clarity of mind and heart about his relationship was clear. God was his shepherd, his guide, his leader, his provider, his protector. And, in this God, David found the peace of green pastures and still waters. He found peace in the midst of his darkest days. He found provision even in the face of his enemies. And, he declared that he would be with his God forever." That's where we find the "big idea" or "secret" of Psalm 23 - God always protects and provides. And that is the major theme of most of the Psalms, including those written by David.

Now let's look at Psalm 61. It starts by giving the choir director instruction that David intended this psalm to be accompanied by stringed instruments. This song however, starts with a prayer (I mentioned this one previously) – "God, listen to my cry! Hear my prayer!"

I don't know if any of you remember, but shortly after I started to attend here, Pastor Keith asked us to record testimonies about which scripture has made an impact on our lives and these were played during a Sunday service. I'm dredging this up in my not-so-episodic memory as to what to was actually the assignment, but I recently found the video on a flash drive while I was looking for something else. In 2009, I suffered a nervous breakdown and had two hospital stays within a couple of months. I don't remember exactly if it was during the first or second time – I think it was the 2nd. Once my mind was settled down enough, I found a Bible on a bookshelf and started reading the Psalms as I walked or maybe even paced the hallway. Psalm 61 was my go-to Psalm. When I didn't know what to pray, David's prayer in Psalm 61 became my prayer.

Psalm 61 is a prayer of lament. A lament in basic terms is a crying out to God or, better known to us as, a complaint. There are typically 5 parts to a lament: an address to God, a complaint, a petition for help, a vow of trust, and a vow of praise.

Let me read it to you. This is the New Living Translation.

1 O God, listen to my cry! Hear my prayer!

2 From the ends of the earth, I cry to you for help when my heart is overwhelmed.
Lead me to the towering rock of safety,

3 for you are my safe refuge, a fortress where my enemies cannot reach me.

4 Let me live forever in your sanctuary, safe beneath the shelter of your wings!

5 For you have heard my vows, O God. You have given me an inheritance reserved for those who fear your name.

6 Add many years to the life of the king! May his years span the generations!

7 May he reign under God's protection forever. May your unfailing love and faithfulness watch over him.

8 Then I will sing praises to your name forever as I fulfill my vows each day.

While praying this, I did take the liberty to personalize it; change the references to being a king.

Psalm 143 is another of David's psalms of lament. The notes in my study bible describe it as a prayer in the midst of hopelessness and depression. It states very succinctly that at these times we can come to the Lord and, like David, express our true feelings. [end note] However, smack dab in the middle of David's pleas for rescue from his enemies, is a very clear request for guidance and direction. Verse 10 is the verse that I've taken as my verse for 2024.

"Teach me to do your will, for you are my God. May your gracious Spirit lead me forward on a firm footing." Ps. 143:10 NLT

When I did a search for the psalms of David which express anger and vengeance or ask for revenge or even a request for justice, I was surprised to find that there were more than I was expecting. The most "angry" psalm of David was listed as #35, but Psalm 10 describes David as being infuriated at what the wicked people of his time are doing to the poor and innocent. Verse 15 is an interesting request to be making of God. "Break the arms of these wicked, evil people! Go after them until the last one is destroyed."

I read an intriguing blog post by the wife of one of my seminary students. She writes biblical historical novels, which are very well researched. Her name is Mesu Andrews, if you're interested. The blog was titled, "If David Wanted Revenge, Why Can't I?" Seems like a good question, doesn't it? She makes several interesting points, but two that she gleaned from another commentator caught my eye. People living in OT times: had a very limited understanding of the afterlife. And 2: They had no assurance of a final and Divine righting of all wrongs. I won't go any further into this discussion.

But I truly think that David demonstrates well the best way to handle righteous anger; he takes it to the Lord.

Verses 12 through 14 of Psalm 10:

12 Arise, O LORD! Punish the wicked, O God! Do not ignore the helpless!

13 Why do the wicked get away with despising God? They think, "God will never call us to account."

14 But you see the trouble and grief they cause. You take note of it and punish them.
The helpless put their trust in you. You defend the orphans.

Sometimes we associate the psalms with prayers for forgiveness; namely, David asking God for divine forgiveness. Last week Dr. Vore gave us an interesting perspective of Psalm 51, David's prayer of confession and repentance after the sin with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband. Verse 10 is perhaps the verse that we all remember and maybe have memorized. "Create in me a clean heart, God and renew a loyal (or steadfast) heart (or spirit) in me." There are several other psalms of forgiveness: Psalm 32 for instance, which is often linked to Psalm 51. "Oh, what joy for those whose disobedience is forgiven, whose sin is put out of sight! Yes, what joy for those whose record the Lord has cleared of guilt, whose lives are lived in complete honesty!" (verses 1-2) One thing struck me as I read through this psalm was that there are a lot of exclamation points! To me, an exclamation point indicates that there is plenty of emotion and feeling associated with the expression of the words.

A number of David's psalms are written about deliverance; it's as if he's at the end of his rope and knows that the only place or person he can turn to is God. In Psalm 7, David "sings" – "I come to you for protection, O Lord my God. Save me from my persecutors—rescue me! (exclamation point) Then he goes on to a confession of sorts – "O Lord my God, if I have done wrong or am guilty of injustice, if I have betrayed a friend or plundered my enemy without cause, [while not asking for forgiveness, he goes on] verse 5 "then let my enemies capture me. Let them trample me into the ground and drag my honor in the dust. Arise, O Lord, in anger! Stand up against the fury of my enemies! Wake up, my God and bring justice!" Throughout this psalm, prayer if you will, David intersperses descriptions of evil people with things like verse 10, "God is my shield, saving those whose hearts are true and right." He ends this entry with verse 17 "I will thank the Lord because He is just; I will sing praise to the name of the Lord Most High."

And then this is what we remember David most for – his praise and adoration and thirst for God. Unfortunately, the song we sang which was based on Psalm 42, "As the deer panteth for the water," wasn't written by David but by the Sons of Korah. Korah was a Levite, a priest, who led a revolt against Moses. He was killed, but his descendants remained faithful to God. David himself appointed men from the clan of Korah to serve as choir leaders and temple musicians for hundreds of years. So they were certainly influenced by David.

Psalm 19 was written by David to celebrate God's creation and His greatness. "The heavens declare the glory of God. The skies display his craftsmanship. Day after day they continue to speak; night after night they make him known. They speak without a sound or word; their voice is never heard. Yet their message has gone throughout the earth, and their words to all the world." (verses 1-4a)

Psalm 139 is about God – who sees all, knows all, is all powerful, and present everywhere. Verse 1 "O Lord, you have examined my heart and know everything about me." Verse 17 "How precious are your thoughts about me, O God. They cannot be numbered!" exclamation point "I can't even count them; they outnumber the grains of sand!" exclamation point "And when I wake up, you are still with me! Another exclamation point! Should be a double one – can you hear the awe and wonder in his words, his voice? Verse 23-24 "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. Point out anything in me that offends you, and lead me along the path of everlasting life." This is a beautiful prayer of submission to God, giving him your heart and anxious thoughts. Finding and confessing sin and asking for guidance throughout life.

David's song of praise- his prayer – as recorded in II Samuel 22, which parallels Psalm 18, was written after the conclusion of David's wars – “on the day the Lord rescued him from all his enemies and from Saul.” In it David goes through his feelings, starting with praise of his deliverer - “The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my savior; my God is my rock in whom I find protection.” v1 His anguish when he felt that death would overtake him – “The waves of death overwhelmed me; . . . The grave wrapped its ropes around me.” v5-6. He describes the awesome and sometimes terrifying power of God; “Then the earth quaked and trembled. The foundations of the heavens shook; they quaked because of His anger.” v8 His fear when his enemies were pursuing him and the rescue that God provided. “They attacked me at a moment when I was in distress, but the Lord supported me . . . He rescued me because he delights in me.” v19-20 David relied on God's promises; “God's way is perfect. All the Lord's promises prove true.” v31 And then he closes with more praise, “For this, O Lord, I will praise you among the nations; I will sing praises to your name.” v50

David was able to pray his heart because he held to these two maxims. He prayed openly and honestly, but did **not forget who God was**. And **who he was in God's eyes**. So, yes, it could then be considered sacrilegious (not giving God his proper place) or maybe even sinful if we come to God, not recognizing God as God. “A broken and contrite spirit You will not despise.” (Psalm 51:17)

What's your take-away from this message? David's prayers and songs certainly run the entire gamut of human emotions and feelings. How do you think *you* ought to be praying? How *does* God want us to pray?

First of all, I would encourage you to start to pray ***with your heart, rather than just your head*** when praying to God. As I keep saying, and I hope you're not tired of hearing it, if you don't know *how* to pray, that's where you start, “God, I don't know how or what to say, but I know you want to hear from me.” It is *not* a sign of weakness to breakdown in tears when praying or asking for prayer. We *can* be angry about what we perceive as injustice in our lives and in the world. We *can* be anxious or fearful or doubtful or . . . you fill in the blank with whatever it is that you're feeling.

Maybe you need a prayer partner, a friend who can pray with you, and for you. Ask God to provide that person for you – or maybe you need to be that person for someone else.

I'm going to go down a rabbit trail with a story – or rather a trail left by a goat. My sister-in-law, whose name is also Laurie, spelled differently, and her daughter raise Boer goats. Laurie posted this story on Facebook earlier this week and I told her I just might use it as a sermon illustration.

At dusk on Monday evening, she went outside with the dogs and heard a goat crying in the back pasture. A quick check revealed the herd was in the barn. Still hearing a goat far back in the pasture, she started hiking and saw 2 yearlings in the back. The one goat, Iris, would start towards her then look back at her friend, cry and return to her friend. She did this several times. The other goat, Sequoia, had her head through the fence THREE times!! It was twisted tight enough she could not make a sound. It took Laurie 20 minutes to free her head and horns. If Iris had left her friend, she believed Sequoia would have panicked being alone in the dark and may have strangled herself trying to get free. Iris was nervous being out while it was getting dark, but she stayed with her friend and was calling for help.

There may be times when any one of us might feel like we don't have a voice; we're being strangled by doubt, fear, or by another type of raw emotion. When we feel this way, we can ask someone we trust to

do this on our behalf. When we see someone struggling to pray for themselves, we can bring this person to God, calling his attention to them like Iris, the goat. That's one of the reasons why we instituted the Prayer Corner several years ago.

Second, one of the most powerful ways you can pray, is to pray Scripture – over yourself and for others. Reading and praying through the book of Psalms is an excellent way to start. And God wants to hear your heart – “all the nitty-gritty, down in the dirt, every day and every way of life.”

What causes you to feel as if you're walking through the valley of the shadow of death. What causes you to rise to the highest mountains in praise of our Almighty God. If being raw and open and honest made David a “man after God's own heart,” *I* want to be a person after God's own heart. May David's heart become our heart – your heart.

If you haven't paid attention to the theme of this series about David, let me point it out here - AN ORDINARY MAN, AN EXTRAORDINARY GOD. We are like David – ordinary people with all the emotions that David expressed, in the hands of an extraordinary God.

Would you pray with me? Take whatever prayer posture you need to take – sitting or standing - head bowed, eyes closed; or on your knees, hands raised, eyes opened. Or any combination – there's no right or wrong way. There's no judgment here. Take a moment in silence – just sit in the silence and be open to whatever God may be telling you. Remember how He loves you with **ALL** your emotions.

[PAUSE]

Continue the prayer...

Benediction – Psalm 23 – personalized for congregation

- 1 The LORD is our shepherd; we have all that we need.
- 2 He lets us rest in green meadows; he leads us beside peaceful streams.
- 3 He renews our strength. He guides us along right paths, bringing honor to his name.
- 4 Even when we walk through the darkest valley, we will not be afraid, for you are close beside us. Your rod and your staff protect and comfort us.
- 5 You prepare a feast for us in the presence of our enemies. You honor me by anointing my head with oil. Our cups overflow with blessings.
- 6 Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue us all the days of our lives, and we will live in the house of the LORD forever.