



“The Practicality of the Psalms”¹

I remember a story where a man was so desperate to hear from God in his specific situation that he did something interesting for his Bible study. He prayed and asked God to direct him to the specific passage. He then opened up a page and pointed his finger to some verses. The verses said, “Judas hanged himself.” He thought that was intriguing. He closed his Bible, then opened it. He pointed to a verse and that next verse was “Go and do likewise.” Now, the man did not follow the advice, and I hope he realized that this kind of Bible reading method is not supported in Scripture.

But I think some of us could understand it. Have you ever felt so desperate for God to meet you in your situation that you prayed and prayed that you’d read some verses *that day* that would answer your questions? Do you sometimes wish that God’s answers would come by simply opening up a page, pointing your finger and then have the light bulb go off on the top of your head? Maybe you’re here today in that kind of desperation. You prayed that the Lord would answer this specific thing. You’re hoping for an answer. You’re hoping the sermon is directed to you to give you comfort.

I know I’ve been there. I’ve prayed those prayers and I’ve even practiced that Bible reading method in the past. But pointing to a random verse on a random page isn’t the answer. Instead, whether you’re experiencing joy or grief; I have found that the psalms are a great starting point. During the service today, you’ve heard from people in different circumstances and how God has brought *psalms* to their attention. It’s interesting to me how that is the case. It’s not that people don’t have other favorite passages, but many times when someone goes through greater hardship, God brings them to the psalms.

Why? Because the psalms relate to us whether we’re in the peaks of valleys. The psalms bring out our mind and our emotions. The psalms take us by the mental and emotional hand and guide us to the throne of grace. This is part of the beauty of psalms.

The psalms don’t merely teach a dry theology. They don’t even simply touch on a few applications. Instead, the psalms provide us with a vast and deep ocean of theology and application to the happy and the hurting; the drained and the delighting; the sleepless and the sleep-filled; the nefarious and the noble as well as those who feel numb. Psalm 86:11 seems to be the heartbeat of all the psalms: **Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth; unite my heart to fear your name.** ² God has designed for us to learn *how* to live, think, and feel. But, he didn’t simply write words on a page and say “good luck.” Nor does God simply want us to open up to a page and point. Instead, to reach our heart, soul, mind and strength, he’s given us the variety and complexity of human experience wrapped up in the greatest songbook the world!

¹ This manuscript is still in the rough draft phase. I recommend you utilize these notes in conjunction to the sermon to gain greater insight and clarity.

² [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ps 86:11.

And, seriously contemplate that he's given us this in a songbook! In recognizing the psalms as a songbook, we see how gracious our God is. He wants us to *know* how to live and respond. What better way than to learn through song? Think about it. Have you ever had a song stuck in your head? I'm reminded of a few years ago when the movie *Frozen* came out. Everyone had "Let it go" stuck in their heads. I remember waking up in the middle of the night having that song stuck in my head. It was such a phenomenon, I recall even reading an article on the components to songs that get stuck in our minds as humans – and how "Let it Go" has those components.

In some senses that can be annoying. But in other senses, it can be wonderful. If you have the psalms in your mind, covering various stages of life, it's a glorious thing when you're going through a certain stage, and a specific passage comes to you. In my own life, there are three psalms in particular that God has used in the midst of difficulty, and I'll mention those stories when we get to those passages in this sermon. Suffice it to say, God doesn't simply want us playing a game of open-and-point with the Bible. He's given us so much in all the Scriptures, and so much in the psalms themselves. He wants us to know the truth, be strengthened by the truth and be prepared for whatever life throws our way. So, if I boil down the big idea of the sermon today, I'd say this: **Run to the psalms to fight for joy in life's pleasures and pains – then share those psalms with others!** With this understanding, let's pray together.

[Pray for Navarette's; Pray for Rothbury Church, James Enns]

1. The psalms strengthen us to fight for joy in life's joys.

Like previous weeks, I am not going to be spending time in one passage of Scripture, but instead, I'm going to go through various passages to see the variety of circumstances that the psalms bring out. In the first week's message, I brought out the point that the psalms helps us to rejoice in God and also to fight for joy in God. If you weren't here that week, I'd encourage you to listen to that message for more background. But this morning, I'm going to assume that you believe that God desires that we delight in the Lord in all of life. It's actually a command in the psalms themselves!

But you may be confused when I say "fight for joy in life's joys." I've heard people say before that when you read the Bible and evaluate the people in the Scriptures, often the people fail the trial of prosperity more quickly than the trials of pain. Think about it. What did David do when he was experiencing more blessings from God? He was supposed to go to war. He didn't and then he took one of his close friend's wives as his own. The apostle Peter is blessed by Jesus because Peter declared Jesus to be the Christ! And then what happens moments later? Jesus rebukes him and says, "Get behind me, Satan!" We can think about this in our own lives. When prosperity and pleasure persist in our lives, we can coast on the pleasures. We can assume we're good with God. We're tempted to let our zeal fade away for the Lord.

And then we can cling to those good gifts. Please hear me, I'm not rejecting these gifts and good gifts. However, my concern is that even we as followers of Christ can cling to the gifts as though they are gods. God doesn't give us gifts so that we can live for the gifts. Romans 2:4 says that God showers down his kindnesses down on us so that we would love God most. So that we would turn from our sinfulness, our pride, and turn to him for forgiveness and grace. Every kindness of God is given to us to remind us of the good God!

This is what I mean that the psalms teach us to fight for joy in times of joy! So, let's look at Psalms 23, 34, and 95. We'll start with Psalm 23, and see that we fight for joy by resting in God as our shepherd.

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. ³

There was once a time when a pastor was encouraging the children to memorize Psalm 23, and when he followed up with the children, one little girl quoted the first verse and said, "The Lord is my shepherd, that's all I want." And actually, that's pretty close to what David is saying. "I shall not want" means that if he has God, he lacks nothing. Everything minus God is nothing. God plus nothing else is everything.

So, David moves on in this psalm to declare that God is the satisfaction for his soul in all of life. Why? Because God is his shepherd. The aspect of God being a shepherd should train us not merely in the difficult, but in the encouraging moments of life! In the green pastures, he's cared for. He even indicates that God takes him to still waters. If you know anything about sheep, you know that they won't drink from a flowing stream because they don't like getting water up on their noses. God intimately cares for his sheep to feed them. God leads us for his name's sake. Which means that God works in us in ways that matter for eternity! David can declare that even though we go through trials, God teaches and comforts. And so, David states that God has anointed him. His cup overflows. This simply means that God's goodness and graces are overflowing to him and then to top it all off, he's going to live with God forever. How can he possibly communicate how wondrous God is?! Blessing after blessing after blessing come to those who trust in the Lord.

David is writing this, it seems, in a time of calm. He's contemplating the different life circumstances, but he's focused on the Lord. The Lord is his sustenance. As I read this psalm, I imagine that if David were to have written this today, he'd be writing it on a porch, in a calm area, overlooking fields while he has a cup of coffee sitting next to him. He's resting in all that the Lord is and what he does.

Oh how we need these psalms of calm and trust in our corporate worship. And, oh how we need to remember that any praiseworthy circumstance that happened to us in the past week is because of the Lord. If we forget this, then we will start to take the praise on ourselves or we will despair when things spiral downward. But if God is your satisfaction and he shepherds you everywhere, your rest can remain the same!

So, remember that your raise, your child getting great grades in school, your consistency in Bible reading – none of these things are things to be prideful about. God is your shepherd. Fight for joy by remembering the all-satisfying God is your shepherd.

Now look at Psalm 34:4-8. Here we see that we fight for joy by thanking God for his answers to us:

³ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ps 23:1–6.

*I sought the Lord, and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears. Those who look to him are radiant, and their faces shall never be ashamed. This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him and saved him out of all his troubles. The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them. Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!*⁴

David came out of a difficult and scary circumstance, and David attributes it all to God. He prayed to the Lord, and he says that the Lord delivered him from all of his fears. Have you ever had circumstances like that? Circumstances where you were full of fear regarding what was going to happen? Maybe you're a student, and it was the test the next day. You were anxious about it. Maybe it was a meeting with someone and there needed to be confrontation. Maybe there were scarier circumstances with the life of a family member. Then, miraculously, God changed the circumstances. The fears disappeared quickly!

What did you do? If you were a believer at the time, you probably were praying beforehand, and then once that happened, you said, "Praise the Lord!" You may have even shared it with other people. This is what David does here, but then he writes in in corporate song. Why? Because we always need to be reminded that the Lord is the One who delivers us. This is something I think we can forget in our culture. Many of us can be tempted by a mindset of entitlement. We assume we deserve for something to happen to us. I mean, "Of course God will give me this or that thing." But gratitude speaks to the fact that we don't deserve the kindnesses – and that even exemplifies the greatness of God's goodness! Be grateful. Be thankful. And, we should sing these songs of gratitude for who God is and what he has done.

I remember, years ago, talking with a man who did not like a certain song we sang in corporate worship because it spoke of what Jesus did and then it said, "That's why we praise him." And he said, "No. We don't praise God for what he does for us. We praise God for who he is." That man clearly hadn't thought well about the psalms. David says "taste and see that the Lord is good." This means that he wants us to believe that God is good in our inner being. We taste God's goodness. But he calls us to open our eyes and see God's goodness. This psalm is saying that God isn't merely good, up there on his throne. But God also acts in ways that reveal his goodness to us! God's character is revealed through deliverances; so, it's only right to sing praise and gratitude. When we thank God, our eyes are opened and so are our hearts to the magnitude of God's kindnesses.

So, we fight for joy in the midst of joy by remember God as our shepherd and also by thanking God. Finally, we fight for joy in the midst of joy when praising God for who he is:

95 *Oh come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise! For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods. In his hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also. The sea is*

⁴ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ps 34:4–8.

*his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land. Oh come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!*⁵

Sing to the Lord because he is our salvation. He's the King. He's the Creator. He made us! This song calls us to sing joyfully and *worship* God. Now, the word worship is extremely important. To reiterate what I've said before, "worship" is "worth-ship." To worship is to say you are the greatest worth! And then to praise him is to emphasize what he has done! So, we worship God for who he is. We praise him for what he has done.

In the joyous times, we must always remind ourselves who is of greatest worth. Is that new car of greatest worth? Is the new job? Is the new child? Is the pain-free life? All of these things can be blessings from God, and we should praise him for his kindnesses. But in all of these, we must remember that we don't worship these things. We must not ascribe ultimate worth to things that are merely created and gifts. Instead, let your joy culminate to the highest of heights. Worship God! You will never exhaust the eternal glories of God!

As we end on this psalm, you see that the word "worship" itself calls us to see God is our supreme treasure. In Psalm 23, we shall not want. Why? Because he supremely satisfies. In Psalm 34, we taste that the Lord is good. He's the pleasure that fills our souls.

So, in times in plenty, fight for joy by worshipping God, knowing he's the supreme treasure. But what about times of hardship? There are some people who think that in corporate worship (and even in our daily lives), we are simply supposed to put the mask of a smiling face on. We always have the positive answers, but we must admit the brokenness and struggles because often life has many valleys. And God's power reaches to those valleys.

2. Psalms strengthen us to fight for joy in life's trials.

When we use the word "trial" it can mean many things. In the New Testament, trial can mean difficulties around us, but it can also refer to internal temptations. And this is what we see in the psalms. But we can only fight for joy in trials if we're honest about the trials. I love the transparency of the psalms. It's not a sweeping under the rug. It's a raw honesty, laying burdens at the Lord's feet! Think of Psalm 3 first:

*O Lord, how many are my foes! Many are rising against me; many are saying of my soul, "There is no salvation for him in God." Selah But you, O Lord, are a shield about me, my glory, and the lifter of my head. I cried aloud to the Lord, and he answered me from his holy hill. Selah I lay down and slept; I woke again, for the Lord sustained me. I will not be afraid of many thousands of people who have set themselves against me all around.*⁶

You can read this and simply think that David is undergoing difficulty with enemies. And that is true. David is King. David's kingship is being threatened. David is in threat of his life, so much so that he's amazed that he is waking up alive! We'd all admit that this would be a painful circumstance, right? But there's

⁵ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ps 95:1–6.

⁶ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ps 3:1–6.

something more to this. Something we may miss when reading the Psalms. The introduction of this psalm is “when he fled from Absalom his son.”

I’ve heard some people talk about David’s lack of leadership with Absalom and coddled him. But, I want you to think as a parent for a moment. Most parents grieve deeply when their child has turned from the Lord. I’ve spoken to one parent who said to me that their child could have crucified them and they still would have loved them. There’s something about a strong parental love. And when a child goes down paths of destruction, the sorrow increases.

How do we respond when our children have turned their back? This psalm gives some answers. One, prayer, crying to the Lord, trust. But this psalm also reveals that God’s side is still right and wrong is still wrong. Sometimes parents will change their positions in deference to their children, but no matter what our children do, God remains the same. So, David declares in this psalm, the need to praise God, to trust in the midst of tension and tears. But how grateful I am for a psalm that reaches to a parents painful heart.

Now think of Psalm 51:3-8 –

*For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment. Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me. Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being, and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart. Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have broken rejoice.*⁷

This is the song of confession because of the turmoil that sin brought into David’s life. Amazingly, David’s confession becomes a part of the corporate gathering. Ventura, we still must sing songs of confession. This is why we have songs of confession in every service. While we are declared righteous in Christ, in our relational aspect with God as Father, we still sin against him and forfeit the blessing of the relationship. And for that we should ask for relational forgiveness there.

As believers, we should see sin as sinful. James tells us to weep and mourn over sin. Have you ever you’re your heart cold when it comes to confession? You feel as though you’re relatively fine. You have no real sin issues in your life? If you feel that way, there’s a problem because the Bible says that we all continually fall short of God’s glory. And, later in psalms, David talks about hidden sins that need to be revealed so that he might draw even closer to the Lord.

But I can understand not knowing the right words and not having the emotions in line when it comes to confession. That’s why we need psalms of confession, too. Singing songs of confession should help us to learn how we ought to confess our own sins. How we should communicate our sorrow before the Lord, and also trust in his forgiveness.

⁷ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ps 51:3–8.

But what if your heart is almost stone-cold towards God? At one point in my life, I felt the pull towards God, but I also was angry at him. I was so confused at his ways and didn't want to trust him. Then I came across Psalm 73. Let me read you portions:

But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped. For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For they have no pangs until death; their bodies are fat and sleek.⁸ All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. For all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning. If I had said, "I will speak thus," I would have betrayed the generation of your children.⁹

In my own pride and internal turmoil, I saw myself in Asaph's psalm. I was angry. I was envious of sinners. I didn't understand God's ways and justice (or what seemed like injustice to me). I felt I couldn't speak to anyone because if I did, I'd betray the Lord. Asaph goes on and then states that he then entered into corporate worship and God revealed his way. Asaph's eyes were opened. Someday, everyone will be judged. As Asaph came to this realization and embraced it, he then goes on to say, "Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever."¹⁰

Asaph states that in the midst of his own serious questions, God didn't let him go. And even when he feels completely overwhelmed and he goes through spiritual heart failure, he knows God won't let him go! This was an immense encouragement to me because while I was struggling with doubts and questions, I wanted to be at peace with God. I wanted to rest in him and his ways. I was encouraged to know that someone else asked questions and was embittered and that God didn't let him go.

And, you know what? We need to sing songs like this – songs of God's rescue and longsuffering with us in days of questioning and pain. Songs that show God is justice even when it looks like injustice flows. We need to sing songs like these even when we feel like not singing!

And this leads me to psalm 103.

*Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name! Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.*¹¹

This psalm may not sound like one for dark times, but why does the psalmist call his soul to bless the Lord? There are other psalms where the psalmist tells himself how he needs to respond, and I believe there are times and seasons when our soul just isn't "in it." You come to the church and you don't want to sing. You don't feel the reality of the words of the songs. What do you do? Some people say, "Well, I don't want to be a fake." Hold on! You're only a fake if you're singing what isn't true about God and you. But if you are

⁸ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ps 73:2–4.

⁹ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ps 73:13–15.

¹⁰ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ps 73:25–26.

¹¹ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ps 103:1–5.

God's child, you need to preach to your soul to bless the Lord, even when you don't feel it. The psalmist says "Why are you downcast, O my soul? Put your hope in God!" Similarly here. Bless the Lord. Recount his deeds. Rehearse his goodness.

This psalm was huge in my own life spiritually, in a season where I had increased temptations. I memorized the whole psalm, and whenever my mind would stray to depressive thoughts or temptations, I'd rehearse the whole psalm. It got to a point to where I almost wonder if the devil didn't want to tempt me anymore because every time he did, I'd just quote the Bible!

But Ventura, I give these psalms to show you that whether you're in trials with children, your soul, and your sin. If you're overwhelmed by circumstances, there are psalms that speak directly to you. I've only showed you a few here, but in this, we remember Jesus.

Jesus was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, and do you realize the psalms he quoted? When tempted by Satan, he quoted psalms. The night before Jesus' death on the cross, he went out with his disciples to sing – and given that it was post Passover meal, it was probably a variation of Psalms 114-118 put together. On the cross, Jesus quotes Psalm 22 and Psalm 31. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" and "into your hands I commit my spirit." When the darkness veiled God's grace, Jesus went to the psalms. And, in quoting the psalms, Jesus also shows us he's the fulfillment of the psalms. He was the One forsaken by God and yet his spirit was committed to the Lord, and the Lord did not let him decay in the grave. On the cross, Jesus not only take the consequences of one sinners sins, but for all who trust him. And, Jesus also is the King to whom all people should humbly bow to be reconciled to God. This King will bring about a glorious Kingdom better than David. And, because of Jesus, we have promises of eternal life where there will be no more need to sing songs of sorrow because there will be no more sorrow.

Until that time, let's look to Jesus as the fulfillment and also an example with the psalms. As we do, just like in seasons of joy, we see the psalms of pain point to God as our treasure. In David's issues with Absalom, David said God is his shield – his protection. In Psalm 51, David prays that he would have joy and gladness in the Lord. In Psalm 103, David recounts all God's benefits. Again, fighting for joy is a fight for joy in God – to recognize that God is greater.

So, if you're in pain or pleasure, remind your hearts. And when you don't know how God could be the treasure in the midst of whatever circumstance you're in, you can even confess that to the Lord!

My hope in sharing all of this with you is to not merely show how the psalms touch various circumstances, but to then show how this should affect our corporate worship. Ventura, all these types of songs should be sung in church. And we should draw our emotions in. When we're singing confession, we should be learning how to confess. When we are worshipping God, we should be praying God draws our hearts to the realities we know to be true of God. We should also sing songs that sometimes question and ask God for understanding. But in all our singing together, we should point each other to the reality of God as our treasure together.

The psalms were not meant to be read or sung alone. They were meant to be rehearsed in community. When you read Psalm 103, the end of the chapter calls all creation to praise the Lord together. The psalms calls us together to sing a new song. In Psalm 73, Asaph says it wasn't until he was with other believers that his eyes were opened. Sometimes our desire is to shrink away from the community. When things are going well, we think, "Why do I need them." When things are bad, we say, "They just don't understand" or, "I don't want them to think this about me." But God teaches us when we're together. And, if we're seeking to

grow in the Lord, God teaches our minds and sinks them deeply into our hearts when we're engaged with others who believe it!

We're hardwired this way – not simply with spiritual things but in the physical. If I enjoy food or liked a movie or read a great book, I share my joy with people. If I go through hardship and made it through, that might come up in a conversation if you went through similar circumstances. We're encouraged and strengthened as we, in community, rehearse things. How much more with regards to God and his Truth.

This is why Paul says that we are to sing to *one another*. Maybe you've noticed me sometimes looking back, and the reason I do is to see you sing. Have you ever looked at others when singing? When you're encouraged or if you know someone else is struggling, have you ever sought to look at them while singing?

The psalms teach us to declare through song with the congregation. But as we're together, encourage each other to truly sing out to the Lord. Pray for one another to grow in this singing! So, **if you're tempted to simply read your Bible by pointing to a random verse, try something different. Jump into the psalms, pray and then gather with believers and sing. Preach to your soul and learn together. Pray that God would sink the truths of the Word into your heart.**