

Series: "Psalms in the Summer"  
Part 1 "The Psalms and Us"

Today we begin a series of messages on the psalms in the Old Testament. *How well do you know the psalms?* I hope these sermons motivate us to make the psalms a bigger part of our life!

For hundreds of years Hebrews and Christians have used the psalms in their worship and devotional life – both private and public. The Book of Psalms has been called the “prayer book and worship manual” of our Hebrew-Christian tradition. Jesus Himself was steeped in the psalms – He used the very psalms that we do in His worship! The Psalms were written over a span of many years, beginning from the earliest days of the Old Testament. Some of them emerged out of the great moments in Israel’s history. In all, there are 150 psalms that represent an anthology or collection of hymns...prayers... poems...and liturgies.

There are many different types of psalms that portray a wide spectrum of human emotions and experiences: praise and thanksgiving to God...prayers of confession and penitence and pleas for help...heartfelt expressions of faith and trust in God. Some psalms were set to music and used in the worship services of the temple. Some were recited at special occasions like religious festivals and the crowning of kings.

For perhaps 3,000 years, the psalms have had universal appeal because they voice so well *all the things we feel* as we face life’s joys and struggles, and as we yearn for faith in the living God! In so many ways we can *see ourselves* in the psalms!

Today, we will look at two psalms that convey several major themes embodied in the psalms: *the greatness and magnificence of God, and our own humanity, as we yearn for God and a **faith in God.*** Let’s turn to Psalm 108. Here we will find an example of the many psalms that celebrate ***the greatness of God.*** Psalm 108, verses 1-5 in the Good News Bible says this: “I have complete confidence, O God! I will sing and praise you! Wake up, my soul! Wake up, my harp and lyre! I will wake up the sun. I will thank you, O Lord, among the nations. I will praise you among the peoples. Your constant love reaches above the heavens; your faithfulness touches the skies. Show your greatness in the sky, O God, and your glory over all the earth.” This psalm exudes an atmosphere of thankfulness, of praise! Many of the psalms express praise and adoration towards God. God is worshiped for His beauty, power, understanding, wisdom, judgments, truth, faithfulness. God is praised for His marvelous creation, for the magnificent things He does! *In the psalms, we are given a glimpse of the awesome greatness of God!*

***It is important to be reminded again and again of the glory and sovereignty of God!*** Whenever a person, or a people, lose a sense of standing under a sovereign God, and being accountable to a holy God – trouble lies ahead. We were created to put God at the center of life. God is to be revered. God alone is to be worshiped. Whenever we cease to give God the glory due His name, and glorify *ourselves* and our human achievements, life eventually comes apart.

*I can’t help but believe that our culture has lost a sense of the holiness of God!* We see this in films, in TV programming, in our common speech, in how often the name of God is expressed in profanity, all with little regard for the sacredness of God’s name and character. I was flipping

TV channels one day and came across this program that's an animated cartoon. One of the characters was supposed to be Jesus Christ. The character were joking around, and one of them asked, "Are you Jesus?" With that, there's all kind of laughing in the background. How's that for trivializing the holiness of Christ.

***Many of the psalms celebrate the power and the glory and the holiness of God!*** God doesn't change. God's moral and spiritual laws do not change. Wise people, and wise nations, recognize and honor this truth. The writer Lloyd Douglas had a friend who was a violin teacher. He wasn't a very successful one, but he had a good deal of wisdom that was refreshing. Lloyd Douglas called on him one day and said, "Well, what's the good news for today?" The old music teacher went over to a tuning fork suspended by a cord and struck it with a mallet. "There is the good news for today," he said. "That, my friend, is A. It was A all day yesterday. It will be A all day tomorrow, next week, and for a thousand years. The soprano upstairs warbles off-key, the tenor next door sings his high notes flat, and the piano across the hall is out of tune. Noise all around me, noise; but that, my friend, is A."

Turn to the psalms. The writers are saying, "Here's the good news of the day. This, my friend, is God. He was God all day yesterday. He will be God all day tomorrow, next week, and for a thousand years. The person upstairs is busy making money and thinking that will bring him happiness. The family down the street can't get along with each other. So many in our culture think that we can change the rules of life on the fly to suit our whims. Noise and confusion all around us. But this, my friend, is God!"

*Turn to the psalms and read them! They will help us focus on God, and the greatness of God! They will give us a healthy and a right perspective on life!* Psalm 108 is one of the many psalms that paint the greatness and glory of our God!

But we also see in the psalms ***our own humanness, as we yearn for God and for faith in the living God.*** The very next psalm, Psalm 109, is a good example of this! In *this* psalm, the mood quickly changes from the previous psalm. Look at Psalm 109:1-5: "Do not be silent, O God of my praise. For wicked and deceitful mouths are opened against me, speaking against me with lying tongues. They beset me with words of hate, and attack me without cause. In return for my love they accuse me, even while I make prayer for them. So they reward me evil for good, and hatred for my love." Here's the setting: the psalmist is being attacked by wicked people who falsely accuse him, even though he's loved them and even prayed for them! He has gotten a dirty deal! Has that ever happened to you? You haven't been treated fairly? You've done your best, then been criticized. People say things about you that aren't true. Someone turns on you.

So he *prays* for them – but look at what he prays! "They say, 'Appoint a wicked man against him; let an accuser stand on his right'" (verse 6). My enemies what *me* to stand on trial? Well, let *them* have someone prosecute them and give them a taste of their own medicine! "When he is tried, let him be found guilty; let his prayer be counted as sin" (verse 7). That's not nice to pray for someone! "May his days be few; may another seize his position" (verse 8). Don't let him live long, Lord! And while he's still living, whatever position of privilege or prominence he has,

let someone else grab it! “May his children be orphans, and his wife a widow” (verse 9). I want this person dead!

The psalm writer goes on with this vindictive prayer: “May his children wander about and beg; may they be driven out of the ruins they inhabit” (verse 10). Let his children be homeless! “May the creditor seize all that he has; may strangers plunder the fruits of his toil. May there be no one to do him a kindness, nor anyone to pity his orphaned children” (verses 11-12). Take away everything he and his children have, Lord! “May his posterity be cut off; may his name be blotted out in the second generation” (verse 13). Not only does the psalmist pray that his rival and persecutor have a short life, but that he be forgotten, and even his children and grandchildren go to an early grave! “May the iniquity of his father be remembered before the Lord before the Lord, and do not let the sin of his mother be blotted out. Let them be before the Lord continually, and may his (or “their”) memory be cut off from the earth” (verses 14-15). Not in his anger the psalm writer prays against his enemies’ parents! Whatever sins they committed, let those sins never be forgotten, but let their name be forgotten forever! To say that the psalmist wants God to curse and condemn the ones who did him wrong would be putting it mildly!

Psalm 109 is an example of what are called “*imprecatory psalms*”. To “imprecate” means to invoke evil on someone, to put a curse on somebody. *Don’t you ever get into that frame of mind?* When that stupid neighbor you’re having a problem with acts up again? When somebody’s really nasty to you or done you a mean trick? Our normal reaction is to want to get even! Let them get a taste of their own medicine! I was going through a spell in one church where a few people in the congregation were criticizing me a lot. They were really being a pain in the neck. It was around the time I was to meet with my District Superintendent in my annual interview, so I share with him what was happening. He suggested that I think of the people bad mouthing me and imagine them slipping and falling on a banana peel! Well, that advice from my boss sort of caught me by surprise! (*Actually, I was probably thinking a lot worse things*). I have a dart board in my study. And over the years I’ve put pictures of certain parishioners on that dart board and practiced my aim! Makes me feel better! (Just kidding).

*Psalm 109, where the writer prays that God will blast his detractors, is a prime example of the honesty and humanness expressed throughout the psalms!* The Psalm writers are *real people* with *real feelings and moods* – just like you and me. Sometimes a psalm writer is in an upbeat mood, feeling joyful and exuberant – praising God and filled with trust of God. But other times the writers of the psalms are despondent, or full of doubt, or fear. Or the writer feels miserable and guilty. In some of the psalms the writer is impatient, angry, bitter – even towards God! “Well, God, where are you? Why don’t you do something to help me”, as in Psalm 10:1. Or Psalm 44:23 “Wake up, Lord! Why are you asleep?” *Don’t you and I ever feel that way?*

And then there are those times when the psalmist is sure he’s innocent and righteous – such as Psalm 26, where the Psalmist says, “I do what is right...I wash my hands to show that I am innocent and march in worship around your altar” (Psalm 26:1,6). Can’t you just picture this person doing a “How great I am” strut around God’s altar! *Is this mood of self-righteousness and defensiveness foreign to us? Isn’t that us at times?* “I’m sick of always having to take the

blame...*she's* the problem, not me!" "I'm doing all I can possibly do...when is he going to pick up his share of the load?"

*I doubt that there is any feeling or attitude that you've ever had towards life or God or someone else that isn't reflected in at least one of the psalms!* I'm glad the psalms are part of our Bible, because the psalms acknowledge, "We're human. We have feelings and moods. That's OK." I often tell people going through difficult times, "It's OK to feel what you feel. Don't deny your feelings; don't apologize for them. God understands." I am not saying that if you feel resentful towards someone that it's all right to stay bitter the rest of your life. Or, if you are feeling discouraged or deeply despondent, that it's ok if you never move beyond your depression. But, *for now*, it's OK to feel what you feel! Remember, this applies to *Christians*, too!

I recall an incident that happened in a waiting room at Lancaster General Hospital while a family member was having surgery. A little girl on a cart was being wheeled into the operating room, and her mother was with her. The frightened child was screaming. The surgeon met them and said, "Stop crying now. We don't cry in here." Perhaps this surgeon was skilled with a scalpel, but apparently he was clueless in understanding people and their emotional needs! I can imagine the little girl was thinking, "Well, *I cry in here!*" I sometimes think Christians in the church are like that surgeon – "C'mon in. Be a believer. Be part of the family of God. But we don't cry in here! We don't show our emotions. We don't ever doubt. We don't ever get mad at God. We don't ever feel depressed because *we're Christians!*" But we do!

We may say, "How can I ever tell God what I'm really feeling? Wouldn't God be shocked, or think I'm bad?" Well...God knows anyway! We might as well be up front about what we feel. God is big enough to take it! *In the psalms, we find this kind of honesty with God.* The Psalm writers just kind of "let it hang out".

This is important to learn in our relationship with God! Realizing we can be honest with God can have practical value. For one thing, we are not always free to express certain feelings to people – like telling our boss we think he or she's a jerk, or telling a customer off when he's been rude and demanding. Unfortunately, sometimes we divert these hostile feelings toward the wrong people – and take it out on our spouse, or the kids, or the dog! But, we can bring these feelings to God in prayer and just let it all hang out!

Also expressing our honest feelings and emotions to God can give us an inward sense of relief. Rather than swallowing or sitting on these emotions, we can unload them onto God and experience emotional release. It can lower our blood pressure! Bringing *all of our feelings* (even the ugly, angry ones) out into the open before God can be cathartic: it opens a door for God to heal us. Get 'em out, and God can heal; keep 'em in, and they fester and grow. *I love the psalms, and the humanity of the psalm writers that comes through!*

In the next sermon we will look at another of the psalms. The sermon title is: "Where Are You Now, God?" What can we do when God seems far away, or even absent, from us?