

Read Through the Bible

Week 28: July 12-July 17

Readings: Psalms 1-21 and Acts 16-19

Reflections by Jackie Kimsey

Psalms

As I enter into the reading of the book of Psalms I found a great collection of songs, and prayers that express the heart and soul of humanity, David and other writers pour out their true feelings, reflecting a dynamic, powerful and life changing relationship with God. The Psalmists confess their sins, express their doubts and fears, ask God for help in times of trouble, and praise and worship him. Believers cry out to God from the depths of despair and you hear them singing to Him in the heights of celebration.

Whether despairing or rejoicing, you will always hear the sharing of honest feelings with their God. When honest feelings and emotions are shared real people can be known, loved and helped.

Because of the honesty expressed by the psalmists, men and women throughout history have come to the book of Psalms for comfort during times of struggle and find ways to express joy, exaltation and praise.

The Psalms set a wonderful example for the way we can open our hearts and minds to Almighty God.

Through the Psalms I continue to find comfort, joy, forgiveness and assurance. I pray that as you read this book you will find all this and a deeper, more honest relationship with God.

Acts

The 16th chapter of Acts finds Paul going from town to town encouraging Jewish Christians along the way. As I read and digested the account of Paul's journey in Acts 16-19 I was struck by several lessons for my own life.

1. Paul listened to the wise counsel of friends who thought highly of Timothy so he chose him to accompany him on his missionary journey.
2. Paul listened to the voice of the Holy Spirit (in a dream) and followed the plan God gave him to go Macedonia.
3. On his journey he allowed a tapestry of people to come alongside and be an encouragement to him as he ministered to others.

Paul responded to God's leading (again in a dream) to go to Macedonia. Barnabas had already taken Mark and sailed for Cyprus. Paul and Silas continued to Lystra, strengthening the churches on the way. Paul responds to the recommendations by brothers in Lystra and added Timothy to his missionary team.

On the journey to encourage the faithful, Timothy, Silas and Paul encountered many challenges to test their faith. In each case God provided strength and provision to meet the challenges they encountered.

Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth provided lodging. She and her household were blessed and baptized.

When Paul and Silas were in prison Silas encouraged himself and others by singing praises to God...

As the journey continued, they were continually met with great obstacles but also many encouragements from Christians along the way. Consider Aquila and Priscilla, the husband, wife team who responded to Paul's message and were able to guide Apollas to a true understanding of the gospel.

As I read these accounts of Paul's journey I was reminded that God works in much the same way through our lives in this modern world. If we quiet our spirit and listen, God guides our lives through dark and difficult times into joy, thanksgiving and praise.

As we follow Him, he brings alongside people to encourage and others to be encouraged by our own testimony. God is available and continues to guide through his own encouragement as he did to Paul in Acts 18:9. "Do not be afraid, keep on speaking, do not be silent, for I am with you".

Questions to Ponder

Can you identify 3 people who have come along side and encouraged you in your Christian Faith?

Have you reached out to someone in your life and encouraged them in their faith?

Be aware, as you continue, of the tapestry of people God brings into your life to expand your understanding of Him.

Introduction to Psalms

By Eugene Peterson, the *Message*

Most Christians for most of the Christian centuries have learned to pray by praying the Psalms. The Hebrews, with several centuries of a head start on us in matters of prayer and worship, provided us with this prayer book that gives us a language adequate for responding to the God who speaks to us.

The stimulus to paraphrase the Psalms into a contemporary idiom comes from my lifetime of work as a pastor. As a pastor I was charged with, among other things, teaching people to pray, helping them to give voice to the entire experience of being human, and to do it both honestly and thoroughly. I found that it was not as easy as I expected. Getting started is easy enough. The impulse to pray is deep within us, at the very center of our created being, and so practically anything will do to get us started—"Help" and "Thanks!" are our basic prayers. But honesty and thoroughness don't come quite as spontaneously.

Faced with the prospect of conversation with a holy God who speaks worlds into being, it is not surprising that we have trouble. We feel awkward and out of place: "I'm not good enough for this. I'll wait until I clean up my act and prove that I am a decent person." Or we excuse ourselves on the grounds that our vocabulary is inadequate: "Give me a few months—or years!—to practice prayers that are polished enough for such a sacred meeting. Then I won't feel so stuttery and ill at ease."

My usual response when presented with these difficulties is to put the Psalms in a person's hand and say, "Go home and pray these. You've got wrong ideas about prayer; the praying you find in these Psalms will dispel the wrong ideas and introduce you to the real thing." A common response of those who do what I ask is surprise—they don't expect this kind of thing in the Bible. And then I express surprise at their surprise: "Did you think these would be the prayers of *nice* people?"

Did you think the psalmists' language would be polished and polite?"

Untutored, we tend to think that prayer is what good people do when they are doing their best. It is not. Inexperienced, we suppose that there must be an "insider" language that must be acquired before God takes us seriously in our prayer. There is not. Prayer is elemental, not advanced, language. It is the means by which our language becomes honest, true, and personal in response to God. It is the means by which we get everything in our lives out in the open before God.

But even with the Psalms in their hands and my pastoral encouragement, people often tell me that they still don't get it. In English translation, the Psalms often sound smooth and polished, sonorous with Elizabethan rhythms and diction. As literature, they are beyond compare. But as *prayer*, as the utterances of men and women passionate for God in moments of anger and praise and lament, these translations miss something. *Grammatically*, they are accurate. The scholarship undergirding the translations is superb and devout. But as *prayers* they are not quite right. The Psalms in Hebrew are earthy and rough. They are not genteel. They are not the prayers of nice people, couched in cultured language.

And so in my pastoral work of teaching people to pray, I started paraphrasing the Psalms into the rhythms and idiom of contemporary English. I wanted to provide men and women access to the immense range and the terrific energies of prayer in the kind of language that is most immediate to them, which also happens to be the language in which these psalm prayers were first expressed and written by David and his successors.

I continue to want to do that, convinced that only as we develop raw honesty and detailed thoroughness in our praying do we become whole, truly human in Jesus Christ, who also prayed the Psalms.