

# PRAYER



---

## Spirituality of the Psalms

---

### The Bible's Prayer Book

*"I have been accustomed to call this book, I think not inappropriately, 'an Anatomy of All Parts of the Soul,' for there is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror."* Calvin

Walter Brueggemann, in *Spirituality of the Psalms*, makes the case that the spiritual life with God is not always happy-go-lucky. Sometimes we experience pain, sorrow and fear. Because of this, our prayers reflect our changing circumstances. Brueggemann suggests that the Psalms assume this reality. Accordingly, they contain various prayers. He organizes these prayers into three categories:

1. *Psalms of Orientation*, in which everything makes sense in our lives.
2. *Psalms of Disorientation*, in which we feel we have sunk into the pit.
3. *Psalms of New orientation*, in which we realize that God has lifted us out of the pit and we are in a new place full of gratitude and awareness.

### Psalms of Orientation

Brueggemann explains that these psalms "affirm that the world is a well-ordered, reliable, and life-giving system, because God has ordained it that way and continues to preside effectively over the process...There is a profound trust in the daily working of that system and profound gratitude to God for making it that way....Life is experienced as protected space." (17) Sometimes life is awesome, and these psalms teach us that we are to praise God for it.

- *Creation* – in which we consider the world and our place in it (Ps 8, 33, 104, 145)
- *Torah* – in which we consider the importance of God's revealed will (Ps 1, 15, 19, 24, 119)
- *Wisdom* – in which we consider the importance of living well (Ps 14, 37)
- *Occasions of well-being* - in which we celebrate God (Ps 131, 133)

(continued on next page)

# Spirituality of the Psalms continued

## Disorientation

Sometimes life does not feel like a “well-ordered, reliable, and life-giving system.” Sometimes “life is savagely marked by incoherence, a loss of balance, and unrelieved asymmetry.” (25) The church tends to avoid these psalms of lament “because it does not want to acknowledge or experience the disorientation of life,” but this is an “an odd inclination for passionate Bible users, given the larger number of psalms that are songs of lament, protest, and complaint about the incoherence that is experienced in the world.” (26) One of the great gifts that these psalms offer us is that “everything must be brought to speech, and everything brought to speech must be addressed to God, who is the final reference for all of life.” (27) Said simply, they teach us to talk to God even when what we say is not particularly kind or nice.

- *Personal Complaint Songs* – in which an individual expresses anger, frustration, confusion about the experience of God’s absence (Ps 13, 35, 86)
- *Communal Complaint Songs* – in which one expresses anger, frustration, confusion about the experience of God’s absence in the community (Ps 74, 79, 137)
- *God’s Song* – in which God airs His complaints to us (Ps 50, 81)
- “*Problem Psalms*” – Ps 88, 109

## New orientation

Brueggemann makes clear that “while the speaker may on occasion be left ‘in the Pit’ (as in Ps 88), that is not the characteristic case. Most frequently the Psalms stay with the experience to bring the speech to a second decisive move, from disillusionment to a new orientation. That is, the Psalms regularly bear witness to the surprising gift of new life just when none has been expected.” (47) These psalms offer us hope that God helps us endure difficult times and even brings us through those times with a sense of gratefulness and thanksgiving.

- *Personal Thanksgiving Songs*– in which I thank God for what God has done for me (Ps 30, 34, 40, 138)
- *Communal Thanksgiving Songs*– in which we thank God for what God has done for us (Ps 65, 66, 124, 129)
- *The Once and Future King* – in which we celebrate God’s victory of His enemies and evil more generally (Ps 29, 47, 97, 98, 99, 114)
- *Hymns of Praise* – in which we praise God for who God is (Ps 100, 103, 113, 117, 135, 147, 148, 149, 150).