

“David the Faith-Filled Poet”

(The Great Story of the Bible, Chapter 81)

The Psalms of David

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

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We’re taking a few weeks at the end of the summer to consider various aspects of the reign of King David. Today we’re taking a look at his faith and art. He was a musician and a poet, and he left us with a lasting treasury of poems that have been set to a countless array of tunes over thirty centuries.

We’ve seen numerous glimpses of David’s musical and poetic gifts. As a young lad, David was brought to the court of King Saul to play the lyre, to help calm the mad king. (1 Samuel 16.14-23) As the story progresses, Saul becomes more and more jealous of David’s gifts, David’s abilities, and David’s growing fame. That jealousy turns into an obsession, and then into a war. At one point David runs from Saul into a cave (1 Samuel 22.1), where David sings to the Lord: “I cry aloud to the LORD; I lift up my voice to the LORD for mercy. I pour out before him my complaint; before him I tell my trouble.... I cry to you, LORD; I say, You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living. Listen to my cry, for I am in desperate need; rescue me from those who pursue me, for they are too strong for me.” (Psalm 142.1-3, 5-7) Later, Saul and his son Jonathan – David’s closest friend – are killed in battle. David turns his grief into a song: “Daughters of Israel, weep for Saul.... How the mighty have fallen in battle! ... I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother; you were very dear to me.” (2 Samuel 1.24-26) Later still, when David has successfully defeated all of Israel’s enemies, he sings again: “The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation.... From his temple he heard my voice; my cry came to his ears.... He reached down from on high and took hold of me; he drew me out of deep waters. He rescued me from my powerful enemy, from my foes, who were too strong for me.... You, LORD, are my lamp; the LORD turns my darkness into light.... I will praise you, LORD, among the nations; I will sing the praises of your name.” (2 Samuel 22) When David is afraid, he sings to the Lord; when he is sad, he sings to the Lord; when is celebrating, he sings to the Lord. Every time something significant is going on in his life, he comes to the Lord in prayer and song.

How ‘bout you? When you’re afraid, do you sing to the Lord? When you’re sad, do you sing to the Lord? When you’re celebrating, do you sing to the Lord? Or ... just even *talk* to the Lord?

There is a false idea that has taken root in contemporary American society: the idea that we can live this life on our own. That we don’t really *need* God. That we don’t need to ask God for help, that

we don't need to thank God for the blessings we have received, that we don't need to cry out to God in the midst of our grief and sorrow. "Believe in yourself! You can do anything! You have the power to move *mountains!*" It's a message of self-sufficiency, a message that we don't really *need* God.

David didn't believe that. David believed he *needed* God. He believed that he needed to ask God for help, that he needed to thank God for the blessings he had received, that he needed to cry out to God in the midst of his grief. Throughout the story he does this time and time again. David moved mountains, all right – but he did it *through* his faith in God. All the good things that happened during his reign – he doesn't take credit for any of them. He gives the credit to God. "I can do all things," says Paul in Philippians, "*through Him who strengthens me.*" (Philippians 4.13) That second clause is *so important!* And it's so often *forgotten*. God never intended for us to live a life of self-sufficiency. God created us to be wholly and completely dependent on *him*. David understood that. I would venture to say that most Americans today *don't*. Most of us think *we can do it on our own*. And ... we're wrong.

David was motivated by a sincere desire to honor God in every way he could. To that end, he brought the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem. The Ark, you will recall, was that sacred box that had been crafted during the days of Moses, that housed the tablets of the Ten Commandments, that had traveled with the Israelites through all their wilderness wanderings, and on which – so the Israelites believed – the very presence of God resided. David brought the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem, with a huge celebration, with music and dancing; David himself was "leaping and dancing before the LORD" (2 Samuel 6.16) with such joyful abandon that his wife was embarrassed and ashamed. But David knew: if you truly want to honor God, you don't just go through the motions. *You sing your heart out!*

Next, David wanted to honor God by building a temple dedicated to him. He doesn't think it right that he himself dwells in a palace while God's Ark resides in a mere tent. But then David hears the word of the Lord, spoken through the prophet Nathan: "I will make your name great ... I will give you rest from all your enemies ... I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name." (2 Samuel 7.9-13) David responds in prayer, with humility. Harkening to God's holy Word, he does as he's told: he does *not* build a temple to the Lord. That task will fall to his son. The ark remains in a tent.

So David creates something else instead. He creates a lasting legacy: a large collection of faith-filled poems. There are 150 Psalms in the Bible; of those 150, 73 of them are attributed to David. Scholars debate: did David actually compose all 73 of those himself, or were some of them written *in the style* of David, or *inspired* by David? We're never going to know for sure, and it really doesn't matter; the point is, David had a *huge* influence on the music of both ancient Israel and the Christian church. He gave words to our most heartfelt prayers. He is a model we can still learn from – thirty centuries later!

How much time have you spent with the book of Psalms? This is *the* classic prayer book of the church. It is rich, and penetrating, and so incredibly *real*. Whatever situation you're facing in life, whatever you're feeling at any given moment – joy, wonder, fear, anger, injustice, worry, heartache, gladness, weeping, mourning, celebrating – you name it, *somewhere* in the book of Psalms there are words that can help guide your prayer life. "Hear my cry for help, my king and my God!" (Psalm 5.2)

“Heal me, LORD, for my bones are in agony!” (Psalm 6.2) “How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever?” (Psalm 13.1) “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Psalm 22.1) “The LORD is my light and my salvation – whom shall I fear?” (Psalm 27.1) “I waited patiently for the LORD; he turned to me and heard my cry!” (Psalm 40.1) “Deliver me from my enemies, O God; be my fortress against those who are attacking me!” (Psalm 59.1) “From the ends of the earth I call to you, I call as my heart grows faint!” (Psalm 61.2) “Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck!” (Psalm 69.1) “Hear me, LORD, and answer me, for I am poor and needy!” (Psalm 86.1) “I will sing of your love and justice; to you, LORD, I will sing praise!” (Psalm 101.1) “Praise the LORD, my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name!” (Psalm 103.1) “I will sing a new song to you, my God!” (Psalm 145.10) All those lines – and hundreds more like them – come from David’s Psalms. You want to know how to pray? Just start reading the psalms. When you reach the end, start over again. The more you know these words, the more you feel them *in your bones*, the more you’ll have them ready at hand when you really *need* them.

In the summer of 2002, at the age of 24, Katharine’s younger brother Andrew was diagnosed with liver cancer. Just a few short months later he was gone, and we were left with our memories and lots of tears. For his funeral, we found words in the Psalms to express some of our grief: *Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD. LORD, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications! How long, O LORD? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long? My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, “Where is your God?” I cry to you, O LORD; I say, “You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living.” Give heed to my cry, for I am brought very low. Give ear to my words, O LORD; give heed to my sighing. Listen to the sound of my cry, my King and my God, for to you I pray. I cry out to you, O LORD; in the morning my prayer comes before you. O LORD, God of my salvation, when, at night, I cry out in your presence, let my prayer come before you; incline your ear to my cry. Hear my prayer, O LORD; give ear to my supplications in your faithfulness; answer me in your righteousness. I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in God’s word I hope; my soul waits for the LORD more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning. I cry aloud to the LORD, and God answers me from God’s holy hill. Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD! The LORD has heard my supplication; the LORD accepts my prayer. Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of God’s faithful ones. The LORD is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit. O give thanks to the LORD, for the LORD is good; for God’s steadfast love endures forever. Gracious is the LORD, and righteous; our God is merciful. I love the LORD, because the LORD has heard my voice and my supplications. Because God inclined God’s ear to me, therefore I will call on God as long as I live. O LORD, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.*

We all have times of deep joy; we all have times of deep pain. Whatever you’re going through, you will find words in the Psalms to help you utter your most heartfelt prayers to God. The more time you spend with that book, the more equipped you will be for the day when you really *need* those words.

Thanks be to God for King David ... and the faith-filled, poetic legacy he left for all of us.

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