



WAITING ON THE LIGHT

Praying with the Psalms through Advent

Introduction

The Psalms are tried-and-true help to us as our souls wait afresh for the birth of our Lord at Christmas.

In this guide (which will appear weekly), one verse from a given psalm is presented for each day in Advent. Some of you may find it helpful to read all of the given psalm as part of your Advent devotions.

At the end of each daily meditation, a short prayer is provided.

Week 3

The Third Sunday of Advent

'My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.' *Ps 84. 2*

'How *lovely* is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts!' (verse 1). The Hebrew term *yedidot* (from the verb *dwd*, which also forms the name David) carries a stronger meaning than 'lovely' or 'pleasing'. Elsewhere in the Bible, the word always refers to those 'beloved' by someone, and particularly by God. So in this psalm, the psalmist is saying that he is in love with God's house.

Why this deep affection and desire? Nowhere does the poet speak of how the temple looks, or of the manifold liturgical activities that take place there. His longing for 'the courts of the Lord' is inspired not by the beauty of objects and activities, but the beauty of the One who lives there. As the Book of Common Prayer expresses it in verse 2, 'my heart and my flesh rejoice in the living God'.

For this reason, the psalmist utters three benedictions upon the one who makes his pilgrimage to Zion.

'Blessed are those who dwell in your house' (verse 4, ESV). If making a pilgrimage to the temple is an occasion of great joy and celebration, how much happier would the person be who lived there all the time? Like the birds of the air that nest in the rafters of the tabernacle, such a person might make his permanent home within the presence of God. There he could sing unceasing praises to the Lord God of hosts. No more would desire and longing define his days. Fulfilment would replace restlessness, and (even by standing at the door, see verse 10) contentment would be his for ever.

'Blessed are those whose strength is in you' (verse 5, ESV). The psalmist knows that a pilgrimage to Jerusalem can be a dangerous undertaking, but those who draw on God are sure to arrive safely (verse 7). The man who loves God's house, whose well of strength is God himself, is not afraid of even the driest valleys. The landscape of our soul's pilgrimage is often marked with rough and parched terrain, but the one who walks with God will never fail to find a stream in the desert (verse 6, see also Is 35. 6).

'Blessed is the one who trusts in you' (verse 12, ESV). This is the heart of the psalmist's benedictions. God is the 'sun and the shield' (verse 11) of them that live according to his ways. Nothing good is withheld from them, for God himself is the sum of their longing.

Prayer

My strength is in you, Lord.

Today, even in my weakness, I am strong.

So if the fight comes to me today, Lord,

Enable me to fight on your side, and by your side.

Amen.

Monday of Advent 3

***'Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am languishing; O Lord, heal me.'* Ps 6. 2**

For someone who lives with God, what is the appropriate response to trouble? Whether from inward distress of soul, or from outward distress by adversity? The psalms teach us that the proper response is always *prayer*. Through prayers, the psalmists bring up every manner of suffering. There is no affliction that is not suitable grist for the mill of conversation with God.

In the case of Psalm 6, affliction has taken hold in both the body and the soul of the psalmist. 'My bones are in agony', says one translation, and 'my soul is in

deep anguish' (verses 2-3, NIV). In both cases, the Hebrew word may be translated literally as 'terrified'. The psalmist's condition is one of utmost panic, both physical and emotional. 'Shaking with terror', translates the NRSV. Moreover, while he is fearfully aware that his enemies seek his destruction, the poet is most dreadfully afraid that his chief enemy may be the Lord himself: 'O Lord, do not rebuke me in *your* anger' (verse 1).

The psalmist has a conscience, and before God he knows that he stands unworthy. Were he to die with his thoughts, words and deeds left un-absolved, he would be banished to death as an unreconciled enemy of the Lord. This is a prospect he cannot bear, and so tears of grief and despair soak his pillow night after night.

However, fear does not have the final say. The psalmist has brought his complaint to the 'throne of grace', where he 'may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need' (Heb 4. 16). There is a distinct change in the tone of the psalm after verse 7. 'The Lord has heard my supplication', he declares (verse 9). The sound of his weeping does not go unnoticed by the Lord. The psalmist is left neither alone in his despair, nor without hope for deliverance.

The tide has turned at last, and it will be his enemies, not his own soul and body, who will be 'struck with terror' (verse 10). What if the psalmist had not turned to the Lord in his desperation? As pitiful as was his condition, his voice was a welcome sound to the ears of heaven. The psalmist's panic is replaced by renewed confidence that God has heard and accepted his prayer (verse 9). A thousand years later, St Paul put it succinctly to his readers, 'If God is for us, who can be against us?' (Rom 8. 31, ESV).

Prayer

Father, there is no question that my sin causes me much pain;
In my bones and in my soul.
And you are the great Physician of both.
Heal me, Lord; forgive the sin;
Save my whole life.
Amen.

Tuesday of Advent 3

'Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth, and teach me.' *Ps 25. 4-5*

Some psalms make use of a poetic device known as an acrostic. Psalm 25 is one of these. Each of its twenty-two verses begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. And Psalm 25 takes this one step further. The opening letters of the beginning verse, the middle verse and the last verse spell out the Hebrew

root for 'teach' or 'learn' (*alaph*), which in fact summarises the content of the psalm.

'Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths.' This psalmist, who is apparently experienced in the ways of God's mercy ('do not remember the sins of my youth', verse 7), requests God's guidance in the midst of his troubles, even as his enemies threaten to destroy him. This is a prayer for instruction and direction that can be helpful in any situation.

As in so many of the psalms of lament, the psalmist holds up his soul before God in search of assistance. The image is rich with feeling, as if the psalmist has succeeded in reaching down within himself, taking his inquiring heart with his own feeble hands, and raising it before his Lord and Maker: 'To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul' (verse 1).

In a time of trouble, rather than answering back to his adversaries, or acting vengefully on his own behalf, the psalmist exercises his faith and turns his aching soul to the Lord. 'Let me not be ashamed,' he prays in verse 2 (KJV). He is asking that the faith he puts in God not be placed in vain. By answering, God will sustain the psalmist's faith and show his enemies that such faith is not misplaced. As soon as he makes this plea for deliverance, however, the psalmist prays for guidance: 'Show me your ways' (verse 4, NIV). With this petition, the psalmist's trust in God becomes active and real; for faith in God's power is empty if it is not accompanied by obedience to his ways.

Certainly, the psalmist is mindful of the mercy and grace of God. He remembers them 'from of old' (verse 6); and he is counting on them now in order to be delivered from his troubles. But his trust is not passive. With his eyes 'ever towards the Lord' (verse 15) he expects not only deliverance, but also counsel. The psalmist looks for the hand of God, so that he might do the will of God.

Prayer

Lord, what more could I ask than to have you as my Teacher?
Because you are my Creator, you know me through and through.
Because you are my Lord, there is nothing beyond your wisdom.
Because you are my Saviour, you will always help me in my weakness.
Amen.

Wednesday of Advent 3

'Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget his benefits.' *Ps 103. 2*

Psalm 103 begins and ends with the exact same phrase: 'Bless the Lord, O my soul!' The repeated phrase is like two bookends that sum up all that is contained

in a long shelf of texts and manuscripts that stand between them. This is a call to worship rooted in specific events and experiences of God's blessings.

Counting one's blessings: Psalm 103 conveys the depth of meaning contained in this very ordinary and often overlooked spiritual exercise. Dietrich Bonhoeffer once reminded his readers that, in times of difficulty, when we are tempted to give in to our worst inclinations, the enemy of our souls has only one goal in mind: 'Satan does not here fill us with hatred of God, but with forgetfulness of God.' The path to renewed faith and joy often leads through the memory; and if there is a central theme to Psalm 103, it is this: *remember*.

It seems as if the psalmist has had some kind of personal experience of God's mercy and healing and, as he calls to mind the love that he has received, his gratitude overflows with song. He invokes everything in his being to praise the One who has saved him. But this is not enough. The author is but one person in the midst of a whole people who have experienced the compassion and goodness of God. His compelling instruction to 'not forget all (God's) benefits' (verse 2) is meant for them as well.

In fact, it is meant for all humanity, for all those whose very breath is a sign of the kindness of their Creator. By the end of the psalm, 'all that is within *me*' (verse 1) expands to 'in *all places of his dominion*' (verse 2). There is not a single corner within the human soul nor within the vast domain of creation that has not known, and therefore should not forget, the 'steadfast love of the Lord' (verse 17).

The human memory is both fickle and selective. Too often it is the unjust and hurtful experiences that linger longest in our minds, taking up valuable space in our memory that could otherwise be occupied with the thoughts of God and of his blessings. As if to drive away these interlopers, the psalmist sounds almost urgent as he recounts the innumerable ways in which God shows his care: forgiving sin, healing sickness, saving from destruction, satisfying need, renewing strength. Call to mind the mercy of God, insists Psalm 103. In other words, *remember the God who remembers you*.

Prayer

Today, Father, I call to mind these blessings from your hand.
For each of them, I bless you, praise you and thank you.
And I hold them in my heart, to remind me of your goodness
And to lead me to praise once again.
Amen.

Thursday of Advent 3

'When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, ...what are human beings, that you are mindful of them, mortals, that you care for them?'

Ps 8. 3-4

Who has not stood in silence under the luminous canopy of a midnight sky and wondered at the mysteries contained in this vast universe? As we ask, 'How far can my gaze reach into this never-ending vastness?' we have an overwhelming sense of our own smallness.

The psalmist probably looked upon the night-time sky every evening. On one occasion, the questions evoked by the starry vision took shape in a poem, and that poem eventually became a hymn to be sung in the house of God, where it is still sung today.

In his epistle to the Romans, St Paul writes that the invisible nature of God is clearly visible in all the things that God made (Rom 1. 19-20). If we will pay attention, the book of creation will tell us a good deal about its Author. The psalmist's contemplation of heaven inspired him to 'see' beyond the stars and to give praise to their Creator (and to *his own* Creator).

Even as the psalmist 'looks at the heavens', his thoughts descend back to earth. Given the infinite scope of God's handiwork, he wonders, where does humanity fit in? Who are we, mere specks, that you not only see us, but care about us (verse 4)?

A clue to the answer is given even before the question is asked. Standing under the glorious night sky, the psalmist reflects that God's praises are even 'chanted' in the squeals and cries of infants and children (verse 2). The poet sees in the middle of the night what an exhausted parent can hardly imagine: an intimate and wondrous connection between God's uncontainable glory and the wailing of a new-born babe.

The psalmist is struck by the inscrutable paradox: within all creation, human life seems hardly noticeable (and almost inconsequential), but in the thoughts of the Creator, human life is immeasurably valuable, dignified and noble. 'So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them. God blessed them' (Gen 1. 27-28). Even this thought humbles the writer and leads him once again to give praise to God. The ancient poet does the modern reader a profound favour by sharing his nocturnal prayer with us. From time to time, we would do well to stand with him under the stars, to lift our own eyes towards heaven, and to hear what prayer that vision might inspire.

Prayer

I do not understand why you think so much of me, Lord.
Can you help my heart to be filled with awe, rather than anxiety;
Gratitude, rather than grief; and wonder, rather than worry?
Then I will sit amazed at your goodness and chant your glory.
Amen.

Friday of Advent 3

'Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.'

Ps 32. 1

There are two basic messages in Psalm 32: firstly, when we depart from the ways of God, confession of sin is the pathway to pardon; and secondly, God will surely lead us in those ways if we will follow.

The first message has to do with the joy of forgiveness, and particularly the joy of being forgiven. The second message has to do with God's willingness, and even his desire to forgive our wandering ways and to then keep his eye upon us. Living in the light of these unalterable truths makes the psalmist truly blessed.

The most famous description of the requirements for a blessed life is found in the Sermon on the Mount. There, Jesus lists nine conditions for true, lasting happiness and fullness of life. Each verse providing such a condition begins with, 'Blessed are...'

The Hebrew word translated as 'blessed' (used here and elsewhere by the psalmist) basically means 'happy'. But it has less to do with an emotion than with the spiritual condition of the person who pursues God's ways and who actually participates in life with God. Thus it is that 'blessed/happy' serves as the opening word of the entire Psalter: 'Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked...but their delight is in the law of the Lord...they are like trees planted by streams of water...in all that they do, they prosper' (Ps 1. 1-3).

In contrast to this state of ceaseless prosperity, the condition of the person who tries to hide his sin is one of arid misery. The psalmist describes himself under such circumstances as a scorched plant withering under the hot summer sun. There are no flowing streams of water for the unrepentant. Releasing the spring requires that the psalmist admit his wrong before God.

Once he has turned around, admitting both to himself and to God that he has been wrong, the psalmist is relieved of the heaviness of heart that has been weighing him down. Now, if he will obediently give himself to God's instruction, he can walk freely with his Lord and be led in the ways of peace and gladness.

Prayer

Father, because your grace is sufficient;
Because your Son's work is finished;
And because your steadfast love never comes to an end,
I am in fact found, and without despair.
Amen.

Saturday of Advent 3

'Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.' *Ps 42. 5*

In several Hebrew manuscripts, Psalms 42 and 43 are joined together, which means that at one time they were probably a single psalm. The fact that they share a common refrain ('Why are you cast down, O my soul?', see 42. 6, 11 and 43. 5) is strong support for this view.

The song is the prayer of someone who is experiencing an excruciating sense of separation from God. The psalmist uses poignant imagery, and his longing for God is almost audible, like the croaking sound of a parched throat. The psalmist is looking for more than refreshment; he is looking for life itself.

So what is the condition of a dehydrated soul? While the sweet waters of God's presence are absent, the psalmist has not run dry of his own salty tears. They are the only moisture he has known for days. What makes it worse is that those who see his condition, rather than offering comfort, add scorn to his own doubts. The bitterness of the present makes this tormented soul nostalgic for the time when he went joyfully to the temple with his fellow worshippers. Where have those days gone?

As only a poet can say it, he is afraid that he will die of thirst for God, and at the same time fears that he will drown in a sea of sorrow. 'All your waves and your billows have gone over me' (42. 7). Like St Peter sinking into the waters of the Sea of Galilee, the psalmist has only one cry: 'Lord, save me!' (Mt 14. 30, NIV).

In the end, after pouring out his bitter complaint, it is almost as if the psalmist is having a word with himself. He knows from experience that God can and *will* save him. 'Hope in God, for I shall again praise him, my help and my God' (42. 5, 11; 43. 5).

Prayer

I thirst for many things, Lord, but not enough for you.
Yet what is this dryness in my soul,
If not the unquenched desire to know you?
Today, may I drink from you longer than I drink from anything else.
Amen.