



LIFE-CYCLE OF THE BELIEVER: A CRESCENDO OF PRAISE

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Psalms

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Over the past year, my world has been turned upside-down. Having embarked on the path of being a vocational pastor for the rest of my life, and after eight years of walking along that path, suddenly the plan changed drastically a year ago. It became clear to me that my God was calling me back into the business world for a season. This past year has been a much different journey than any I have ever taken, and it has forced me to think and pray about what God wants my life to look like now. So, since this has been so greatly on my heart and in my prayers over the past year, I want to take the next two weeks to do a short series on the topic, *finding God's vision for your life*.

When your world gets turned upside-down and you become lost in a wilderness not of your own choosing, it can rattle you to your bones. It can make you cry out for direction, a way to get back to reality. When all of this change was coming down in my life last summer, my family and I were spending time up in the panhandle of Idaho, while I worked with a friend on a short project at his church in Spokane, Washington. We had the privilege of living in a house on Schweitzer Mountain, a ski resort. This place was quite wild: we saw bears on the mountain, and a bald eagle flying about fifteen feet over our heads. While we were there, my wife Blythe decided to teach our children about wilderness survival, using the book, *Practical Outdoor Survival*. That book describes exactly what happens to us when we get lost in the wilderness. First, we panic. We realize our reality has fundamentally changed; we aren't in Kansas anymore. Panic sets in, and the first thing we do is react out of panic: we start scurrying around, choosing the most likely direction and heading that way. But what usually happens is that the panicky person ends up walking in a big circle. And when he realizes he's back where he started, the panic doubles.

The crucial thing to remember when you are lost in the wilderness is to stop and not panic. The best first step is to find a compass. When you are in the wild, consult your compass or find some natural way to locate true north. Once you find your compass and identify true north, you have a reference point. From there, you can identify your relative position, and plot your pathway home.

The best thing about the past year is finding my true north once again, and seeing afresh this great compass called the Bible. Our God is our true north, the Ancient of Days, the One who is the same yesterday, today and forever. His word that stands forever while the grasses fade is our compass. And in that word is a book that traces the life cycle of every believer, what our lives should and ultimately will look like. It is the book of Psalms, the book we will study together this morning.

A believer's life is a long journey from self-preoccupation to God-preoccupation and praise. As babies and children all the way through high school and college, we are consumed with ourselves. For some of us, this self-preoccupation continues much longer. But when the believer is indwelt by the Spirit of God when he or she becomes a Christian, a new Presence is asserted in the very center of our lives. From that point

forward, the journey away from the "self" and toward our eternal God begins, and it is a journey we see traced in the book of Psalms in the Hebrew Scriptures. Here we find David, a man after God's own heart, working out his entire spiritual life with his Lord, in all its agonies and ecstasies, on paper. Through it all he came to know himself very deeply. But more importantly, he came to know God. And even more importantly, he grew in praising God, the ultimate end of this life and the preoccupation of the next.

The path toward knowing God intimately and learning the crucial importance of praising him lies through the Psalms. David grew mightily through writing seventy-five psalms, half of the book of Psalms. Moses wrote two psalms himself. Jonah prayed a prayer entirely borrowed from phrases in the Psalms while in the belly of the fish, at his crisis point. And Jesus Christ quoted from the Psalter more than from any other work of the Hebrew Scriptures, showing that the way of our Lord also lay through the Psalms. All these great heroes, and the greatest of all, discovered the way of knowing God intimately, and praising him no matter what, through the Psalms. Let us follow along their way.

Overview of Psalms

What a joy it is to read and study the Psalms! One day a couple of years ago, I was preparing to teach a book study on the Psalms. I sat down to read and take notes on the patterns across the entire book of Psalms. It took about fifteen hours, but it was one of the great days of my life. I discovered that the book of Psalms is called *Tehillim* in Hebrew. *Tehillim* means "Praises." That is the title and the point of the book: Praises.

Psalms is a master work of diversity. It is composed of five separate books, each of which is punctuated at the end with a doxology of praise or blessing (see Pss 41:13; 72:18-19; 89:52; 106:48 and 150:1-6). Because there are one hundred and fifty psalms covering every imaginable human emotion and experience, the book is difficult to classify. Some scholars over the past century have decided to lump all the psalms into two categories: psalms of lament and psalms of thanksgiving. Others arrange the psalms in as many as ten different categories, complete with sub-categories. There are Messianic psalms prefiguring Christ; the so-called imprecatory psalms where the writer calls upon God's judgment to fall on his enemies; there are psalms entirely consisting of praise; others entirely consisting of lament; some are psalms of instruction which are not even prayers at all, and in many of them the chief theme is the *hesed*, or the loyal love of God. If nothing else, this book is a collage of diversity, where virtually any attempt at classification seems to fall short.

One of the more persuasive classifications I have encountered is the comparison between each of the five books of the Torah with the five books of the Psalms. Thus, Book One is analogous in topic and theme to Genesis (man and creation); Book Two to Exodus (deliverance and redemption); Book Three to Leviticus (worship and sanctuary); Book Four to

Numbers (wilderness and wandering), and Book Five to Deuteronomy (Scripture and praise). While this has some merit, there is a more living, exciting way of classifying the Psalter. I believe the book chronicles the spiritual life cycle of the believer, from self-preoccupation to praise.

Psalms: The Spiritual Life Cycle of the Believer

I believe Psalms surveys the life cycle of the believer based on observing the flow of the psalms from Psalm 1 through Psalm 150. Psalms begins with a definitional description of the man or woman who knows God, in Psalm 1: who is a believer and who is not. Then it chronicles the coronation of the believer into life as a king or queen before the Lord in the coronation psalm of ancient Judah, in Psalm 2. This starting point in Psalm 2 is crucial: the believer is crowned a king or queen immediately upon inviting the Holy Spirit to live inside. The kingdom of heaven is a fine thing; everyone is crowned a king or queen from the outset. As C.S. Lewis used to say, every believer is a king or queen under wraps. Every citizen is crowned royalty upon entry into the kingdom. And of course we know where all those crowns of all the kings and queens in the kingdom of heaven will be found: thrown at the feet of our humble King who died for our sins, in worship and praise.

The first book, Psalms 1-41, particularly deals with many self-focused prayers such as the "How long?" prayer of Psalm 13 and the self-concerned prayer of Psalm 26. Listen to Psalm 26:1-7: "Vindicate me, O Lord, for I have walked in integrity; and I have trusted in the Lord without wavering. Examine me, O Lord, and try me; test my mind and my heart. For Thy lovingkindness is before my eyes, and I have walked in Thy truth. I do not sit with deceitful men, nor will I go with pretenders. I hate the assembly of evildoers, and I will not sit with the wicked. I shall wash my hands in innocence, and I will go about Thine altar, O Lord, that I may proclaim with the voice of thanksgiving, and declare all Thy wonders." While those verses end with a desire to praise, there is a whole lot of "self" crying out for vindication along the way.

I remember sitting one afternoon in my first official Dilbert-style cubicle in my first job in the Silicon Valley. It was about fourteen years ago, and I was a Christian of about two years of age at the time. I was thinking for a moment in my cubicle, and it dawned on me that I almost never thanked God. My prayers were so full of my requests, my struggles, my needs, my cries for things to get better...there was almost no room in my prayers for the best prayer of all: the simple prayer of "Thank you." Maybe I am just denser than most, but it took two years for the thought to dawn on me that my prayers ought to at least include a "Thank you" now and then amid all my rabid requests and urgent needs.

Getting back to Book One, of course there are also wonderful discoveries of intimacy with the Lord found in these early psalms. My favorite is in Psalm 23, when the Lord, who is identified as the "He" out there in verses 1-3, becomes the "You" right beside me in verses 4-5, once the valley of deep darkness has been traversed. But many of these early psalms focus on the great needs and longings of the "self": our need for help; our pain in waiting on the Lord; our need for justice; our need for intimacy with him; our need to be heard by him; our need for comfort in the midst of gnawing fears, and so forth. The first person "I," "my," and "me" figure prominently in the psalms of Book One. Only two psalms in the first book focus exclusively on praising and thanking the Lord, Psalms 8 and 29.

In the second book, Psalms 42-72, there is a strong note of longing for intimacy with the Lord sounded in the first psalm.

Psalm 42: "As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for Thee, O God." The problems have not disappeared, with such questions as, "Why are you in despair, O my soul?" still lingering in Psalms 42 and 43, and there is a deeper searching going on. There is the realization of the deeper truth of resting in God himself discovered in Psalm 46: "cease striving, and know that I am God." There is the remarkable observation of David in Psalm 51 that "the sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise." There is the growing confidence based on experience that if you "cast your burden upon the LORD...He will sustain you," in Psalm 55. There is the dawning of understanding in Psalm 56 that "This I know, that God is for me." But there is also the continuing suffering encapsulated in such lines as "O God, Thou hast rejected us. Thou hast broken us," in Psalm 60, and "Reproach has broken my heart, and I am so sick" in Psalm 69. As with book one, there are only two psalms devoted exclusively to the praise of God, Psalms 48 and 65.

Book Three, Psalms 73-89, deals with many questions of life that seem to hit around the "middle age" in one's spiritual life. Psalm 73 sets the tone with the difficult question about why the wicked seem to prosper. This is a question that can only be answered by sitting quietly before the Lord and contemplating the end to which wickedness inevitably points: an eternal end of separation from God.

A friend of mine in the middle of her Christian life was running one day, and she unwittingly found herself right in the middle of Psalm 73. She was a believer who was deeply bothered by the rich and luxurious lifestyle of a close friend of hers who was not a believer. This woman and her husband lived a life of wealth and abundance: hot sports cars, an awesome house, vacation homes, designer clothes, designer drugs, and so on. And they mocked God, with their words and by their lifestyle. My friend was running that particular day and praying this through with her Lord, because she was poor as a church mouse. She had given her life to Christ, and was spending her time studying the Scriptures. She was living from paycheck to paycheck. The wild lifestyle of her friend was bugging her deeply, because their life seemed to be so rich and full.

That day my friend was running along the salt marshes in Redwood City, and she turned a corner to a green area where the Bay water was abundant and the grasses were rich and lush. It looked like the well-watered Jordan on the day Lot chose to live there. She ran through that area and said to the Lord it seemed like the life of the rich unbelievers was lush and beautiful. But just at that moment, the sun reflected brightly off a building straight ahead on her path, and the thought struck her: just focus on the light and keep your eyes on where you are going. Keep runnin' with the goal in mind. So she kept running, her eyes on the goal. A few paces on she ran over a culvert that diverted the Bay water to another part of the wetlands, and in an instant the lush greenery became a wasteland of salt-encrusted plants jutting out of the ground. It looked just like a valley of dry bones. The Lord then impressed upon her the end of the wicked rich: a valley of death. She had just experienced the truth of Psalm 73, the middle mile of the Christian life.

The long middle mile of the Christian life is a tough road, filled with many questions and some hot, dry stretches. Here is a poem inspired by Vance Havner's writing that describes the midsection of the Christian life, a modern day psalm of sorts. It is called *The Middle Mile*:

□

The gun goes off, the crowd roars,
The race is begun, the glory: yours.

Adrenaline rushes, the wind at your back,
Your power surges, you're ahead of the pack.

A corner you turn, you look up with a smile
But it stretches before you: the middle mile.

It's flatter than flat, and hotter than hell
Where it will end, no one can tell.

The wind at your back turns around to your face,
Glory behind, ahead commonplace.

No one to see you, only One taking note,
No map to guide you, dust in your throat.

You're in the middle mile, where the race must be run
It'll rarely be easy, it'll rarely be fun.

On that track will be measured all that you are,
All your credits and riches won't take you too far.

It's a terrible place: there's no turning back,
The start has been started, the goal's what you lack.

Not daring to stop, what else can you do,
Your eye on the goal, you keep pushin' through.

Your side aches, your heart pounds, there's little but pain,
Your sweat flows, your eyes sting, but slowly you gain.

Far greater than your take-off, deeper than your smile,
There's a pace now, a pattern, that runs out the mile.

A new wind is blowing, not behind, not before,
But in you and through you, the breath of the Lord.

You crest the last hilltop, at the setting of the sun,
His arms are there open, His two words: "Well done."

The middle mile of the Christian life is tough, but there is great truth to be gained along the way. This is where the golden truth that "besides Thee, I desire nothing on earth" begins to come to light. These psalms include the beginning of thoughtful reflections on the history of the nation, how the Lord has been a faithful and loving Shepherd for them, as we see in Pss 77, 78, 80, 83, and 89. And above all, this book reflects the joy of having fellowship with the Lord in his house, in Mt. Zion, in his courts, and in his sanctuary, as we see in Pss 73, 74, 76, 84, and 87. There is the beginning of historical reflection on God's faithfulness and the enjoyment of pure, intimate fellowship with God that are the riches of the middle of one's life with the Lord. However, there are still only two psalms devoted exclusively to praise, Pss 75 and 84.

The fourth book, Psalms 90-106, opens with the recognition that wisdom from God is needed to spend one's days well on the earth. Moses' well-known phrase in Psalm 90:12 is the reflection of a spiritually mature man who knows his days are numbered on the earth: "So teach us to number our days, That we may present to Thee a heart of wisdom." There is also a growing awareness of the sovereignty of God that undergirds all of human life. Up to Psalm 90, fifteen psalms allude to the majestic reign of the Lord over all things. But in the fourth book, the sovereignty of God becomes a major theme. It is a critical motif of Pss 93, 95, 96, 97, 99, 103. In fact, Pss 93, 97, 99 all begin with the triumphant line, "The LORD reigns." It seems that the more mature one becomes in the Lord, the more the issue of his sovereignty transfixes the mind and settles the heart. This book reminds me of the old priest in the movie *Rudy*, who told Rudy at one point (quoting from memory), "In thirty years of theological study, there

are only two things I know for certain: God is sovereign ...and I'm not him." That's the voice of wisdom. There is also a growing number of psalms in this section which seem utterly devoted to praise: Pss 92, 96, 98, 100.

But in the final book, Psalms 107-150, we see the place where the "self" so dwindles in importance that the exclusive business of worship and praise supersedes all other concerns. The section begins in Psalm 107 with a wonderful reflection on God's loyal love across all of one's experience, with the added exhortation at the end of the psalm that if one wants to be wise, one should "give heed to these things; and consider the loyal love (lovingkindness/mercy) of the LORD." The Hebrew term translated as "lovingkindness" in Psalm 107 (NASB) or "mercy" (NIV) is the important term *hesed*, which more literally means "loyal love." In fact, no fewer than fourteen psalms in this section extol the wonderful *hesed* of God, his loyal love seen across all the generations (Pss 107, 108, 109, 115, 117, 118, 119, 130, 136, 138, 143, 144, 145, 147). It seems the more mature one becomes in the Lord, the more aware one becomes of the unfailing loyalty of God's love for us in all trials and circumstances, so that his love begins to completely overshadow our difficulties as his perfect love casts out our fears.

In fact, a key turning point in this final book is the beloved Psalm 139, the crowning work of self-preoccupation giving way to God-preoccupation and praise. David asks the question in v 7, "Where can I go from Thy Spirit?" as if he is searching for one last place to hide from God, the way Adam hid that day back in the garden. But just a few verses later, in v 14, David concludes, "But I will give thanks to Thee, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; wonderful are Thy works, and my soul knows it very well." He has shifted focus from himself onto God, exclaiming in v 17, "How precious also are Thy thoughts to me, O God! How vast is the sum of them!" After that psalm, over half the remaining psalms are devoted to praise. In fact, David's final psalm in the psalter, Psalm 145, is an acrostic psalm praising God from A to Z. Incredibly, there are no less than nine psalms in this final book that are devoted exclusively to praise (Pss 113, 117, 134, 145, 146, 147, 148, 149, 150). But the key point to observe at the end of the Psalter is that all six of the final six psalms are exclusively devoted to praise. And Psalm 150 includes a dozen phrases which begin with the word "PRAISE." This is the destination point of maturity to which we are all going along the way: we have grown from self-preoccupation to a securing knowledge of God, but more importantly, we end by praising God with all our hearts! So, all we want to say is, "Praise him! Praise him forever!"

Thus, from Psalm 1 to Psalm 150, there is a life cycle of ever-increasing depth of maturity, the gradual loss of self-concern and self-focus, and a slowly growing but mighty crescendo of praise. And, typical of the life of a man or woman in relationship with God, even though the trend is toward maturity and ever-increasing praise, the path along the way is extremely varied: full of ups and downs, usually "three steps forward and two steps back." All five books of the Psalms include prayers that are raw with the emotion of being frustrated with God or questioning him deeply (see Pss 13, 60, 73, 102, 137). In all five books, there are psalms devoted to the theme of God's *hesed*, his loyal love, although this theme comes to a crescendo in the final book (see Pss 25, 52, 89, 103, and then 107 and 136, for which the loyal love of God is the obvious major theme). In all five books, there are the psalms where the writer cries out to God for his divine justice on his enemies (see Pss 7, 55, 79, 94 and 109). In all five books there is express respect for God as Creator (see Pss 19, 65, 89, 95, 139). In all five books, there are numerous examples of the

heart of the psalmist being anxious, fearful, or sad (see Pss 22, 51, 88, 102, 140).

So, on the way of knowing God more deeply and growing in praising him, there are many and varied experiences along the way, to be sure. But the point is this: the believer's life will be a crescendo of praise. It will be a rocky path at times, and we will wallow in self-absorption at times, but our lives will be a crescendo of praise. We are being trained on this earth to sing and praise, for the day when we join the heavenly song of unending praise. If you want to know God's vision for your life, both here and hereafter, this is it.

Believers Whose Lives Are a Crescendo of Praise

About now, many of you are probably saying, "Dorm, get serious. Get your feet back on the earth. You're too heavenly minded. My life is so busy and full of distractions I can hardly get my bills paid, much less praise God. Get serious!" To close, I want to paint a portrait of a believer I know, by way of illustrating this life cycle of the believer, this crescendo of praise.

My Friend Ron

Last Sunday, I had the privilege of visiting the church where a friend of mine was preaching. His name is Ron Ritchie. Of course, many of you know him from his thirty years of service at PBC Palo Alto. For those of you who don't know him very well, Ron had a terrible growing-up experience: his father abandoned his family when Ron was still a young boy, and Ron was forced to grow up in an orphanage, on a farm run by hyper-legalistic zealots. It was as if his growing up went from a happy family dream to a terrible nightmare. One day while serving in the armed forces in Morocco years later, Ron visited the Garden Tomb in Jerusalem and accepted Christ right there in the tomb. He went off to Bible school and then to seminary. He spent thirty years in ministry to high schoolers, singles and the broader body at PBC, and then he moved on to serve a church in Colorado Springs.

But something Ron said to me several months ago has stuck in my mind ever since. We were agreeing about how tough life and ministry are every day, and he was surveying his life at age sixty-five. I'll never forget what he said. He said, "You know what, I am loving what I am doing, and I'm

going out praising God." That is it: despite a childhood torn in half, despite the hard knocks of over thirty years of ministry, by God's grace, Ron is going out praising God. Not a bad epilogue to the story of his life!

God's Vision for Your Life: A Crescendo of Praise

As I said at the beginning, the last year and a half has been the toughest of my life. My soul has traversed a dark valley. But, in the midst of this darkness, God has shown me his vision for my life. My life will be a crescendo of praise, because of his grace. Starting from all those selfish, unthankful prayers in my early days in my Dilbert cubicle, starting from the microscopic point of my own small life, he has been leading me to begin to thank him. And in the past year, our family has been singing praise songs around our breakfast table in the morning. And along the road to Los Banos, which I have to commute from Fresno to the Bay Area, I have been moved to tears in praising him in song in my little red pickup. This is what life is about: training on earth to join the heavenly song of praise, where each individual crescendo of praise will combine with the heavenly hosts in a ringing song, praising God with one voice. Oh! how sweet that will be! Now I am not telling you that you have to go out and praise more. No. The fact is, our lives as believers will be crescendos of praise. What I am suggesting is, let's get started! Amen and amen!

*Praise the LORD!
Praise God in His sanctuary
Praise Him in His mighty expanse.
Praise Him for His mighty deeds;
Praise Him according to His excellent greatness.
Praise Him with the sound of the ram's horn;
Praise Him with harp and lyre.
Praise Him with timbrel and dancing;
Praise Him with stringed instruments and pipe.
Praise Him with loud cymbals;
Praise Him with resounding cymbals.
Let everything that has breath praise the LORD.
Praise the LORD!*

Psalm 150

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