

The Speaking God: Singing our Prayers

“It is the Christian vocation:
to begin on earth the life and Liturgy of Heaven.”¹

*Psalm 121*²

¹ *I lift up my eyes to the hills—
where does my help come from?*

² *My help comes from the LORD,
the Maker of heaven and earth.*

³ *He will not let your foot slip—
he who watches over you will not slumber;*

⁴ *indeed, he who watches over Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.*

⁵ *The LORD watches over you—
the LORD is your shade at your right hand;*

⁶ *the sun will not harm you by day,
nor the moon by night.*

⁷ *The LORD will keep you from all harm—
he will watch over your life;*

⁸ *the LORD will watch over your coming and going
both now and forevermore.*



Do you ever wonder what life is supposed to be about? I mean, why are we here? Well, there are a lot of answers to that one, and Thomas Merton has one for us to consider: We are, he writes, “to begin on earth the life and Liturgy of Heaven.” If he is anywhere close to the mark, that means we need to immerse ourselves time and again in the Psalms of the Old Testament. We are closest to the worship style and content of the faith of the people of Israel in the Psalms. We stand shoulder to shoulder with our Lord Jesus in his worship of God in the Temple when we sing or chant the Psalms. The early Christians knew no other worship songs than those in the

¹ Thomas Merton, Bread in the Wilderness (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1953), 113.

² New Revised Standard Version.

collection of the Psalms. It was easy for them to see their walk with the Lord reflected in those poems and prayers. Did you know that there was a time in the church when the song book for Sunday mornings was the Psalms...and only the Psalms?

I don't want to get carried away with the technical aspects of various Psalms; it is enough now to say that for the church the Psalter is a beginner's book of theology, a book of songs and chants, a book of prayers to God the Almighty, a collection of brief writings for meditation. It is easy to see that the Psalter is many things to the people of God. Take the Psalms I asked you to read for today, Psalms 88 and 121. Psalm 88 is a desperate prayer to God by a man who is dying. He is afraid and it seems as though God is not answering his prayers; God doesn't care. The man is near panic. On the other hand, Psalm 121 is a testimony to the goodness of God; the writer is filled with joy at the thought of God's care. There are other psalms just like these two because that is the way life is: a roller coaster of feelings; sometimes God is there, sometimes He is not. What is going on?

Let's take a closer look at the Psalms for today, to see what we can and just how these Psalms reflect our experience of life, and based on that experience how they become our prayers. Oh, before we begin it maybe helpful to know that the Psalms are a struggle between God and human beings...from the perspective of human beings.



At the end of the last lesson I asked you to read Psalm 88 for today. Do you remember having read it before? I had read this Psalm many times before its central message began to make sense to me. It is important to remember that all 150 Psalms in the collection were written by people of faith. It is easy to read a Psalm like number 88 and think the writer a complete pagan, but not so. Keeping this in mind helps us realize that even people of faith have times of fear, times when they call on God when their heart is full of apprehension. You will recall that our Lord prayed with anxiety as his death on the cross approached.³ Whoever wrote Psalm 88 knew full well the fear of death.

Some things stand out as we read Psalm 88. For example, did you pick up on the tone of the psalm? The author is obviously in pain. He says he cries out to God "day and night," that his "soul is full of trouble," and that he feels "rejected" by God. Did you notice the number of words that speak of life after death—and that they are all negative in tone and meaning: "the grave", "the pit," "the darkest depths," "the place of darkness," and "the land of oblivion." And this is not all of such words; did you find any more? I am sure you discovered that there is not one word of happiness in the 18 verses of this psalm of dread.

Each psalm has a central idea that relates to the writer's view of God. The author of Psalm 88 thinks that God is a God of the living. The dead have their own place to go and it is a place where "darkness is my closest friend." Not all Old Testament writings think of life after death in such negative ways. Certainly if you are a Christian, life after death for the believer is joyous to think about...that God is there for an eternal relationship of love and confidence. Did

³ Luke 22:39-44. NIV

you pick up on the writer's feeling of being lost? If there is one shred of hope in this psalm, it is that the writer continues to pray to God, even when he suffers the way he does.

Would you like to have such a song in your hymnal? I have found them, particularly in songbooks dated in the late 17th--18th century.. For all its sense of dread, this psalm has some deep truths that we need to meditate on. Can you pick out these truths? Have you ever known believers to lose faith when the going was tough? Have you had a chance to encourage them? What did you say?

It is typical of hymnals to be very careful about the first and last hymns. Usually hymnals try to affirm faith in God's care and power in the first hymn. The last hymn typically relates to the New Testament's view of heaven. Take a look at your church's hymnal and see if this is true. It is certainly true about the psalms. The first Psalm affirms the Hebraic confidence about God and the last Psalm (150) relates to a positive faith in the eternal God. Psalm 88 could be included in a Hebrew songbook because the Hebrews knew how their Psalter was put together. Even Psalm 88 will be redeemed by the goodness of Israel's God. Psalm 150 has the last word, and it is a good one!



Yes, you are right; the message of Psalm 88 is acceptable in the light of Psalm 121. Psalm 121 is one of my favorite psalms. It is a great psalm for meditation and personal prayer. Psalm 121 remembers what the writer of Psalm 88 forgot: that God is watching our every move and is always at hand to help us out of difficult situations. Speaking of watching, did you notice how many times the words "watch" comes up in your NIV?⁴

Did you notice that Psalm 121 is called "A Song of Ascents," whereas Psalm 88 is attributed to a particular author (Herman the Ezrahite⁵)? Psalm 121 is one among a group of 14 psalms⁶ called "A Psalm of Ascent" or "A Pilgrim Song." These short songs were sung by groups of pilgrims as they made their way to Jerusalem for the major feasts of the year, such as the feast of Passover. The main idea of the psalm is the certainty of Divine protection for those going through the rugged mountains on their way to Jerusalem. The pilgrims sing a prayer asking for protection from accidents, robbers, and disease⁷.

And to whom did these prayers ascend? To God the Creator, "the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth." This is established in a question/answer scenario in the first two verses. Thus, the strength of God is highlighted, as well as confidence that God would be on the job twenty-four hours of every day. When we mention God's strength, we are affirming that God (*Yahweh*, God of Israel) is greater than the gods of the surrounding tribes. These themes are wonderful for prayer and meditation. It does not take much imagination to adjust Psalm 121

⁴ Twice—2 times. That's not much. But "watches" occurs 3 times, for a total of five times—that's better. At any rate, the writer makes his point!

⁵ Herman the Ezrahite was probably a member of the temple guild of singers during the Second Temple period.

⁶ Psalms 120-134. No author is mentioned for these songs.

⁷ Some pilgrims would travel a long distance to get to the Holy City. These people would be subject to disease as they made their way along the road. In addition, asking for protection from the moon suggests protection from disease (vs. 6).

from its original setting to ours today. We face danger all the time and we need to make appeal for God's help, especially as we participate in the mission of the church.

A final word: Both Psalms 88 and 121, as well as the rest of the Psalter, were used in the worship of God in the Temple. Many of the psalms reminded the worshipers of their history, of the nature and character of God, It is important to read the psalms carefully, paying attention to repetition, to questions and answers, and the obvious development of the songs' structure. You can compare the Psalms with many hymns and songs in your church's hymnal, asking the same questions of them as you would a biblical passage. Hymns develop a thought, rehearse history, or bear witness to God or Christ. There is no better way to transmit the basic doctrines of the church than singing. Likewise, which of us has resisted goose-bumps as a favorite line or combination of words is sung?

*We are both participants and listeners as we sing
our prayers, prayers for ourselves and for others.*

The next installment of our series is entitled
The Speaking God: Dark Sayings of Old
In preparation, please read Psalm 78 carefully. We
will emphasize verses 1-9 in the printed lesson for
next week, but it is important to take a close
look at the entire psalm, a psalm of Jewish history.

This next lesson will conclude the Old Testament section
of our study on the uniqueness of God seen in
His dialogue with His creatures.

*"My life is a listening,
his is a speaking.
My salvation is to hear and respond."*⁸

--Jerry Mercer
January 6, 2008

⁸ Thomas Merton, Thoughts in Solitude (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 27th printing, 1999), p. 69.