

Psalms: The Prayerbook of the Bible

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible*. United Kingdom: Augsburg Fortress, Publishers, 1995. Pp. 53-58, 155-177

7/15/20 Lecture

Open with the Lord's Prayer:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran Pastor and professor in the 1920s and 30's. He has a fascinating story—originally a pacifist, he spoke out against the Nazi's and ended up becoming involved in a plot to kill Hitler. He was executed in a concentration camp days before liberation by Allied forces, and his loss was one of the greatest minds in the 20th century. Before he died at 39, he was a prolific author. His works now span a 17-volume set in English. *The Prayerbook of the Bible* is his relatively short introduction to the psalms, and I will be covering that in today's lecture.

Bonhoeffer treats the psalter as "the prayerbook of the Bible." He argues that "Praying does not mean simply pouring out one's heart. It means, rather, finding the way to and speaking with God, whether the heart is full or empty. No one can do that on one's own." (155). Bonhoeffer argues in another work (*Life Together*) that through the Psalter we learn to pray as Jesus prays, based on three things:

1. Prayer means praying based on the Word and promises of God (cf. Romans 8:26-27).
2. We learn what we should pray from the Psalms. Here, Bonhoeffer shows examples of innocence (though he does not consider individual humans innocent) and vengeance (though he thinks it is dangerous for us to individually pursue vengeance). These examples point to Christ; who undertook the wrath and vengeance of God on the cross, and who was the innocent victim. When we pray those psalms as individuals, we are joining our prayer to Christ (and to the Church), and thus praying on behalf of others even when they don't apply directly to us in our situations.
3. The Psalms teach us to pray as a community. When we all share in the same prayers, as we do in the daily office and revised common lectionary, our prayers are connected. "Is that

not an indication that prayer is not a matter of a unique pouring out of the human heart in need or joy, but an unbroken, indeed continuous, process of learning, appropriating, and impressing God's will in Jesus Christ on the mind?" (p. 54-57)

Bonhoeffer repeats many of these ideas in his introduction to the Psalter: the Psalter shapes our prayer life because it is teaching us not just to pray for ourselves. If we only prayed for ourselves, he says, we would only pray "give us our daily bread" in the Lord's Prayer (p. 157). Bonhoeffer meditates on this connection of Jesus teaching us to pray by offering the Lord's Prayer, and how the Lord's Prayer and its petitions connect to the Psalter. He also connects Jesus to David and his Psalms, saying that Jesus prayed the Psalms in his forerunner, David.

Bonhoeffer organizes the Psalms in the following categories: creation, law, the history of salvation, the Messiah, the church, life, suffering, guilt, enemies, and the end (162). These are different and more complex thematic categories than what we covered last time; so as I go through these, think of them not as "types" but as groupings by theme. Also, remember the Christological lens Bonhoeffer is using. He is interpreting the Psalms for Christians and for prayer; thus he is not as interested in looking at them quite the same way as we did two weeks ago with our typology and classification.

1. Creation - The creation psalms talk about God (who is revealed to us by Jesus) who created the world. It is important for Bonhoeffer to draw that distinction, to avoid finding God solely in the natural world. So, a creation psalm helps us thank God for creation that exists for Christ (Examples: Ps. 8, 19, 29, 104)
2. Law - Examples: 1, 19, 119. These give direction for new life in obedience to God (vs. "things to do in order to be saved). The law Psalms, particularly the lengthy 119, give us perspective that God's word can be meditated on endlessly.
3. The History of Salvation - Examples: 78, 105, 106. These tell us the history of God's work with the people of Israel, and summon us to thanksgiving and petition (especially 106).
4. The Messiah - Examples: 22 and 69. 22 has Jesus' words from the cross (Mark 15:34, Psalm 22:2). These Psalms, according to Bonhoeffer, prophecy about Jesus' passion. He includes many others as examples, including the Royal Wedding Psalm (45) being about a Messianic King - aka, Jesus.
5. The Church - Example: 27, 15, 50. These are worship songs about Jerusalem and the temple. For Bonhoeffer, as Jesus has fulfilled all necessary sacrifices on our part, now we only owe a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving (also in the eucharistic prayer).
6. Life - Bonhoeffer meditates on how the Psalms frequently have petitions for good life and fortune.
7. Suffering - (Psalms of lamentation). Suffering is not denied, and it is more vast than our

individual experiences. Only Jesus has definitively experienced all suffering. Yet despite suffering, God is kept in focus. God is still sought out and questioned by the Psalmist. He links these to the Psalms of trust, because Jesus also suffered (again cf. Psalm 22); We can trust because God, through Jesus, hears our suffering and suffers with us.

8. Guilt - (7 penitential Psalms, including 51; also, Bonhoeffer names several others). He calls these Psalms of repentance, and that we can easily pray these psalms as sinners; yet how does the sinless one, Jesus, pray these? Here again Bonhoeffer speaks about how Jesus takes on his sin for us,
9. Enemies - There are many (he lists about 20, a good example being Psalm 137) psalms that deal with vengeance or enemies; or as we mentioned in our study of Psalm 1, "the wicked." Bonhoeffer connects those to God's judgement on sin and God's enemies, never about our personal enemies or personal vengeance. This "vengeance" was expressed on the cross; again, linking back to Jesus. Thus, we can forgive our enemies through Jesus who forgives *from the cross*.
10. The End - 96-98, 148-150. These talk about the final victory of God, the ushering in of the Messianic kingdom, etc. These connect to the enemies Psalm and the judgement of God and those who oppose God in the end. We pray these in Christian Hope!

I hope this view of some of the themes of the Psalter was a helpful addition to last week's look at the types of the Psalms. These types, from a more devotional perspective, may begin to aid us in considering the Psalms as prayer. Next week, we will look take a deep dive into Psalm 95, one of the central Psalms in Morning Prayer, with John Webster, a British Anglican Theologian.

#bible/psalms