

Pastor, Psalms, and Day by Day life:
Visitation, Sickbed, and Deathbed

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It is especially fitting that the Good Shepherd Institute should devote an annual conference to Psalms in the Life of the Church. For in these divinely-revealed songs Christ our Lord, the Good Shepherd who laid down His life for the sheep, continues to cause His voice to be heard, refreshing each of His sheep and His entire flock with the living water of His death-destroying, life-bestowing Word; calling sinners to repentance while leading wounded, broken refugees from this fallen world out of this present darkness into the bright courts of His never-ending light. These Psalms are a guidebook through life, a companion on the journey. For the church remains a pilgrim people. As she makes her way through this world, she seeks the world that is to come. With eyes wide open to the realities of this world, in the church's song she looks not to the things that are seen, but to the unseen things. The church militant here on earth, under attack from every side, is at the same time one with the saints at rest, the church in glory. While here we already know joy, such joys are often fast-fleeting; they have a way of slipping through our fingers before we know it. The things that are seen are only temporary, but the unseen things are eternal. And so while here in this world we have no continuing city, in the church's song her gaze is fixed on things unseen - her final victory in the life of the world to come, the city with foundations, whose maker and builder is God.

I. The Psalms as the Church's Daily Prayer

The Psalms are thus each Christian's continuous personal consolation in the midst of the church's corporate pilgrimage. Old Testament believers prevented by time and distance from being in the temple could participate in the morning and evening sacrifices vicariously, as it were, in the daily prayer of Israel. So also the Psalms connect each individual Christian in his or her own private prayers with the church's public liturgy. The church's ancient hymn, the *Te Deum Laudamus*, captures the idea exactly: "Day by day we magnify Thee, and we worship Thy Name ever, world without end." So we read in Psalm 145 (2): "Every day I will bless thee, and praise thy name for ever and ever." In Psalm 113 (3): "From the rising of the sun to its setting the name of the LORD is to be praised!" In Psalm 88 (13): "...in the morning my prayer comes before thee." And in Psalm 141 (2) "Let my prayers be set forth before thee as incense, and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice." The church's morning and evening prayer offices are of course filled with Psalmody. So Christians are taught to pray together what they may also pray individually. And teaching is important in the church. In fact, it is the chief task of the office of the public ministry. Preaching is a subset, it would appear, within the pastoral office, which the Augsburg Confession identifies as "the office of teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments." (Latin: *ministerium docendi evangelii et porrigendi sacramenta*)

Since all Psalm prayer is by nature sung prayer, the singing of Psalms (as well as hymns and spiritual songs) is not merely some time-honored tradition in the church, but the deliberate way that Christians teach and learn the faith. The Apology to the Augsburg Confession provides the Lutheran consensus on this point:

The children chant the Psalms in order to learn them; the people also sing in order either to learn or to pray.¹

So that's why we sing: to learn and pray. Just another way, it would appear, of stating the ancient Christian maxim: "He who sings prays twice." When the human diaphragm gets involved, and not merely the brain, something happens to the soul, it seems. Sung prayer involves not just the grey matter, but cartilage and bone. Singing involves the body in prayer, in other words, and not just the mind. And that's a good thing, for we humans are not pure spirits. We are embodied spirits. And when body and soul join together in prayer and praise built upon the Word of God within the church's song, that's when we pray and learn the best. No better way to learn the art of prayer, then, than in the Psalms. That's what the church has always known since earliest times. Church music lies within the parameters of spiritual care. Thank God, in our own day we are seeing a renaissance of the Lutheran Kantor and the dedicated church musician. This Good Shepherd Institute is a natural place, then, for the pastors of the church and the musicians of the church to meet, to link, and join forces to foster quality care and nurture for the soul.

While the Psalter is at one and the same time the church's prayer book in every age as well as each Christian's companion along life's pilgrimage, we discover that the Psalms also address the health of the soul at its heart and center and are therefore central for conscientious pastoral work.

II. The Word of God and the Care of Souls

Every faithful pastor knows that he dare never venture out on the dangerous terrain of caring for souls relying on his own personal savvy and ingenuity. He musters every shield and weapon given from above, and takes with him the medicines of eternity as he makes his rounds each day among the sick and hurting souls entrusted to his care by the One who purchased them with His own blood. The application of the Word of God is at the heart of the cure of souls. In that Word every baptized believer, in the company of all the baptized, finds health and strength in the Word made flesh for us and for our salvation. In that Word every wandering child of God finds the way back home to the Father's house where he or she belongs, there to be fed and nourished, comforted and protected for all their days and to all eternity. No greater tool does the pastor have for the care of souls than the book of Psalms. We have this testimony not merely from the ancient church, but also from the pen of Luther, whose own concerns were above all else pastoral concerns.

III. Martin Luther on the Psalms

¹ Apology, XV: (Human Traditions in the Church) 40, K/W p. 229

Martin Luther's affection for the Psalms is well documented, and need not be explored in detail in this present study. We do well to remember that the Psalter was not merely the repeated focus of Luther's attention as an exegete and biblical teacher,² it was also the wellspring of his work as preacher and *seel/sorger*. And all of this, of course, because first and foremost Luther prayed the Psalms regularly and devotedly all through his life before, during, and after his evangelical awakening. Consider, for example, his familiar and moving testimony from the preface to the Large Catechism:

But this I say for myself: I am also a doctor and a preacher, just as learned and experienced as all of them who are so high and mighty. Nevertheless, each morning, and whenever else I have time, I do as a child who is being taught the catechism and I read and recite word for word the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Psalms, etc.³

Because Luther knew the Psalms intimately and well as his personal consolation, they became the constant focus of the meditation of his heart from which flowed the words of his lips not only in prayer and devotion, but also in his preaching and teaching.

In his *Preface to the Psalms* Luther extols the Psalter as a concise summary of everything genuinely Christian, in effect a "little Bible:"

In a word, if you would see the holy Christian Church painted in living color and shape, comprehended in one little picture, then take up the Psalter. There you have a fine, bright, pure mirror that will show you what Christendom is. Indeed you will find in it also yourself and the true *gnosthe seauton*, as well as God himself and all creatures.⁴

Not only does the Christian grasp the length and breadth and height and depth of the love of God in the Psalms and capture a glimpse of the profound mystery of the church in earth and heaven, it is also possible to find yourself there. As faithful Christians have always known, it is an uncanny fact that because every possible human experience and emotion is reflected in the Psalter, one can truly *gnosthe seauton*, "know yourself," by means of contemplating and praying the Psalms. In our narcissistic age, it is important to remember that central to the task of soul care is a healthy self-examination.

While current fads elevate the self on a pedestal, pandering and catering to the sinful indulgence of the old Adam, the longer tradition of Christian soul care takes a different approach to the self. It is the approach of critical analysis according to the clear light of the Word of God. Spiritual care providers have always recognized that if sin is to be rooted and out and destroyed by contrition and repentance and if the

² The Psalms were central to Luther's insights into the gospel. "His first major work was a Commentary on the Psalter, *Dictata super Psalterium* (151-1516). It was soon followed by another one, *Operationes on Psalmos* (1519-1521). Already in 1517 he had translated the penitential Psalms into German, and in 1524 he had accomplished a complete new translation of the Psalter." [unpublished paper by Carl Axel Aurelius presented at the Anglo-Nordic-Baltic Theological Conference in Aarhus 2001]

³ Large Catechism, Preface, (7), K/W p. 380

⁴ WA DB 10:1, 105, 5ff (translation: Aurelius)

healing balm of the gospel is to be applied to human hearts, be they broken and contrite or battered and bruised, then the first step in addressing the health of the soul is proper diagnosis. The Christian must be led to realize the particular impact of sin in his or her own life, be that anger, shame, grief, guilt, remorse, fear, distress, or other anxiety. The Psalms serve a useful purpose here. They serve as mirror to the full spectrum of human emotion, shedding the light of God's own Word on both joys and sorrows, to be sure. But when it comes to diagnosis, we are especially interested in cutting to the heart of the matter. We need to see clearly the problem of sin in all its complexity so that we might see all the more clearly the abundant and abounding love of God in Jesus Christ. The Psalms shed light upon the heart, disclosing what lies hidden there so that the heart may be cleansed and the spirit renewed in Jesus' Name. "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me" (Ps 51:10) is not just the prayer of David in his guilt and shame, but it is the prayer of every contrite sinner still today.

But the human heart grows dull under the weight of sin, and lips refuse to speak to acknowledge their sin and hurt before God. Therefore the Psalms teach the Christian what to pray, shedding light on the grievances of the human heart, and moving lips to say what all too often remains unspoken before the throne of God. Luther, too, knew the experience common to so many Christians through the centuries. He found that the Psalms were an effective way that he might truly know himself; he found himself reflected there:

Hence it is that the Psalter is the book of all saints; and everyone, in whatever situation he may be, finds in that situation Psalms and words that fit his case, that suit him as if they were put there just for his sake, so that he could not put it better himself, or find or wish for anything better.⁵

The Psalms, then, give voice to the uniquely personal experience of the soul. They are a Christian means toward the cardinal classic virtue: *gnosthe seauton*. Sin unacknowledged and undisclosed continues to fester, often bursting out in ways that are destructive to ourselves and others. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. Healing therefore begins with the truth, though it might be a painful truth. Emotional pain is often the first presenting symptom of spiritual malady, and that pain can find its voice in the Psalms. Thus we find, as Luther did, that by praying the Psalms we can more clearly see ourselves and be led toward healing. Not so much because misery loves company, but because in the company of all the saints we find the same healing as they did for their distress.

IV. The Word of God and Spiritual Diagnosis

The Psalms are indispensable when it comes to spiritual care. They not only give voice to the prayer of the heart, they shed light upon the heart. Not only do the Psalms reflect the feelings of the heart, they teach the heart what to feel. Pastors in their visitation could teach by example, showing parishioners how the Psalms are companions in the ups and downs of life, giving voice to the perplexities of life in

⁵ WA DB 10:1 103, 22ff (translation: Aurelius)

times of both sorrow and joy. More than that, parishioners could be shown how to use the Psalms for spiritual self-examination. Christians should be taught not just to thumb through the Psalms to discover one that expresses the emotion of the moment, but to use the Psalms deliberately as a tool for prayer, that is, to meditate and reflect upon them until the prayer of the Psalmist become one's own. When that happens, the Christian often discovers that things are not always as they seem. "The Word of God," after all, "is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of the joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart." (Hebrews 4:12) So also the Psalmist writes: "With thee is the fountain of life; in thy light do we see light." (Psalm 36:9) The Christian needs the light of the Word of God to drive away the darkness and see things more clearly.

The devil, after all, is a liar and deceiver. He never rejoices in the truth, but thrives on lies and deception. To do battle with the temptations of devil, world, and flesh, the Christian can do no better than to use the bright beams of the Word to drive away the darkness that clouds his perception. Then he can see his situation more clearly. The Word of God sheds light upon the heart, disclosing not only the inner attitudes of the heart when it comes to one's own sin, but also the extent of the injuries and hurt that are the byproduct and residue of the sins of other people. Spiritual care is not a game of "blind man's bluff." We would be rightly alarmed if our medical doctor based his diagnosis and prescription on a hunch or a whim. Why should spiritual treatment be any different than medical treatment? We need an objective basis for analysis and diagnosis when it comes to spiritual malady. The Word of God, particularly the Psalms, because they so easily lend themselves to prayer, provide just that kind of standard. They shed light upon the soul's condition before God. When a person is better able to see his spiritual circumstances for what they really are, he can find a path toward healing. So we read in Psalm 119:(130) "The entrance of thy words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple."

Once a presenting symptom is clearly recognized, then its underlying cause can be discovered. Here is where pastoral care begins. The pastor in this case functions not as an inquisitor, but as a physician of the soul, gently exploring with the aid of the stethoscope of God's Word the depth of the wound and its cause, whether the sheep before him is victim or perpetrator in this case, applying law to impenitent sinners and gospel to penitent sinners. It sounds complicated, and it is. A faithful physician of the soul must be skilled above all else in the art of listening. "...the shepherd needs great wisdom and a thousand eyes," writes St. John Chrysostom, "to examine the soul's condition from every angle."⁶

The skill of spiritual diagnosis is more caught than taught, learned in the school of pastoral experience in consultation with experienced pastors both living and departed. In other words, faithful shepherds not only read books, but learn from their contemporaries as well. They learn their craft from both reading the classic works on

⁶ St. John Chrysostom, *Six Books on the Priesthood*, Graham Neville, trans. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), p. 58.

pastoral care and from mutual conversation and consolation with brother seelorsgers. Best of all, as the ancients always knew, but we seemed to have forgotten lately, the art of pastoral care is learned most effectively by receiving such care oneself from another pastor. Yes, learning the parameters of soul care and the art of diagnosis is a complex and difficult task.

V. The Essence of Spiritual Cure: the forgiveness of sins

But the cure comes down from above. The essence of soul care is simple and direct – the forgiveness of sins. The church has continually confessed that for nearly two millennia in the Third Article of the Creed: “I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Christian Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body.” In other words, in each and every instance of soul care, the disease is sin and the medicine is the forgiveness of sins through the gospel preached and the sacraments administered in Jesus’ name. Through these, as through means, God the Father sends forth His Spirit, who works faith when and where He pleases in those who hear the gospel.

Under the Third Article the Small Catechism masterfully captures the twin dimensions of soul care: both its personal focus and its corporate setting within the communion of the church.

(I believe that) the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.

Thus we confess that the Holy Spirit calls, enlightens, and sanctifies each sheep one by one by the gospel and yet at the same time by that same gospel the Holy Spirit gathers them all into one holy church, that each might there be kept with Jesus Christ in the one true faith until life’s end, despite the onslaughts and assaults of devil, world and flesh. The end of the third article rises to a crescendo, with the forgiveness of sins taking its rightful place as the heart of the life of Christ’s church on earth and the basis of her life in heaven:

In this Christian church He (that is, the Holy Spirit) daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers. On the last day He will raise me and all the dead, and give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ. This is most certainly true.

VI. Pastoral Care at the Sickbed and Deathbed

Nowhere are pastoral visits more welcomed than at the sickbed and the deathbed. In this busy age in which churches seem to be preoccupied with so many things at best peripheral to the care of the soul, it is good to remind pastors that besides preaching and administering the Sacrament, their priorities include visiting the sick and comforting the dying. During those episodes of physical and at times intensely personal crisis, the soul is particularly vulnerable to temptation and in need of spiritual care.

And so the faithful pastor tends his flock not just in those bright and happy days when things are going well for them, but also in those dark days when those same sheep and lambs are assailed by doubt and despair; plagued by frustration, resentment, or anger; and when they are under attack from fear and dread. Hirelings turn tail and run at first sight of a predator, but faithful pastors stick by their sheep whenever they come under attack. Like the Good Shepherd whom they serve and in whose name and stead they minister to the flock, they stand their ground whenever the wolf shows his ugly face. Even the stench of death cannot frighten them away. For such pastors serve the One who endured the cross and grave, who trampled down Satan by His own death upon the cross, who snatched victory from the jaws of defeat by His triumphant victory over death and hell, who even now intercedes for all His own from His exalted throne in glory, where He ever lives to intercede for the flock of God, which He purchased with His own blood.

What a privilege, then, to minister in Jesus' name to those who suffer in body. Pastors have nothing to bring to the sick and dying in themselves. No personal charisma or winsome personality can provide cheer and hope in the face of illness and death. No hale-fellow-well-met or backslapping glad-hander can provide the hope and courage needed to face a long and serious illness or help the dying soul toward a blessed end and a joyous homecoming among the saints in glory. Rather, the calling of the pastor in such trying circumstances is to be the mouth and hands of Christ; that is, to speak the Words of Christ into the ears of those sick and dying souls and place upon their lips Christ's life-giving, death-destroying flesh and blood that bring life and hope to all who believe His Word. When Christ Himself accompanies His saints through stressful and trying times, there is spiritual strength and healing in the midst of physical illness. Yes, even though they walk through the valley of the shadow of death itself, they need fear no evil, for the Good Shepherd walks with them. His rod and staff are the continual sign of His comforting presence. And of course, that's the hardest part for faithful Christians who live this side of eternity: the rod and staff of the LORD. That is, the hardship and reversals that come our way in the mysterious providence of God. How can all things – even the bad things - possibly work together for good to those who love God?

Common to all Christian experience, therefore, is a certain uneasiness under fire. The most natural question arising in the human heart when suffering hardship is "why?" Why me? Why this? Why now? The faithful pastor, when faced with such perplexing questions, will refrain from rushing in where angels fear to tread and foolishly attempting to answer that question directly. There is a certain mystery to the problem of human suffering that remains unresolved this side of eternity. Now we see through a glass dimly. One day we shall know as we are now known by God; then we shall see face to face. But not yet.

Even our Lord Himself, when confronted with the fearsome prospect of the wrath of His Father that He was to endure upon His cross, asked that that cup might pass from Him. Once nailed to the cross, He Himself prayed the prophetic words of Psalm 22, thus sanctifying for all time that most profound of human laments, "why:" "My

God, My God, *why* have you abandoned me?” This despite the three-year catechesis He had conducted, carefully explaining to His disciples that He would endure many things at the hands of His enemies, that He would be killed, and after three days rise again. If the Lord Christ ventured to question His own suffering, why should not those who are baptized into His death and resurrection?

VII. The Psalms of Lament and pastoral care of the sick and dying
The pastor who ministers at the deathbed or sickbed will have ample opportunity to help faithful souls who face just such questions. Rather than concluding that there is something wrong with the faith of people who wonder “why?”, sensitive pastors will rather seek to help their sheep give voice to the anguish of their hearts. Again, the Psalms provide rich ground for such faithful pastoral work. No more fertile ground can be found for this task than the Psalms of Lament.

Dr. John W. Kleinig, of Luther Seminary in Adelaide, Australia, has provided a study on the structure of the Psalms of Lament of particular interest to pastors engaged in the care of the soul.⁷ These Psalms most often exhibit the following five-fold pattern: First, an address to God from the midst of trouble; Second, complaint to God about the trouble, the hurt received at the hands of the enemy, and frustration at God’s seeming indifference; Third, meditation upon God’s grace and help in other times of trouble; Fourth, prayer to God to take action against the enemy, to surrender personal injury to Him, or to ask for His help; and finally, praise of God, including the promise of thankoffering and meditation on His anticipated assistance.

When Christians fail to give voice to their frustration in the face of sickness or the prospect of death, they open the door to spiritual temptation in the form of despair, misbelief, or other great shame and vice, including resentment and bitterness that undermines their faith in God’s goodness and salvation. Such suffering saints should be led to see the experience of the Biblical saints who also endured great affliction, not woodenly and silently like stoic heroes and heroines, but rather giving voice to their fear and frustration, going boldly to the throne of grace as true children of a true Father in heaven, there to unburden their hearts with all the boldness and confidence of dear children who ask their dear Father.

Pious Christians often shrink from such lament because they regard it as a kind of ‘whining’ before God. The red-blooded saints of old had no such dainty sensibilities. Bravely and openly the psalmist boasts in Psalm 142 (1-2): “I cry with my voice to the LORD, with my voice I make supplication to the LORD, I pour out my complaint before him, I tell my trouble before him.”

The concerned pastor will find such Psalms of lament of inestimable value in the care of the sick and the dying. Using such Psalms, the pastor can patiently teach those who suffer bodily illness or face the prospect of death an approach to prayer that unburdens the whole contents of the heart before a merciful and loving Father in

⁷ “The Personal Disciplines: Christian Meditation” in *Christian Spirituality (UEB.084P/BAM.PA04)*, an unpublished course outline in the possession of the author, p. 36.

heaven. Psalm 77 serves as an excellent pattern for such prayer, for it begins with complaint and ends in praise.

In this Psalm, the psalmist meditates orally upon two themes that appear to be mutually exclusive: first, his own predicament and distress; second, the grace of God and His wonderful works of salvation. He mulls over these themes repeatedly, spitting out these thoughts in no precise order, but rather saying them just as they arise in his heart. Note that this whole prayer is oral prayer: “I cry aloud to God, aloud to God, that he may hear me.” (1) It does the heart good to speak out loud in God’s presence. It is a pious myth that mature Christians must pray silently, in mind and heart only. Here we need to become children again, and learn that the most natural way for humans to speak includes both mouth and voice.

“I think of God, and I moan;” he says, “I meditate, and my spirit faints.” (3) “I commune with my heart in the night; I meditate and search my spirit.” (6) And yet this meditation is not all focused on his predicament. He also prays: “I will meditate on all thy work, and muse on thy mighty deeds.” (12)

The psalmist does not shrink from voicing his most profound frustration and fear as he contemplates the unthinkable: “Will the LORD spurn forever, and never again be favourable? Has his steadfast love for ever ceased? Are his promises at an end for all time? Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion?” (7-9)

Yet in the midst of his distress, the psalmist also calls to mind and heart the mighty deeds by which God delivered his people at the Red Sea: “I will meditate on all thy work, and muse on thy mighty deeds. Thy way, O God, is holy, What god is great like our God? Thou art the god who workest wonders, who hast manifested thy light among the peoples. Thou didst with thy arm redeem thy people, the sons of Jacob and Joseph. ...Thy way was through the sea, thy path through the great waters; yet thy footprints were unseen. Thou didst lead thy people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.” (12-15, 20)

VIII. Pastoral Care under the Cross

So it is that God’s people find consolation in the midst of distress, light in the midst of darkness, and healing in the midst of sickness and death. Not by looking at the things that are seen and speculating about what they may mean, but by paying attention to the unseen things of God as they are clearly revealed under cover of the opposite. He shows His strength in weakness, His peace in turmoil, His comfort in distress, and He gives His life under cover of death – that is, the cross of His only Son our Lord who by His death has destroyed death and brought life and immortality to light.

No one knew the theology of the cross better or articulated it more clearly, of course, than Martin Luther. As the months dragged on leading to the presentation of the Confession of the evangelical party at Augsburg, Luther bided his time at Castle

Coburg, just out of reach of the ban of both Emperor and Pope. During those dark and uncertain days Luther penned a commentary on Psalm 118, which held a special place in his heart. This Psalm, a cry of confidence in the midst of attack, was a constant consolation for Luther in the darkest days of the Reformation. "I was pushed back and about to fall, but the LORD helped me," the psalmist writes. "The LORD is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation." (13-14) Among other reflections, Luther comments on the need for faith in the grace of God in the face of God's seeming wrath and displeasure:

Faith does not despair of the God who sends trouble. Faith does not consider Him angry or an enemy, as the flesh, the world, and the devil strongly suggest. Faith rises above all this and sees God's fatherly heart behind His unfriendly exterior. Faith sees the sun shining through these thick, dark clouds and this gloomy weather. Faith has the courage to call with confidence to Him who smites it and looks at it with such sour a face.⁸

Luther goes on to make the bold assertion that were it not for trouble and hardship, Christians would not know God. Paradoxically, it is precisely because God loves us that He sends misfortune. Troubles are to be regarded by the Christian as more necessary and useful than all earthly possessions, Luther writes:

[God] wants to drive him to pray, to implore, to fight, to exercise his faith, to learn another aspect of God's person than before, to accustom himself to do battle even with the devil and with sin, and by the grace of God to be victorious. Without this experience we could never learn the meaning of faith, the Word, Spirit, grace, sin, death, or the devil. were there only peace and no trial, we would never learn to know God Himself. In short, we could never be or remain true Christians. Trouble and distress constrain us and keep us within Christendom. Crosses and troubles, therefore, are as necessary for us as life itself, and much more necessary and useful than all the possessions and honor in the world. We read: "I called upon the Lord."

You must learn to call. Do not sit by yourself or lie on a couch, hanging and shaking your head. Do not destroy yourself with your own thoughts by worrying. Do not strive and struggle to free yourself, and do not brood on your wretchedness, suffering, and misery. Say to yourself: "Come on, you lazy bum; down on your knees, and lift your eyes and hands toward heaven!" Read a Psalm or the Our Father, call on God, and tearfully lay your troubles before Him. Mourn and pray, as this verse teaches, and also Ps. 142:2 "I pour out my complaint before Him, I tell my trouble before Him." ...It is (God's) desire and will that you lay your troubles before Him. He does not want you to multiply your troubles by burdening and torturing yourself. He wants you to be too weak to bear and overcome such troubles; He wants you to grow strong in Him. By His strength He is glorified in you. Out of such experiences men become real Christians. Otherwise, men are mere babblers, who prate about faith and spirit but are ignorant of what it is all about or of what they themselves are saying.⁹

⁸ AE 14:60

⁹ AE 14:60-61

Having considered the place of the Psalms when it comes to spiritual diagnosis and consolation, we now come to the point of that familiar question: what does this mean? Where does this leave Christians who are neither pastors nor sick nor dying – at least at present? Of what use are the Psalms for Christians under normal circumstances? How do the Psalms provide spiritual health care maintenance for us all?

IX. Spiritual Health Care Maintenance and the Psalms

A. The Psalms teach us how to pray: the language of spiritual intimacy
 First, the Psalms teach us how to pray. All language is learned by imitation. We speak as we are spoken to. Infant ears first hear, and only then do infant tongues and lips begin to form words. It stands to reason, then, that if Christians are to learn to pray to God, they must first pause to hear Him speak in His Word. And nowhere does He teach us more clearly what to say than in the Psalms.

Eugene Peterson in his book “Answering God: the psalms as tools for prayer” has provided marvelous insight on how the Psalter function as a prayer primer. I take the liberty of quoting his words at length, because I believe they provide a fundamental framework for approaching the Psalms as a school for prayer. Peterson’s thesis is that all human language can be reduced to three types of speech: what he calls “Language I, Language II, and Language III.”¹⁰

Language I is the language of intimacy and relationship. It is the first language we learn. Initially, it is not articulate speech. The language that passes between parent and infant is incredibly rich in meaning but less than impressive in content. The coos and cries of the infant do not parse. The nonsense syllables of the parent have no dictionary definitions. But in the exchange of gurgles and out-of-tune hums, trust develops. Parent whispers transmute infant screams into grunts of hope. The cornerstone words in this language are names, or pet names: mama, papa. For all its limited vocabulary and butchered syntax, it seems more than adequate to bring into expression the realities of a complex and profound love. Language I is primary language, the basic language for expressing and developing the human condition.

Language II is the language of information. As we grow, we find this marvelous world of things surrounding us, and everything has a name: rock, water, doll, bottle. Gradually, through the acquisition of language, we are oriented in a world of objects. Beyond the relational intimacy with persons with which we begin, we find our way in an objective environment of trees and fire engines and weather. Day after day words are added. Things named are no longer strange but familiar. We make friends with the world. We learn to speak in sentences, making connections. The world is wonderfully various and our language enables us to account for it, recognizing what is there and how it is put together. Language II is the major language used in schools.

¹⁰ Eugene H. Peterson, *Answering God: the psalms as tools for prayer* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), pp. 37-39.

Language III is the language of motivation. We discover early on that words have the power to make things happen, to bring something out of nothing, to move inert figures into purposive action. An infant wail brings food and a dry diaper. A parental command arrests a childish tantrum. No physical force is involved. No material causation is visible. Just a word: stop, go, shut up, speak up, eat everything on your plate. We are moved by language and use it to move others. Children acquire a surprising proficiency in this language, moving people much bigger and more intelligent than themselves to strenuous activity (and often against both the inclination and better judgment of these people). Language III is the predominant language of advertising and politics.¹¹

Peterson goes on to observe that because we usually use the language of description and motivation in our daily lives, in our prayers we habitually revert to these languages we know the best, making lists for God and presenting Him with demands, trying to get our way with Him. But such prayer is impossibly thin. In fact, he observes:

To pray in these languages is, in effect, not to pray. We must let the Psalms train us in prayer language—the language of intimacy, of relationship, of “I and Thou,” of personal love.”¹²

B. Praying the Psalms as the Prayers of Christ

Secondly, when Christians pray the Psalms, they never pray alone. As we heard yesterday in Dr. Wenthe’s address, Christ is everywhere portrayed in the Psalms. Properly understood, Christians can be led to see that the Psalter is not only the church’s prayer book, but Christ’s own prayer book. That is, as the written Word of God the Psalter is not only words *about* Jesus Christ but also words *from* Jesus Christ. When we pray the Psalms, it is our Lord Himself who prays with us. This is why Christians do well to lean heavily on the Psalter for their private prayer. For in praying the Psalms, Christians pray the prayer of the one God and mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who always lives to make intercession for us.

When we pray the Psalms, we pray the very Word of God. We pray as we are taught to pray; we speak as we are spoken to. The Lord first opens up our lips, and then our mouths show forth His praise. The prayers we pray in the Psalms are acceptable to God, for they are the prayers of the one in whom He delights, His holy Son. All psalmody is fundamentally therefore the prayer which Jesus Christ Himself ceaselessly prays in the Spirit through His church back to the Father. Frank von Christierson paints a vivid picture of this for us in his hymn stanza:

Come, pray in me the prayer I need this day;
Help me to see your purpose and your will
Where I have failed, what I have done amiss;

¹¹ Peterson (39)

¹² Peterson (40)

Held in forgiving love, let me be still.¹³

X. Praying Day by Day: the Psalms and Daily Vocation

Finally, when the Psalms teach us how to pray and who it is that prays with us in our prayer, they also teach us who we are. We learn our daily vocation within the church's daily prayer. Psalm 95, the *Venite*, the church's morning hymn, puts us in our place within the whole magnificent creation:

For the LORD is a great God, and a great King above all gods.
 In his hand are the depths of the earth;
 The heights of the mountains are his also.
 The sea is his, for he made it;
 For his hands formed the dry land.
 O come, let us worship and bow down,
 Let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!
 For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture,
 And the sheep of his hand. (3-7)

When we begin to see that we are nothing less than God's sheep and lambs, and therefore the flock under His care, this world becomes a lot friendlier place to live in. When we begin to recognize that our frantic scurrying will not add one day to the length of our lives or make us one bit happier and fulfilled, we begin to relax. We find our rest in Him who is our peace. And His peace surpasses all human understanding.

When we tie our prayers to the Word of God, we learn to relinquish control of our lives to the one who knows us best. After all, He created us to be His own, redeemed us with the blood of His Son, and sanctified us by Holy Baptism as His dwelling place. The Word He speaks to us in the Psalms we pray back to Him. Thus all of life is consecrated by the Word of God and by prayer. We discover that our Father in heaven designed our daily routine to be a cycle; we are the ones who have made it a rat race.

When we are exhausted by our daily work, our Father in heaven invites us every day to find rest for our bodies in sleep and rest for our souls within the shelter of Christ's peace: "I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety." (Ps 4:8) When we awake each day, we find the creation already up and running. We slip into the stream of life each new day, confident of God's continued presence: "In the morning, O LORD, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait in expectation." (Ps 5:3)

Left to ourselves, we tend to get things backward; we think of the day as beginning at dawn and ending in the evening, and life becomes a mad race with the clock. The Word of God teaches us another view of life: "And there was evening, and there was morning," we read in Genesis, "—the first day." (Gen 1:5)

¹³ LW 432 "Eternal Spirit of the Living Christ" (The Hymn Society of America, 1976).

Since ancient times Christians have always found the evening hours particularly conducive for prayer. As the evening lights were lit to dispel the darkness, Christians were reminded of Jesus Christ, who is the light of the world, the light no darkness can overcome. As they went to their rest, they were reminded that Jesus Christ invites all His faithful to find their rest in Him. As they laid down to sleep they were reminded that sleep is rehearsal for their day of death, when they would lay their body down in this world only to rise again on the day of the resurrection of all flesh.

Still, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. An ancient evening prayer breathes the quiet confidence of all the faithful: "Guide us waking, O Lord, and guard us sleeping that awake we may watch with Christ and asleep we may rest in peace."

And so Christians begin the day: first quiet contemplation and confident prayer, then restful sleep. Refreshed in body and spirit, they rise to face the rest of the day. This is the rhythm of prayer that governs life for the Christian. However, when life begins to govern prayer, things deteriorate. The chaos of life can wreak havoc with the rhythm of prayer.

There is therefore a certain liturgical shape to the Christian life that is taught in the Psalms; not that prayer makes them Christians, but that Christians pray. Prayer is not a means of grace; it is not a channel for God's forgiving love to come to us. But prayer does have the command and promise of God; it is the way Christians go to their Father in heaven. He both directs and invites us to pray. And by this invitation our Heavenly Father invites us into His presence, where our private prayers mingle with the public prayers and praises of the church in both earth and heaven. And these prayers remain forever one; one perpetual liturgy continually offered up to the Father through the Son in the power of the Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen.

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