

Praying with the psalms:

The common pattern we find in the bible for obtaining an answer to a prayer:

1. Take the need to God. 2. Listen for a word from God. 3. Obey that word.

We find a similar pattern in certain psalms. The psalmist takes the need to God. God speaks to the psalmist. The psalmist is filled with joy upon hearing God's voice, and praises God, even though he or she does not yet see their wishes totally fulfilled.

Psalm 12 Help, LORD; for there is no longer any that is godly; for the faithful have vanished from among the sons of men. ² Everyone utters lies to his neighbor; with flattering lips and a double heart they speak. ³ May the LORD cut off all flattering lips, the tongue that makes great boasts, ⁴ those who say, "With our tongue we will prevail, our lips are with us; who is our master?" ⁵ "Because the poor are despoiled, because the needy groan, I will now arise," says the LORD; "I will place him in the safety for which he longs." ⁶ The promises of the LORD are promises that are pure, silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times. ⁷ Do thou, O LORD, protect us, guard us ever from this generation. ⁸ On every side the wicked prowl, as vileness is exalted among the sons of men.

Psalm 6 *The psalmist is groaning on his sick bed, faced with the prospect of death. Acute pain in his bones may suggest cancer. But he lifts up his voice to God, and God answers. He then raises his voice in praise and thanksgiving. He knows his enemies – whether it is heart disease, cancer, or some deadly virus – will flee in sudden disgrace.*

O LORD do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath. ² Be merciful to me, LORD, for I am faint; O LORD, heal me, for my bones are in agony. ³ My soul is in anguish. How long, O LORD, how long? ⁴ Turn, O LORD, and deliver me; save me because of your unfailing love. ⁵ No one remembers you when he is dead. Who praises you from the grave? ⁶ I am worn out from groaning; all night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears. ⁷ My eyes grow weak with sorrow; they fail because of all my foes. ⁸ Away from me, all you who do evil, for the LORD has heard my weeping. ⁹ *The LORD has heard my cry for mercy; the LORD accepts my prayer.* ¹⁰ All my enemies will be ashamed and dismayed; they will turn back in sudden disgrace.

Psalm 20 *The entire nation of Israel prays for their king who leads them into battle to defend them from their enemies. We can apply this psalm to ourselves. I am the king, and the saints are praying for my success.*

The LORD answer you in the day of trouble! The name of the God of Jacob protect you! ² May he send you help from the sanctuary, and give you support from Zion! ³ May he remember all your offerings, and regard with favor your burnt sacrifices! (Selah) ⁴ May he grant you your heart's desire, and fulfil all your plans! ⁵ May we shout for joy over your victory, and in the name of our God set up our banners! May the LORD fulfil all your petitions! ⁶ *Now I know that the LORD will help his anointed; he will answer him from his holy heaven with mighty victories*

by his right hand. 7 Some boast of chariots, and some of horses; but we boast of the name of the LORD our God. 8 They will collapse and fall; but we shall rise and stand upright. 9 Give victory to the king, O LORD; answer us when we call.

Psalm 28 *The psalmist pours out his bitterness and desire for vengeance upon God. God answers him, and his bitterness is removed, and he is filled with love and joy. Such psalms teach us that it is good to express our anger and bitterness in our prayer to God, instead of repressing them. When we are in the presence of God, we should not smother our feelings of hurt and anger with sweet loving sentiments. Give the anger to God, and God will replace it with love, joy and peace.*

To you I call, O LORD my Rock; do not turn a deaf ear to me. For if you remain silent, I will be like those who have gone down to the pit. 2 Hear my cry for mercy as I call to you for help, as I lift up my hands toward your Most Holy Place. 3 Do not drag me away with the wicked, with those who do evil, who speak cordially with their neighbors but harbor malice in their hearts. 4 Repay them for their deeds and for their evil work; repay them for what their hands have done and bring back upon them what they deserve. 5 Since they show no regard for the works of the LORD and what his hands have done, he will tear them down and never build them up again. 6 Praise be to the LORD, for he has heard my cry for mercy. 7 The LORD is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and I am helped. My heart leaps for joy and I will give thanks to him in song. 8 The LORD is the strength of his people, a fortress of salvation for his anointed one. 9 Save your people and bless your inheritance; be their shepherd and carry them forever.

Psalm 62 *The psalmist has suffered at the hands of hypocrites. In contrast to the delusion and vanity of the world, God offers power and steadfast love.*

For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation. 2 He only is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be greatly moved. 3 How long will you set upon a man to shatter him, all of you, like a leaning wall, a tottering fence? 4 They only plan to thrust him down from his eminence. They take pleasure in falsehood. They bless with their mouths, but inwardly they curse. 5 For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him. 6 He only is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken. 7 On God rests my deliverance and my honor; my mighty rock, my refuge is God. 8 Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us. 9 Men of low estate are but a breath, men of high estate are a delusion; in the balances they go up; they are together lighter than a breath. 10 Put no confidence in extortion, set no vain hopes on robbery; if riches increase, set not your heart on them. 11 *Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this:* that power belongs to God; 2 and that to you, O Lord, belongs steadfast love. For thou dost requite a man according to his work.

Psalm 85 *The psalmist takes his experience of national disaster – war, pestilence, or famine – to God, who promises prosperity and abundance.*

LORD, You once favored, your land, restored the good fortune of Jacob. 3 You forgave the guilt of your people, pardoned all their sins. (Selah) 4 You withdrew all your wrath, turned back your burning anger. 5 Restore us once more, God our savior; abandon your wrath against us. 6 Will

you be angry with us forever, drag out your anger for all generations? ⁷ Please give us life again, that your people may rejoice in you. ⁸ Show us, LORD, your love; grant us your salvation. ⁹ *I will listen for the word of God*; the LORD speaks peace to his people, to the faithful, to those who trust in him. ¹⁰ Near indeed is salvation for the loyal; prosperity will fill our land. ¹¹ Love and truth will meet; justice and peace will kiss. ¹² Truth will spring from the earth; justice will look down from heaven. ¹³ The LORD will surely grant abundance; our land will yield its increase. ¹⁴ Prosperity will march before the Lord, and good fortune will follow behind.

Not all the psalms of the Bible have this dialogue structure. Many psalms are songs of praise with no petition, such as Psalms 149 and 150.

The psalms were so important for the early church that every time they gathered together to pray, they would read one or more psalms.

Ephesians 5:18-20 And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in *psalms* and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, always and for everything giving thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father.

Colossians 3:16-17 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and sing *psalms* and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

1 Corinthians 14:26 Then what should it be like, brothers and sisters? When you come together each of you brings a *psalm* or some instruction or a revelation. (*The Greek word for psalm is psalmos. In every other instance where this word appears in the New Testament it always has the unambiguous meaning of psalm, and not hymn. Some bibles – NIV, RSV, NRSV - translate the Greek word psalmos as “hymn” in 1 Cor 14:26, but there is no justification for that. Most bibles have the correct translation.*)

We know that the early Christians used the psalms when they gathered together for prayer. In Acts 4:24 – 31 when the Christians were threatened with persecution by the religious authorities of Jerusalem, they turned to God in prayer, and quoted from Psalm 2 in their prayers.

Jesus himself quoted from the psalms on at least 11 different occasions in the gospels. The last words of Jesus on the cross “Into your hands I commend my spirit” is taken from Psalm 35. After his resurrection Jesus mentions the five books of Moses collectively as the “law of Moses”, and all the prophetic books as “the prophets”, but the only single OT book that he mentions specifically is the Book of Psalms:

Luke 24:44 Jesus said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and in the prophets and *psalms* must be fulfilled.”