

## You Don't Have to Be a Poet to Pray

I can understand why so many struggle to pray. Since the Psalms are often presented to us as the Bible's prayer book, we might believe we have to be poets or orators to pray for real. The flowery expressions, lofty language, figurative images, powerful praise can seem like more than we can come up with in our moments of need. We want to pray, we want to confess, we want to praise, we want to plead, but we are certain our prayers will fall short. After all, God is God and we are not. How can our flimsy attempts at prayer do anything but fail to impress Him?

And so, we give up. We toss up our hands in frustration. We walk away, wishing we could pray like those amazing saints of old, but convinced we never will. Why bother?

Here's the key. The likelihood is those saints of old didn't pray like that either, not at least in their moments of distress and need. What we have in the psalms is not their heat of the moment prayers. We have their stylized versions memorializing what God had done for them in response to their prayers.

Don't believe me? Consider **Isaiah 38:3** versus **Isaiah 38:10-20**. In the latter, we see a profound poem memorializing Hezekiah's prayer for healing and God's gracious granting of the request. However, in the former, we see the actual prayer. The latter is filled with flowery expressions and lofty language. The former is...well...very similar to what we would pray.

Hezekiah prayed: "Please, O LORD, remember how I have walked before you in faithfulness and with a whole heart, and have done what is good in your sight" (**Isaiah 38:3**, ESV). Then he wept bitterly. This recorded prayer even forgets the petition. But God heard and granted the request. So then, when he had time to think it through, Hezekiah was able to memorialize this event in the psalm we see in **Isaiah 38:10-20**.

We can go to a whole host of psalms that scholars claim might have come from the time when David was running from Absalom. For instance, consider **Psalms 55**. This psalm could well have been written during the time when Absalom was turning David's friends against him, when Absalom was gaining the counsel of Ahithophel and using it against David. How easily we might envision David on the run, overcome with emotion, and yet he was such a talented pray-er that this psalm just flows from his lips extempore. And once again we view ourselves as hopeless and helpless in prayer. We'll never pray like David. However, David's actual prayer about Ahithophel and his counsel is recorded in Scripture, and it really isn't all that remarkable. "O LORD, please turn the counsel of Ahithophel into foolishness" (**II Samuel 15:31**, ESV).

I could never produce something like **Psalms 55** on the spur of the moment. I doubt I could produce anything like it if I spent hours and days trying to craft a great prayer. But, I can pray like **II Samuel 15:31**. That is easy. That is simply laying out my need in bald statements. That is just telling God like it is. That is just making my request to God the way I would to anyone else.

Instead of allowing the psalms to paralyze our prayers, we need to remember what they were. They were poems that took work for their original authors just like they would us. They are crafted and stylized memorials of events that happened in the lives of the psalmists. They are not extemporaneous explosions of prayer from uber-talented individuals. They are inspired expressions that are from the Holy Spirit and not simply from men. They are given to help us pray, to express our emotions in ways we are not likely to come up with on our own. We can use them in our praying, but we need not think we have to mirror them perfectly in our own spur of the moment praying.

Granted, you may want to try your hand at poetry like these ancient worthies. You may or may not be able to produce verse as profound and meaningful as theirs. After all, there are some really good poets throughout history who are not divinely inspired. You may be one of them. On the other hand, when it comes to poetry you may want to just throw up your hands and give up on it. That's fine. God isn't asking for more poets.

But He is asking for prayers. If you want to pray, don't let the psalms paralyze you. You don't have to be a poet to pray. Just tell God whatever is on your heart. If you do, you'll be praying like the Psalmists prayed.

—Edwin L. Crozier