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Deeper Places

The Spirituality of the Psalms

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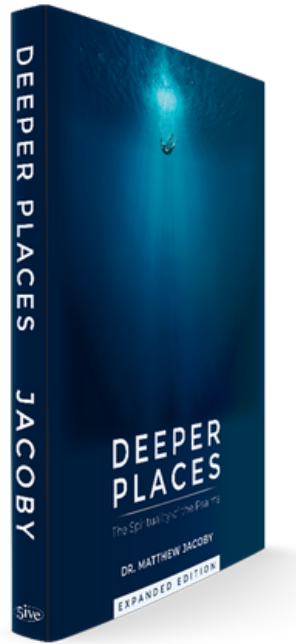
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DEEPER PLACES

The Spirituality of the Psalms

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INTRODUCTION

How lovely is your dwelling place,
O Lord Almighty!
My soul yearns, even faints,
for the courts of the Lord;
my heart and my flesh cry out
for the living God.

PSALM 84:1-2

In Search of Reality

“I feel nothing.” That is how many Christians would honestly respond when asked how they really feel about God. Beyond brief moments of inspiration and a basic underlying conviction, most people struggle to attain anything more than a remote and abstract idea about God. It is a symptom of a faith focused on concepts and propositions rather than real, personal encounter. We are children of our scientific culture, a culture obsessed with information about things. So we find our minds crammed with ideas about God, with concepts and facts about who God is and what he has done, but too often the reality of God is as remote to us as the reality of

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black holes and supernovas. It is little wonder, then, that we have no emotional connection with these facts. They are as abstract as a mathematical equation. It is true that three plus two equals five, but I cannot summon up any passion for that truth. I cannot love an idea. I can only love a person with whom I have some experience. The Bible tells us that we can have a real relationship with the real God. In fact, this is commonly and correctly upheld by theologians to be the main purpose of human life: to know God, to glorify God, to enjoy God. The Good News is that no matter what we have or haven't done, we have access to God through Jesus Christ, who paid for all our sins. If we put our faith in him, we can become God's children.

If you have been a Christian for some time, you no doubt have heard this Good News again and again from hundreds of different angles. You probably have also been encouraged to *delight* in this message, to share it with others as the most wonderful news in the world, and even to rejoice in this message by singing songs of praise and thanks to God for what he has done. But what do you feel? Do you feel anything?

It may well be that the more you hear this message the more aggravatingly boring it becomes precisely because the only thing you feel when you hear it is the pressure to feel something you just don't feel. It can be like people continually telling you about a wonderful place but not telling you how to get there, or whether it is even possible to get there. As long as the Good News remains a matter of abstract facts, it will have little more effect on your life than your insurance policy has on the way you drive.

Great Expectations

I get the impression sometimes that a relationship with God, for many Christians, means little more than the possession of a spiritual status that gives them assurance of going to heaven when they die. In this case, being adopted as a child of God is more about knowing where one stands with God than actually knowing God himself in the relational sense. The whole thing is abstract and removed, as though the object of faith is a great contract in heaven rather than a person. Perhaps Christians tend to think like this because they have accommodated their expectations to their lack of real, personal experience. They have tried to normalize their failure to engage with God.

If we believe that Jesus has given us access to God, to be children of God and to love and be loved by God, then the clear implication is that we should *not* be content with knowing *about* God. We should not be content with anything less than knowing God with greater intimacy and more experiential engagement than we know and experience with any other person. Is such a thing possible? I imagine there is probably little within you that feels this to be in reach. You have probably accommodated your expectations to what you lack. It is difficult to live with a conviction *about* God while lacking any sense of real engagement *with* God. It is difficult to live in continual spiritual frustration, so we tend to lower our expectations and then try to justify those lowered expectations.

We will find lots of literature to help us justify our lowered expectations of God, but we won't find any in the Bible. The more we read the Bible, the harder we will have to work to maintain low expectations of God. For example, if Moses could speak with God "face to face, as a man speaks with his friend" (Exod. 33:11), how

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can we possibly justify an expectation of a lesser experience for us now? Is God's plan regressive? Are we to believe that what we have now is less than what Moses had? The more we read the Bible, the more frustrated we will get by the gaping incongruity between what is promised to us and what we actually have. This will bring us to a crucial junction of decision, and it is here that many people take the wrong turn.

Many people make the mistake of assuming that this tension between promise and reality is something to be avoided, that they must either lower their expectations of God or convince themselves that they have something they clearly don't have. But this very tension is a crucial element in the formation of a spiritual capacity to know God. I will say more about this in the following chapters, but suffice it to say now that the common avoidance of the tension between human reality and divine promise is evidence that we may have adopted inadequate notions of the spiritual life, to say the least. If we feel compelled to lower our expectations or embrace delusions in response to this tension, it is only because the expectations we had in the first place were seriously contaminated. It is not that we can ever have too high expectations of God. The contamination of our expectations is our misunderstanding of the *process* by which we attain what the Bible promises. It is not so much *what* we expect that is the initial problem but *how* we expect to get there. The failure of bad processes so often leads to disillusionment, which in turn leads to severely stunted expectations.

Beyond Token Piety

Read the Bible and pray. That is the nutshell prescription I was given as a young Christian for building my personal relationship

with God. It is simple and achievable. You read God's Word, and you pray for yourself and others. That advice will get us started, but it won't be long before we realize that the spiritual journey, the experience of relating to God, is far from simple.

Due to the complexities of our dysfunctional hearts, we all begin our journey with God in the middle of a vast spiritual labyrinth. There is a sense of simplicity to be gained in the spiritual life, but it is not where we begin. If we make the spiritual life a simple matter of achieving goals using step-by-step processes and daily habits, it becomes more about personal achievement than real relationship. It is so easy, then, for the spiritual life to become little more than a religion of token gestures of piety that only serve to make us feel we have fulfilled our duty toward God. We should indeed read our Bibles and pray, but this advice is just too simplistic to be helpful to anyone who really wants to have a deep relationship with God.

So where do we look for an account of spirituality that is deeply relational, that is congruent with the complexities of life, that affirms the tensions of human existence, and that goes beyond simplistic and pragmatic notions of the spiritual life? To me, the answer is obvious, but not because of any brilliance on my part. It was an accidental discovery and by no means unique. The answer has always been right in front of our eyes and most probably on the tips of our tongues, if we have been a Christian for any length of time. It is contained in the book of the Bible that has been the most utilized part of Scripture (though less so in our time), the one most widely quoted (even in the Bible itself), and the one that successive generations of Bible scholars have acknowledged to be the defining example of biblical spirituality. I discovered it not initially because I was a Bible teacher but because I was a musician. I discovered a book of songs in the middle of my Bible.

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The biblical Psalter, the book of Psalms, attracted me as a creative challenge long before I really came to understand it. It took years to understand the psalms, partly because the spirituality they portrayed is so countercultural to the spiritual environment I came into as a young Christian. With my band, Sons of Korah, I have worked for over fifteen years adapting the psalms to music and touring the world, singing them night after night. As time has gone on, I have found them doing unexpected things to me, and as a result, I have begun to understand what the purpose of this book actually is and how it can perform its function in my life.

The Trodden Path

It is always important, when interpreting a text of any type, to ask not only what it is saying but also what it was intended to *do*. What was its function? When we discover this, particularly with respect to the Bible, we discover the *meaning* of a text. The meaning of any part of Scripture is found when we discover what God is *doing* by having the text say what it is saying.

The Psalter is the most practical book of the Bible. It was not compiled just as a book to be read but as a tool to be used. For most of its history—since its final compilation somewhere after 500 BC—the contents of the book were not read by people or even read *to* people. Rather, the psalms were sung and prayed. This, I believe, is how the psalms yield their meaning. As I have discovered after many years of singing the psalms, it is by *using* the psalms that we begin to discover what they were actually intended to *do*.

The psalms show us what authentic spirituality looks like, and in this sense, they should shape our expectations of the spiritual life. The ultimate purpose of the psalms is not just to portray

authentic spirituality but to draw us into the experience of those who went before us, those whose lives were used by God to create key spiritual precedents for us to base our lives upon. The psalms belong to a corporate spiritual context in which the acts of God in the lives of people were celebrated and commemorated annually. Many psalms were either written for or preserved specifically for commemoration festivals such as the Passover, the Feast of Weeks, and the Feast of Firstfruits. In these festivals, the people sought to find God in the present by connecting with his actions in the past. The psalms were seen as something akin to tracks in the jungle cut by those who had gone before. We are not left to work out the way for ourselves. The path has been trodden down, and we are invited to walk in this path and continue where the psalm writers left off.

David and the other writers of the psalms were the pioneers of the Spirit-filled life. The Spirit of God worked in and through them to show us what we can all discover for ourselves now that the Spirit of God has been poured out into our hearts. The psalms were written not to dictate religious habits or to achieve certain ends. They are expressions of the heart written to cultivate in us the very heart that they themselves express. They are given to us to shape our innermost desires and thereby to open up our capacity to live in relationship with God.

The fact that the psalms were written as songs should serve to underline the nature of their purpose. Music is the language of the heart, and it was for this language that the psalms were written. They were written not just to tell us *about* God but to draw us into an encounter *with* God. In this sense, the psalms both exemplify and potentially impart the very thing that the rest of the Bible directs us toward as the ultimate goal of human existence: a love relationship with God in which we glorify and enjoy God forever.

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The biblical faith is not a religion we observe in order to achieve some level of status in God's favor. Faith is a relationship to be enjoyed and cherished. It is a matter of the heart, not to the exclusion of the intellect but flowing from the heart of love to the whole being and life of the individual. And faith is not individualistic. It has as its ultimate goal the reinvigoration of true community, the full expression of the kingdom of heaven on earth. Each of the psalms was selected and incorporated into Scripture by God's providence because it exemplified the ideals and goals of the biblical faith. The psalms became the primary tool by which the ancient faith of Abraham, Moses, and David was to be passed on from generation to generation.

Earthly Spirituality

If there was ever a time to search the Bible for a portrait of authentic spirituality, it is today. Our overentertained modern minds are prone to adopt highly romanticized notions of spirituality that inevitably lead us to disillusionment. A romanticized spirituality is one that creates a context in which we would like to live rather than the situation we actually have. We can tend to think that the expression of our hearts should be just like those of the worshipers in heaven. We can have a taste of heaven now, and, in fact, we are called to be the vessels through which the kingdom comes "on earth as it is in heaven." But, again, this is not a reality we begin with. We don't live in heaven; we live on earth. We live in an imperfect world, and we begin with highly dysfunctional spiritual capacities. Just because we can and should be experiencing certain heavenly realities does not mean that we are.

The wonderful thing about the psalms is that they show us how

to begin where we are. We are not expected to begin with some heightened state of spiritual ecstasy. We can and must begin where we are. What we need is not a heavenly spirituality but an earthly spirituality that captures the present tension between what we have already and what remains unfulfilled. This is precisely what we have in the psalms.

The Purpose of This Book

To get in touch with the reality of God, we must first get in touch with the reality of our own situation. Self-realization is the first step toward any realization of the truth of things outside us. We cannot experience the reality of God while we remain in our fantasy-world cocoons.

The spiritual journey portrayed in the psalms, therefore, begins with the saddest and harshest realities of life. From here, the path winds upward into the embrace of God, and we find here a state of heart that, according to the psalms, is the ultimate state of happiness. From this happiness flows a joy that is both profound and indomitable. This is the shape of the journey we will take in this book. We will begin with a downhill descent into the valley of reality before ascending to the mountain of joy. On the way, we will visit the dominant experiences portrayed in the Psalter.

My purpose here is not to examine the Psalter itself as a piece of ancient literature. That is a valuable endeavor, and many books have been written about the psalms on that level. My intention here is to use the psalms as windows into the experiences of people—experiences that exemplify the life of faith from an inside perspective. The psalms are the expressions of people who had real interactions with a real God, and at their highest points, the psalms

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testify to an unshakable joy that must be desired by every person. But how did they get there? What does that road look like? These are questions that the psalms answer, and, in fact, I would even suggest that when we begin to use the psalms as a guide for this journey, we are beginning to grasp the meaning of this amazing biblical book of songs.