

Lord Teach us to Pray

Edward H. Schroeder

[Printed in Nexus, Vol. 2:1 (Nov. 1961).]

“Pious Roman Catholics pray the entire Psalter once a week, Anglicans once a month, Lutheran s almost never.”

Why?

In public worship we tolerate the psalms. The synodical hymnal includes about one third of them. The Sunday introit and gradual preserve a snatch of them. In Walther League “vespers” we frequently recite one. Some of our favorite hymns are metrical retranslations of psalms, e.g., “A Mighty Fortress,” Psalm 46.

But in private worship the Psalter is largely a closed book – and perhaps in public worship, too, except that public forms take longer to change. Is the reduction of a whole psalm to one or two verses in the introit and gradual perhaps not our admitting that even in public worship the psalm is meaningless?

A common epigram calls to our attention that if you open your printed Bible right in the center you land in the Psalter. Although this point is a book-binder’s accident, it can alert us to the centrality of the Psalter in another matter. The Psalter is the one book of the scriptures which makes no bones about being the words of men. While other Biblical literature is God’s Word to men, the Psalter constitutes men’s words back to God. Whereas the other Biblical literature is intent on revealing to man how God feels about man, the Psalter expresses to God how man feels about God. The verb “feel” is purposely chosen here, for what we would call the Psalmist’s psychic state and mental attitudes, his aches and pains, his pleasures and problems, his boredom and anger, his impatience and his envy – in short, all that we normally include when we ask, “How do you feel?” – all these are openly and unabashedly poured out in the texts of the Psalms.

But in the Psalter these feelings are not poured out to the counselor or to the dear friend. Instead they are all poured out to God. So the Psalter is a prayerbook, a collection of prayers which seems to have had only one limiting factor: Is it human? Are these prayers an expression of what men experience? Is this actually the way men “feel?” And not merely the pious man’s experience is found in these prayers, but the experience of the impious, too. It is not as though the Psalm collector solicited prayers of unbelievers to get a well-rounded collection, but the pious man of God himself finds within him all the experience of the impious man, too. The very fact that the Psalmist can pour out his impiety to God is evidence of how he really feels about God, for without previous experience of God’s favorable attitude toward him, the Psalmist would not dare to admit to God his unfaith and the vast variety of times and places wherein he gave vent to that unfaith.

The Psalter is also the Word of God in a way that many other Biblical books are not, at least not quite. For the Psalter becomes the Word of God in that God accepts these prayers and takes them to Himself, takes them to heart and thereby, they become God’s property. But then God turns around the gives them back to us. Through His mysterious workings God saw to it that the Psalter got into the Old Testament. No one has yet

discovered even shreds of important evidence to indicate how this development actually happened. What “chances” (read: “grace of God”) in history were responsible for the preservation of individual prayers, and the scrolls of collected prayers, and the “good memory” of some Israelite? What “synodical committee” finally decided to include this alien collection of words of men in a canon otherwise devoted exclusively to the Word of God?

Not only has God seen to it that the Psalter got into the Old Testament, but that the Old Testament got into the collected Christian scriptures (no small miracle itself), and finally that the scriptures of the Old and New Testament finally got down to us who live in these last days. St. Paul seems to have this “gracious transmission” of the Old Testament in mind when he says that “these things were written for our learning.” The original prayer of a particular Psalm may have meant an infinite variety of things in the mind and mouth of the originator, and how his “inspiration” transpired is beyond our view; but God had it put down on parchment, not for the original author’s sake, but for **our** sake.

God has given the Psalter back to men, not back to the original authors, but back to **us**; and he says in effect: “Here is a collection of prayers which I have accepted. You go ahead and pray them. They are acceptable prayers. They fairly well run the gamut of everything you will ‘feel’ – good, bad, and impassive – if you, too, are still human. In fact, these prayers may well reveal to you for the first time some of the things that you do indeed feel even though you are unaware of it. You may be prone to read through one of the psalms and respond that it says nothing about you at all. This can be an honest reaction, although it may actually be telling you more about yourself than about the irrelevance of the prayer. For do you really know what you ought to be praying for? Do you really know what your genuine needs are? Unless you have progressed beyond the first twelve Christians, you, too, most likely need to be taught to pray. ‘Lord teach us to pray’ is not only the first prayer the twelve disciples prayed, but is quite likely your first prayer, too, if you are a disciple.”

We need to be taught to pray, because we are chronically prone to pray wrong. Not only do we have to be taught, but we have to be commanded to pray, for we are chronically prone not to pray at all. What Luther says about the Lord’s prayer in the Large Catechism is good for the Psalter, too. “In addition to God’s command (to have us pray) and his promise (to listen to us), God comes to our aid and puts into our mouths the very words we are to use, that we may know how sincerely He is interested in our needs (even our need, i.e., **lack**, of faith) and may never doubt that such prayer is pleasing to Him and shall surely be heard. So this prayer is superior to any that we may be disposed to “make up” on our own. For in them our consciences might ever be in doubt and say: I have prayed, but who knows if it pleases God, or if I have used the right form or measure. There is no more admirable prayer on earth, then, than the Lord’s Prayer, because it bears the superior testimony that God loves to hear it. . . It serves to remind us of our need and teaches us earnestly to reflect upon that need, that we may not neglect to pray. **WE ALL HAVE NEEDS ENOUGH, BUT THE GREAT TROUBLE IS, WE DO NOT REALIZE THEM.**”

Read through Luther’s quotation again and substitute the Psalter for every reference to the Lord’s Prayer. For us, Psalter, too, is words coming from God to be put into our mouth to be prayed back to God. Bonhoeffer has remarked that human children

learn to speak by having parents teach them the very words they are to say and that God the Father works the same way with His children. By allowing the Psalter's inclusion in the canon God bears testimony that He loves to hear it. In its 150 variations, this prayerbook reminds us of our needs and of the greatest of all our needs, viz., that we do not realize them.

It must be said that the Christian does not pray the Psalter in the same way that the Old Testament believer did, for between the Christian and the Old Testament believer there now stands the person and work of Christ. Christ is not, however, the cause of our separation from the Old Testament pray-er and His collection of prayers. Much more Christ is the connecting link that makes these prayers ours and makes us one with the Old Testament pray-er himself. The Psalter was our Lord's prayerbook (e.g., in his "Eli, Eli . . ." cry from the cross he was praying Psalm 22), and was the touchstone for the apostolic generation as they sought to unfold and understand their continuity with God's ancient people. The apostles did not establish this continuity, nor did they arbitrarily pick the Psalter as a key to it. Actually it was foisted upon them, and foisted upon them by none other than their Lord Himself. If this Lord of the apostles is also our Lord, then He has also established for us this connection with the Old Testament, and with the Psalter. And because above all else he has established for us the full and final connection with the Father, we now pray every prayer to the Father through the middle-man workings of Christ. In short, we also pray the Psalter together with Christ. As Christians, as members of His body, there is finally nothing we can do **without** Him. ("Without Me you can do nothing" may not merely mean that without Christ we are helpless, but that once we have come into Christ, there is no longer anything we can do without Him. In a sense we're "stuck" – stuck, because **HE** won't let go.)

Perhaps this connection with Christ is the clue to praying those Psalms which "don't seem to mean anything to me." The reason they don't mean anything may be that I am merely thinking of "God and me", and forgetting that Christ is praying this Psalm along with me. I may actually be trying to do something without Him. Thus the Psalm might not actually be "about me", but about my **alter ego**, my other self, my Lord Christ.

To take the Lord Christ more consciously into my prayer life is no earth-shaking revelation. But it is the **key** to Christian prayer and to the Christian use of the Psalter.

One of the jobs for the future is to take the "superior" prayer of our Lord, the Lord's Prayer, and collate it with the prayerbook He personally used most often, the Psalter. Even a mere superficial parallel placement of the Psalter alongside the Lord's Prayer reveals how frequently one or more of the seven petitions is indeed **the** petition of a particular Psalm. Luther's Large Catechism exposition of the Lord's Prayer with its deeper penetration into the meaning of each of the seven petitions is a tool for deeper understanding and appreciation of the petitions in the Psalter.

The high priestly prayer of our Lord (John 17) because of its close parallels to the Lord's Prayer (e.g., the first petition and "Keep them in thy name," or the seventh petition and "Keep them from the evil one") and also because of its central position to the concept "prayer in Jesus' name" is surely another key to unlock the riches of the Psalter.

The devotional use of the Psalter is still one of the great unknowns in our church. May this article encourage someone to knock off the rust from this buried treasure and at least get a glimpse of the gold.

Lord, teach us to pray!

--- Professor Edward H. Schroeder