
The Songbook of the Bible

DAVE BAST

Have you ever been at a loss for words when you pray? Maybe you are feeling blessed beyond words; or maybe your heart is breaking. Well, this week on *Groundwork*, we turn to the Psalms to express our deepest human emotions, and begin a series on this songbook of the Bible. Dr. Tim Brown joins us as we discuss how the Psalms can give words to our most earnest prayers. Stay tuned.

BOB HEERSPINK

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Bob Heerspink.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

BOB HEERSPINK

Dave, I don't know if you have ever had the experience I have had, but sometimes in the toughest moments of life, prayer becomes so very, very difficult. We know we have to pray – I know I have to pray, but what do you say?

DAVE BAST

Well, not only the tough times; sometimes when we are filled with gratitude and joy, we say: Thank you, thank you, thank you; but is there more? Can we express it a little more deeply than that?

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, and that is really why we are getting into a new series here on *Groundwork*, where we are actually going to go to scripture and say: Okay, what does scripture have to teach us about how to pray? And the best place to go in scripture is the book of Psalms.

DAVE BAST

A great Christian father of the Church named St. Athanasius once said that in most of the Bible or in the rest of the Bible God speaks to us, but in the book of Psalms, we speak to God, and God gives us the words even there to speak back to him.

BOB HEERSPINK

And when we went to some of our social media sites and asked some questions to our listeners: What do you think of the Psalms? How do you use the Psalms? We got some great responses, and one of them I would like to share from Audrey; she says: Psalms is a book that all of humanity can relate to. The ups and downs of life are dealt with so honestly, often with raw emotion; but most of all, I love the ultimate reference to God's constant, abiding presence and faithfulness in both the joys and sorrows of life.

DAVE BAST

Well, we also want to invite reflection from a good friend who has done a lot of work teaching the Psalms, memorizing the Psalms, preaching the Psalms, and we welcome today into our program Dr. Tim Brown. Tim is Professor of Preaching at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan, and he is also the president

of that seminary. So Tim, it is great to have you with us today. Thanks for joining *Groundwork*.

TIM BROWN

David and Bob, thank you very much. I am thrilled to be here.

DAVE BAST

So, what about the idea that the Psalms is this wonderful resource that not only expresses our emotions to God, but teaches us how to speak back to him – how to pray?

TIM BROWN

Oh, absolutely. You know, something I like to say to students... in our cultural context, the prize is your heart, your emotion, your passion. I like to say to students that the heart is a necessary precondition to praying, but it is an insufficient precondition. We need a better teacher than our own emotions, and that better teacher is the Psalms.

BOB HEERSPINK

So, if we just rely upon our own selves in terms of what our prayers should look like, they are going to be pretty anemic.

TIM BROWN

I think that is exactly right, and partly what the Apostle Paul was getting at in Romans 8: We do not know how to pray as we ought; so the Spirit, of course, intercedes, but we also have the Psalter to intercede on our behalf to give us the words to say.

DAVE BAST

So, we started this series with the idea that the Psalms can help us express our emotions to God, whatever we are feeling: Up, down, sorrow, worry; but you are suggesting they actually take it a step further and can teach us what emotions we should be feeling.

TIM BROWN

Oh, exactly so. In fact, the very great author that you were referring to a moment ago, Athanasius, has something along those lines – remarkable. He says of the Psalms, “It was indeed for this reason that he – that is to say, he is referring to the Lord – that he made this resound in the Psalms before his sojourn in our midst, so that just as he provided the model of the earthly and the heavenly man in his own person, so also from the Psalms he who wants to do so,” listen to this, “can learn the emotions and dispositions of the souls; finding in them also the therapy and correction suited for each emotion.”

DAVE BAST

Unpack that a little bit.

TIM BROWN

Well, not only do the Psalms give us the proper way to feel about a range of emotions, it also heals those very emotions that we have, because we have disordered affections; and the Psalmist has this remarkable capacity to heal us inwardly.

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, maybe that is why, the older we get, the more we appreciate the Psalms.

TIM BROWN

Oh, I think that is absolutely true.

BOB HEERSPINK

As a pastor, I have found that teenagers have a really hard time making sense of the Psalms. They would say to me, they all sound alike; and older folks would say: That is my favorite book; but it is because they have really lived the Psalms, and they have lived the experience of the Psalms...

TIM BROWN

Oh, sure.

BOB HEERSPINK

And the dynamic of the Psalms has worked out in their own lives.

TIM BROWN

Most definitely.

DAVE BAST

Well, let's turn to the Psalms, and start with the very first one as a kind of template, maybe, for the whole book. Perhaps I could read it:

¹Blessed is the one who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; ²but his delight is in the Law of the Lord, and on his Law he meditates day and night. ³He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers. ⁴The wicked are not so; but are like the chaff, which the wind drives away; ⁵therefore, the wicked will not stand in the judgment nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous. ⁶For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

TIM BROWN

Yes.

DAVE BAST

Why, Tim, do you think this is the psalm that stands at the head of the whole book?

TIM BROWN

Well, that is great. You know, there are one hundred fifty psalms. Psalms 3 through 150 are actually the prayers of the Psalms. Psalms 1 and 2 are what one of my teachers, Eugene Peterson, calls pre-prayer. They are the proper disposition for the praying person. Psalm 1: Torah meditation; the blessing accrues to the person who meditates on Torah. Psalm 2: Messiah expectation; the blessing accrues to the person who takes refuge in the Lord. It is pretty interesting; so, you come to prayer through the Psalms first with a commitment to carry these words in your heart, and to let these words prompt a longing for the one who came and is still to come.

BOB HEERSPINK

So that first psalm really sets the stage for who we need to become as we meditate on the Psalms.

TIM BROWN

Absolutely; a person who is focused on the scriptures themselves.

DAVE BAST

And these beautiful images – there is really a double metaphor here – both taken from agriculture in the Middle East, but the righteous person – the person who is rooted in God's word – is like a tree planted by streams, fruitful and prospering...

TIM BROWN

Absolutely.

DAVE BAST

And the wicked, which does not necessarily mean the terribly evil, but simply the person who does not take God into account, they end up like chaff, just sort of empty, dry.

TIM BROWN

Absolutely.

DAVE BAST

Well, I want to pick up, though, on that idea of meditating on God's word, because that is key in the beginning of the Psalms – the one who meditates on the word, his delight is in the Law of the Lord. Let's talk about what that means after this break.

Segment 2

BOB HEERSPINK

Welcome back to *Groundwork*. I am Bob Heerspink, and with me is Dave Bast and Tim Brown, and we are talking about the Psalms, thinking about what it means to meditate on the Psalms. You know, as I think about that word, *meditation*, that can be a scary word because, well, Eastern religion is very much part of our North American culture now, and people say: Hey, Christians – we meditate? You know, transcendental meditation and the like; is that part of our practice? What do we say to people who say this really isn't us?

DAVE BAST

Yes, Bob, I kind of get a bad vibe when I hear the word meditation because I think of some person adopting a yoga posture, sitting cross-legged and saying: Ommm...

BOB HEERSPINK

Following some kind of guru or...

DAVE BAST

Emptying their mind of whatever; but it is a wonderful biblical idea; a very different take on what it means to meditate, right, Tim?

TIM BROWN

Sure; oh, absolutely so; and you have it in Psalm 1. The blessing accrues to the person who meditates upon the Law of the Lord. Here is an interesting thing: Meditate in Hebrew is the word *hagah*; Hebrew is an exotic language and a small one; so one word can mean a lot of different...

DAVE BAST

A small vocabulary, you mean.

Tim Brown: A small vocabulary, exactly.

DAVE BAST

Words have to do double duty.

TIM BROWN

Absolutely; and the word *hagah* literally means to devour or to chew. It shows up again in Isaiah 31; listen to this:

⁴For thus says the Lord, "As a lion or a young lion growls over his prey..." Now, the word growl is *hagah*...

DAVE BAST

Hagah, yes.

TIM BROWN

The same one; so...

DAVE BAST

So the image is gnawing at it, gnawing at it...

TIM BROWN

Exactly; and so the difference really between Eastern meditation and Christian meditation...

DAVE BAST

Or biblical meditation.

TIM BROWN

Or biblical meditation would be the difference between emptying your mind and concentrating your mind. Meditation in this biblical, Christian sense is to focus your mind on the revealed word of the living God.

BOB HEERSPINK

And in our culture, where everything has to come fast, fast, fast, that is not something that we as Christians even find an easy thing to do. Ten minutes for devotions and let's get on with the activities of the day.

TIM BROWN

Well, being ten minutes of devotion is better than no minutes of devotion, but the real prize is to quiet yourself and focus your mind on the word of the Living God.

BOB HEERSPINK

So, Tim, as you think about that in your own practice and what you advise students, do you have some guidelines where you say: Okay, these would really be some helpful ways in which we can fulfill the invitation of Psalm 1?

TIM BROWN

Well, for me, the most basic practice that accrues to meditation is memorizing the scripture; so, line upon line, precept upon precept; trying to lock it deep in my heart; so I say it over and over and over again until I can repeat it without reading it; and this, of course, would have been the practice of our Lord himself, and the early Church. They would have memorized the scripture so that it could be utilized in the midst of all of their spiritual battles at a moment's notice.

DAVE BAST

Yes; we tend to forget that people did not have books.

TIM BROWN

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

Nobody owned books in the ancient world; or for that matter, into the Middle Ages until printing made them widely available. So, you might have a copy of the scripture in the synagogue, or in the church later if you were a Christian, but the only way you could savor it or study it would be to memorize it, to hear it over and over, and hide it in your heart.

TIM BROWN

Sure; even preceding the early Church, in the synagogue members of a community would come to the synagogue to read the only Torah scroll that was available; so if they were going to carry it with them, they would have to memorize it in order to have it at their homes.

DAVE BAST

There is also, though, a larger process to meditating on the word. I know I have heard you talk about the *lectio divina*, and we don't want to get too Latin on people here, but step us through that a little bit. What was that process for reading and meditating on scripture?

TIM BROWN

Sure; that is a great question. *Lectio divina* really refers to a practice adopted by St. Benedict in about the sixth century. It refers to reading the scriptures carefully, meditating on them in a focused way, praying them back to God, and then living them out in practice. So, actually, the Latin words were *lectio* – to read; *meditatio* – to meditate; *oratio* – to pray; and *contemplatio* – to practice.

BOB HEERSPINK

I am struck by that invitation to pray scripture. You know, so often we just see it as something we mine for theological truth; but actually, in this approach to scripture, we are really taking the word of God, whether it is Psalms or, I assume, other passages, and actually praying them to God. It forms the basis of our own communication to God.

TIM BROWN

Oh, most definitely. There are so many grinding, human realities where words escape us. We have no word to offer back; but the Psalter gives us appropriate words to say in the presence of God; and our proof positive for that is Jesus on the cross himself crying out: my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

BOB HEERSPINK

And Jesus used the words of the Psalms, and he is the very incarnate Son of God.

TIM BROWN

Exactly; so, if Jesus would do it, every Christian ought to do it.

DAVE BAST

So let's take Psalm 1 as a case study. How would we appropriate this psalm for this kind of practice of meditation and prayer?

TIM BROWN

Well, I think because Psalm 1 and Psalm 2 have a special role; they provide the predisposition toward the praying person. Psalm 1, meditating on the word; Psalm 2, finding refuge in the one who is to come; they set the dispositions of the soul for the rest of our praying life; and then you begin in Psalm 3 with the actual prayers of the Psalter.

DAVE BAST

So you would not necessarily pray Psalm 1 back to God?

TIM BROWN

I certainly would, but it would be on the order of: Lord, please make me the kind of person who can meditate on your Law day and night. I am so impatient. I am so riddled with a thousand different thoughts. Focus me on your word, O God.

DAVE BAST

Right; help me to start this.

TIM BROWN

Exactly.

BOB HEERSPINK

Tim, you mentioned earlier how important memorization is to you; and I would like to come back to that after a brief break, because I think that is something that you in your own ministry, you have really developed that and you have taught it. It would be great to explore the way in which we can use that technique to fold scripture into ourselves. So we will talk about that after a brief break.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

Welcome back to *Groundwork*. I am Dave Bast, along with my co-host, Bob Heerspink; and today we are joined by special guest, Dr. Tim Brown, professor of preaching and president of Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan; and Tim, we just got to the point where we wanted to dig into how to memorize the Psalms, and for that matter, any part of scripture. Our launching pad is Psalm 1:

¹Blessed is the person who walks not in the counsel of the wicked or stands in the way of sinners, or sits in the seat of scoffers; ²but his or her delight is in the Law of the Lord – the word of God – and on his Law he meditates day and night. So, to meditate we have to chew and take in. I think of the word, savor. You know, you taste the scripture, and you take time with it, and even memorize it; but that is not easy. A lot of us would complain we are too old to memorize. How would you respond to that?

TIM BROWN

Well, I think my first response would be memorization will keep you from getting older still. There is good research that shows that the mind that focuses itself and concentrates increases its mental capacity. So a lot of memory work is applied to people who have a diagnosis of early-onset Alzheimer's. It quiets them and concentrates their mind. Think of doing calisthenics – sit-ups and push-ups and that sort of thing. Memorization is that for the mind.

BOB HEERSPINK

So when you memorize, Tim, how do you go about it? I can hear someone say: Ha, yes, I know I should memorize. It is just so hard. Are there some tips that you would share to say, okay, this is how you really fold scripture into your memory?

TIM BROWN

Sure; let me begin by saying scripture memorization is simple, but it is not easy. There is a world apart between those two words. It is as simple as reading it over and over and over again...

BOB HEERSPINK

So, it is repetition; that is the key.

TIM BROWN

Repetition is the *first* key; there are several others that follow after that. One is soundedness – making sure that in your reading over and over, you are reading it audibly – aloud. Still a third one would be to write it out. That slows you down even more. A fourth one would be to act it out; to think of particular motions that are appropriate to the word that you are memorizing. Still another one would be like the ancient word, hieroglyphic – the writings in the pyramids or the hieroglyphics on the catacombs in Rome. Write a picture of what you are saying, and then all of these things combined will help to create a sort of stickiness in your mind.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, that is interesting. I can hear a teacher saying that is exactly how kids memorize, and so often when it comes to scripture, we just repeat it internally, but you really have to have these other hooks in terms of really grounding it.

DAVE BAST

So, come back to Psalm 1. This has been our base point for this whole program. It seems to me you begin with determination – with the decision. Like so much of life, you know. Do I want to become the kind of person that God says is blessed? Do I want that kind of life? Well, maybe then I am going to take the time – set aside the time – in the quietness of the morning, I will make it a firm appointment that I will spend one-half hour every day meditating on God's word; and then there are these things that you can do; but it starts with that determination. What kind of person do you want to be? The chaff that the wind blows away? End with being an empty shell? Or do you want to be fruitful and productive and green, even in your old age?

TIM BROWN

Exactly. Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, makes a very important observation about the Psalms, that they are done in crisis. Almost all of the psalms, when you read them, there is something very critical at stake. Here in Psalm 1 there is the way of the righteous, which the Lord knows, and then there is the way of the wicked, who perish. I mean, that is a critical difference; so the Psalter is sort of charged with tension in that regard. So that is my first incentive or eagerness; I want to be among those whom the Lord knows, and not like the wicked.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, what I hear you saying in your memorization, you are not just memorizing words; it is really a way of thinking through all these implications for your life. You walk away from your memorization having gone through almost praying the Psalms, and chewing on it. Your memorization is a way to savor the scriptures.

TIM BROWN

Absolutely so; absolutely so; and everything about memorization is so counterintuitive and countercultural. You were referring to that earlier, Bob. It is a way of refocusing and reframing my very life. I need to do this. Every follower of Jesus needs to do this.

BOB HEERSPINK

So, if you have someone now in our audience, and they are saying: Okay, I am going to make that commitment. How often would they need to revisit a scripture to keep it fresh in their memory?

TIM BROWN

Regularly; I mean, I have made this a commitment since 1978. I happened to be invited to a play where a British actor performed the Gospel of Mark. It took about one hour forty minutes from start to finish the Gospel of Mark. I sat transfixed. Two things happened to me. One, a deep sense that the living Christ had accompanied this word, and that Jesus himself was in the theater that night; and the other thing, if an actor would do that for \$5.00 a ticket, maybe a pastor ought to do it just to feed the flock. So I began that night memorizing the Sermon on the Mount. That was the first long section of scripture...

BOB HEERSPINK

That's where you started.

TIM BROWN

That is where I started; and I blessed the Lord every day that I was given that incentive; and I think I have recited the Sermon on the Mount probably 150 times on several continents and almost every state in the Union.

DAVE BAST

In worship.

TIM BROWN

In worship, of course.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

TIM BROWN

Or in the context of a seminar or something like that.

DAVE BAST

Right; yes, right; and then, to me, the beauty of this whole thing is to bring it full circle, to memorize those words so we can meditate on them, so we can store them up in our hearts, so that we can walk with them on the way, and they go with us; but then to pray them back again regularly so that we are praying things that we might not think to pray...

TIM BROWN

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

Except that the scriptures teach us the words, and even the emotions.

TIM BROWN

Exactly so. We do not know how to pray as we ought; the Psalms will give us the proper place to begin our prayers and the proper way to voice our prayers.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, I hope that those listening to the program today have been challenged, like I have been challenged, to take memorization more seriously. Hopefully as we explore the Psalms in upcoming programs, we will see the importance of making these psalms our own.

DAVE BAST

Yes, Bob, I agree. There is a simple takeaway for me: What kind of person do I want to be? Do I want to be the righteous person whom God knows and who flourishes, even into old age? Then I know what I better do. So Tim, thank you very much for joining us. It has been a pleasure.

TIM BROWN

David and Bob, thank you. I am honored.

BOB HEERSPINK

Thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation; and don't forget, it is listeners like you asking questions and participating that keep our topics relevant to your life. So tell us what you are thinking about what you are hearing and suggest topics or passages that you would like to hear about on future *Groundwork* programs. Visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

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