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David & the Psalms

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Psalm 23, A Psalm of David

(Adapted from a sermon by Rev. Adam Hamilton)

All of David's life experiences we've talked about (the good, the bad, and the ugly) have prepared us to come to this particular day, where we learn about his heart...in worship. Today is David the poet, David the singer of hymns, David the lover of God. David is the most prolific *poet* in biblical history. 73 of the 150 Psalms in our Bible were written by David. Or written about him. Think about this: David the poet has been published more than any other poet in human history. His words, his verse, have shaped our language in ways we can't even fathom. So today we look at his poetry, Hebrew poetry called Psalms. The word Psalm is a Greek word that means song or hymn. Our Psalms were the hymn book and prayer book Israel used in worship. There are 150 Psalms. Many were actual songs, with prescribed tunes. But some were meant to be simply shared as prayers. And a few Psalms are affirmations of faith, or creeds that said "This is what we believe as God's people." The book of Psalms is divided into 5 books, just like the Law of Moses is 5 books we call the Pentateuch.

Most of the Bible is God speaking to us. But the Psalms are a human response to God, crying out to the Lord in the midst of the various seasons of life. So the Psalms have things you wouldn't expect to find in the Bible. For example, Psalm 109 is David complaining about his enemies. He says to God, "*May his days be few; may another take his place of leadership. 9 May his children be fatherless and his wife a widow. 10 May his children be wandering beggars; may they be driven from their ruined homes. 11 May a creditor seize all he has; may strangers plunder the fruits of his labor.*" Psalm 109:8-11. I'm gonna go eat worms! So much for "turning the other cheek." It's in there, in the Bible, because the book of Psalms is a human response to life. So when we look at those things, it's not that God wants us to have the heart of David, but that God wants us to know that even King David felt like we do sometimes.

If you have your Bible with you, open it in 1/2. If you don't have a lot of study notes at the end, chances are, you opened up to the Psalms. Dead center. The book of Psalms is literally at the heart of the Bible; **the Psalms are the heart & soul of the Bible**. Real life where God's people cry out to God during the various seasons of life.

Walter Brueggemann wrote *Understanding the Psalms* in 1984. He looks at the seasons we go through in our lives. If you can tune in to those seasons of life, you can unlock the key to the Psalm. This is what I want you to do. Look at your study guide, around the arrows.

1. First is the season of **Orientation**. Brueggemann says when we're on top of the world, at the top of the circle, we experience orientation in our lives. Notice that the arrow inevitably leads downward. Eventually in our lives we experience
2. **Disorientation**. Notice the arrow doesn't last forever. Eventually disorientation swings back upward and leads to a season of
3. **Reorientation**.

Orientation, Disorientation, Reorientation. A basic breakdown of the seasons of our lives.

Orientation is that season when everything is going really well. Your job, the \$ is there, life feels good, and

you experience success and peace. Turbulence is at a minimum, and you are secure. Many of you are experiencing orientation right now in your lives. It's a great place to be! You can just look at nature: a lake or sunset and say "The world is beautiful! God is *so* good!" You go out at night and see the moon and stars, and you just sort of celebrate. Listen to these Psalms of David.

- *"The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that He has made." Psalm 145:8*
- *"When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established, what are people, that you are mindful of them? Humanity, that you care for us?" Psalm 8:3-4*
- *"I will extol you, my God and King, and bless your name forever and ever. Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised. His greatness is unsearchable." Psalm 145:2*

These Psalms of David capture the sense of well-being. Orientation feels good. It's a wonderful place to live your life. But there are 2 dangers to living in orientation all the time.

First, we can have an over-simplistic faith. We can believe that it's always going to be this way, and bad things won't happen to you. Some very popular TV preachers talk about this "God will protect you from everything and bless you with everything if you have enough faith" gospel and it's *not* what God has promised. Some of us have that kind of 3rd grade faith, and about the time something bad happens to us, that level of faith can't sustain us anymore. We falter because God has not come through on promises that *we* made up. A lot of people have this wishful thinking, genie kind of God. And when real life happens, it doesn't work. Many of you have shared how when you were 15 God didn't come through for you, so we turned your back on God.

The other danger is you can become complacent. This is what happened to ancient Israel, over and over again. Here's how it works: God delivers you. You come to faith in Christ. But as things keep going well, you don't find the need to get down on your knees like you used to, like you did when things were going bad. You don't feel the immediacy of God's presence. And you begin to think that things are going well because you're so smart. Or gifted. Or a great business person. Or talented. Or good looking. Things are going well, not because God is the giver of every perfect gift, but because you're pretty good yourself. Until we get shaken up by something bad. And it shakes up our oriented world. Someone does something cruel or evil to us. Sometimes our own drifting away led us somewhere where we feel separated from God. And during those times we enter into a season of **disorientation**.

The world no longer feels stable anymore. Things are really shaken up and troubling to us. We can no longer understand why these bad things are happening: You're out of time. It is cancer. Your stable company downsized. Your spouse left you. Your friend turns their back on you. Disorientation. We're scared. We're frightened. We're confused. And here's what we do in those times. Even though we have not been praying for a long time, we suddenly get "religious" really fast. And we begin coming back to church. We pray, "Lord, help me. Please, Lord, help me!" And of course we want the instant fix. We give God 60 minutes to fix it, and if God doesn't give us the easy fix, then God's just one *more* disappointment to us. You need to know in the midst of the times of disorientation, part of God's mechanism to get us to draw near to Him is to silently stand by, watching and working in quiet ways that you can't see. Sometimes He seems conspicuously absent in our lives, and sometimes the silence is deafening in our ears. And at those times of disorientation, we cry out in words like these, by the Psalmist David:

- *"How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? Psalm 13:1*
- *"I am worn out from groaning. All night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears. My eyes waste away because of grief. They grow weak because of all my foes. Psalm 6:6-7*
- *"Help me, O God. Save me according to your steadfast love. May my accusers be clothed with dishonor. May they be wrapped in their own shame, as in a mantle. With my mouth I will give great thanks to the Lord. I will praise Him in the midst of the throng. For he stands at the right hand of the needy to save them from those who would condemn them to death." Psalm 109:26-31*

Disorientation. Disconnect from God. "How long, O God, how long?" They cry out. These psalms are brutally honest. Some of you can relate right now to their message. You are *not* alone when you are going through rough times. It would have been *easy* for the Psalmist to *remove* all those psalms and put in only the happy songs, the encouraging

songs, the promise songs. But instead God included them in the Scripture to remind you that God knows. He's heard it before. And God can handle what you're going to say to Him. These psalms shake their fists at Him. They're angry with God. And these psalms give you permission to be angry with God, or confused with God, not understanding what's taking place in your life. Do you see? God is big enough to deal with that. He's heard those prayers before. You say "How can God really understand what I'm going through, when I'm going through such terrible times? He's God and I'm down here?"

He understands, because he walked here among us before. Because He experienced through Jesus Christ the feelings of being abandoned by God. Remember when that happened? When he was nailed to the cross? And from the cross he cried out "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" He felt forsaken of God at that moment, just like we do sometimes. You know what's interesting about that line in John's Gospel? You know what he's doing there? He's praying the Psalms. That line comes from Psalm 22; a psalm that Jesus memorized.

Jesus prayed the psalms. If *he* needed the psalms of disorientation, then you will too. Because there are going to be times when bad things happen in this world. Floods and earthquakes that take innocent people's homes. Drunk drivers who kill people. Freak accidents. Times when our bodies break down. Bad things. And when those things happen we need to cry out to God. Not with the simplistic faith of orientation, but with the real heart-felt, agonizing cry for help.

Here's the interesting thing about psalms of disorientation: do you know how they end? With one exception, every one of the complaint psalms of disorientation, ends with a word of hope. They end by saying "But You, O Lord, are my hope. Despite all these things, the fact that I feel like I'm dying, that you aren't hearing my prayer, yet I will trust in You, and I know that You are the only source of my hope, and that You are my Deliverer." And you know what that's saying in the end? It's saying even when you are struggling, hold on tight. Especially if you are struggling, hold on tight. Your knuckles may be white, but you hold on tight to your faith because one day, God is going to deliver you. Disorientation does not last forever. Did you hear that line in one of David's psalms? "*Weeping may endure for a night, yes. But joy is going to come in the morning.*"

And that leads us to **reorientation**. Reorientation: that moment, that season in our lives, where we have just come through hell. Where we have been through that worst time in life, and we have come out the other side. A time we didn't even know would come, and yet it begins to come. It comes to every one of God's people. Here's the thing about reorientation: The joy you feel at reorientation is so profound and so deep, it makes everything pale in comparison. And you begin to say things like David said in these psalms of reorientation. Listen for the note of joy.

- "*I will extol you, O Lord. You have drawn me up. You have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling.*" Psalm 116:8
- "*O Lord my God, I cried to you for help, and you have healed me.*" Psalm 30:2
- "*Sing praises to the Lord. And give thanks to his holy name. For his anger is but for a moment, His favor is for a lifetime.*" Psalm 30:5
- "*You have turned my wailing into dancing. You have taken off my sack cloth and clothed me with joy! O Lord my God I will give thanks to you forever!*" Psalm 30:11

"You have turned my mourning, my lamenting into dancing." Have you been there before? You just couldn't wait to share and shout praise because of what God had done for you. These are the seasons of our life. You will go through seasons of disorientation. Probably again and again and again. And then the disorientation will fade, as you seek God's help. And then reorientation. And then orientation, and back through the cycle again. And the psalms are a gift from God to you in those times.

Some last words about the psalms. The first is that **your worship is an important part of your life**. David, a man's man, who had all you could want in life, wrote poetry to God and sang praise to God. Real men and real women embrace what it meant to be fully alive and fully human, which means worship. You can love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and bring yourself before the Lord. Have a personal friendship and loving relationship with God. That's where Christianity becomes powerful in your life; and not until then.

Second, **It's okay to be angry with God, but don't stop trusting Him**. In real relationships, anger plays a role. It means something's wrong and you need to confront. God, in this case. If you meet someone angry with God, don't freak out. You don't have to defend God. God's big enough to handle it. Just walk with that person, and stand in the gap.

Finally, God is a God of all seasons of life. We have different psalms for the different seasons of our lives. The Psalms are a gift from God to you. A way of helping you remember what is important and true in the seasons of life. I have imagined in my mind that it was at the *end* of David's life that he wrote this greatest of all psalms. When he was 70. That he looked back over his life, from the time he was a small boy, and he saw the hand of God walking with him all those years. As he remembered the joy of becoming king, looking over his kingdom, the victory in the midst of battle, as he reflected at standing at the graveside of 3 of his children over the years. And the pain and the heartache of being betrayed by his friends. Of remembering battles lost and battles won, as he looked over all of those times and seasons, he was able to write these words, which we share as our closing prayer and statement of faith, as you find the most famous of all of David's psalms, the 23rd psalm. Would you join me in making this your prayer and your statement of faith today?

Psalm 23

*The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
2 He makes me to lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside the still waters. 3 He restores my soul;
He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.
4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil; For You are with me;
Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.
5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
You anoint my head with oil; My cup runs over.
6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me All the days of my life;
And I will dwell in the house of the LORD Forever."*

Sermon Notes & Study Guide: David & the Psalms His Gift to You

This study guide is designed to allow you to dig deeper into the themes of the sermon. Study with a friend, a Bible study, or on your own. And enjoy the time!

There are a variety of ways to study the Psalms. Two ideas:

1. Read them and imagine the setting in which they were written. Consider what was happening in David's life for a deeper experience.
2. Use them as an outline for your own prayer and worship to God. Take each line or group of lines, read them aloud, then use the words and thoughts as an entrance into prayer yourself. This is called "praying the Psalms."

Monday—David's Psalms of Orientation, Praise Hymns. Psalms 8, 145, 133, 23. Remember Psalms of Orientation are written when life is good, stable, and secure. Some are psalms of creation, praising God by meditating on nature. Some are hymns of praise. Read and savor each verse. Some are designed to lead us into the Temple of worship. (Psalms of Ascent). How do you think David was feeling when he wrote them? How do you feel when you read and pray them? Are there times when you would not feel like praying these psalms?

Tuesday—David's Psalms of Dis-orientation. Psalms 13, 6, 109. Psalms of Disorientation are composed during times of difficulty, when life seems out of balance. Some are about enemy attacks, or evil persons have triumphed. Others are the result of terrible natural events: illness, drought, death. These have caused the Psalmist pain. Read Psalm 13. Do you feel the writer's anguish? What might David have been facing? Notice that the last 2 lines end with an affirmation of faith, that God will see us through. Read Psalm 6. Have you ever felt that way? Read Psalm 109. Notice how David feels. His prayer is not "Christian." There is no mercy here, only vengeance. This Psalm is not what God wants from us, but of how we sometimes feel, and that God can handle our hurt and anger. It also helps us see what we should not be.

Wednesday—David's Psalms of Re-orientation. Psalms 30, 34, 116. These are written just after God has brought deliverance or relief, when joy and gratitude and praise fill us. They are sometimes reflective. Read Psalm 30. How does David feel? Read Psalm 34. Do you feel the joy David feels? Read 116. This is not classified as David's, but is a powerful psalm of reorientation.

Thursday—Read Psalm 139. Reflect on the depth of God's love for you. Does this scare you? Or does this give you security?

Friday—Read Psalm 23. Pray verse by verse. Take your time. Think of yourself as the lost sheep Jesus spoke about, and how the shepherd stoops down. Have you felt God's staff and rod? What is that in your life? What if "dwelling in the house of the Lord forever" means to start today? What could you do today that would reflect this?