

INTRODUCTION

“Lord, teach us to pray!” So spoke the disciples to Jesus. In doing so, they were acknowledging that they were not able to pray on their own; they had to learn. “To learn to pray” sounds contradictory to us. Either the heart is so overflowing that it begins to pray by itself, we say, or it will never learn to pray. But this is a dangerous error, which is certainly very widespread among Christians today, to imagine that it is natural for the heart to pray. We then confuse wishing, hoping, sighing, lamenting, rejoicing—all of which the heart can certainly do on its own—with praying. But in doing so we confuse earth and heaven, human beings and God. Praying certainly does not mean simply pouring out one’s heart. It means, rather, finding the way to and speaking with God, whether the heart is full or empty. No one can do that on one’s own. For that one needs Jesus Christ.

The disciples want to pray, but they do not know how they should do it. It can become a great torment to want to speak with God and not to be able to do it—having to be speechless before God, sensing that every cry remains enclosed within one’s own self, that heart and mouth speak a perverse language which God does not want to hear. In such need we seek people who can help us, who know something about praying. If someone who can pray would just take us along in prayer, if we could pray along with that person’s prayer, then we would be helped! Certainly, experienced Christians can help us here a great deal, but even they can do it only through the one who alone must help them, and to whom they direct us if they are true teachers in prayer, namely through Jesus Christ. If Christ takes us along in the prayer which Christ prays, if we are allowed to pray this prayer with Christ, on whose way to God we too are led and by whom we are taught to pray, then we are freed from the torment of being without prayer. Yet that is what Jesus Christ wants; he wants to pray with us. We pray along with Christ’s prayer and therefore may be certain and glad that God hears us. When our will, our whole heart, enters into the prayer of Christ, then we are truly praying. We can pray only in Jesus Christ, with whom we shall also be heard.

Therefore we must learn to pray. The child learns to speak because the parent speaks to the child. The child learns the language of the parent. So we learn to speak to God because God has spoken and speaks to us. In the language of the Father in heaven God’s children learn to speak with God. Repeating God’s own words, we begin to pray to God. We ought to speak to God, and God wishes to hear us, not in the false and confused language of our heart but in the clear and pure language that God has spoken to us in Jesus Christ.

God’s speech in Jesus Christ meets us in the Holy Scriptures. If we want to pray with assurance and joy, then the word of Holy Scripture must be the firm foundation of our prayer. Here we know that Jesus Christ, the Word of God, teaches us to pray. The words that come from God will be the steps on which we find our way to God.

Now there is in the Holy Scriptures one book that differs from all other books of the Bible in that it contains only prayers. That book is the Psalms. At first it is something very astonishing that there is a prayerbook in the Bible. The Holy Scriptures are, to be sure, God’s Word to us. But prayers are human words. How then do they come to be in the Bible? Let us make no mistake: the Bible is God’s Word, even in the Psalms. Then are the prayers to God

really God's own Word? That seems difficult for us to understand. We grasp it only when we consider that we can learn true prayer only from Jesus Christ, and that it is, therefore, the word of the Son of God, who lives with us human beings, to God the Father who lives in eternity. Jesus Christ has brought before God every need, every joy, every thanksgiving, and every hope of humankind. In Jesus' mouth the human word becomes God's Word. When we pray along with the prayer of Christ, God's Word becomes again a human word. Thus all prayers of the Bible are such prayers, which we pray together with Jesus Christ, prayers in which Christ includes us, and through which Christ brings us before the face of God. Otherwise there are no true prayers, for only in and with Jesus Christ can we truly pray.

If we want to read and to pray the prayers of the Bible, and especially the Psalms, we must not, therefore, first ask what they have to do with us, but what they have to do with Jesus Christ. We must ask how we can understand the Psalms as God's Word, and only then can we pray them with Jesus Christ. Thus it does not matter whether the Psalms express exactly what we feel in our heart at the moment we pray. Perhaps it is precisely the case that we must pray against our own heart in order to pray rightly. It is not just that for which we ourselves want to pray that is important, but that for which God wants us to pray. If we were dependent on ourselves alone, we would probably often pray only the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer. But God wants it otherwise. Not the poverty of our heart, but the richness of God's word, ought to determine our prayer.

Thus if the Bible contains a prayerbook, we learn from this that not only the word which God has to say to us belongs to the Word of God, but also the word which God wants to hear from us, because it is the word of God's dear Son. It is a great grace that God tells us how we can speak with, and have community with, God. We can do so because we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. The Psalms have been given to us precisely so that we can learn to pray them in the name of Jesus Christ.

At the request of the disciples, Jesus gave them the Lord's Prayer. In it every prayer is contained. Whatever enters into the petitions of the Lord's Prayer is prayed aright; whatever has no place in it, is no prayer at all. All the prayers of the Holy Scriptures are summed up in the Lord's Prayer and are taken up into its immeasurable breadth. They are, therefore, not made superfluous by the Lord's Prayer, but are rather the inexhaustible riches of the Lord's Prayer, just as the Lord's Prayer is their crown and unity. Luther says of the Psalter: "It runs through the Lord's Prayer and the Lord's Prayer runs through it, so that it is possible to understand one on the basis of the other and to bring them into joyful harmony." The Lord's Prayer thus becomes the touchstone for whether we pray in the name of Jesus Christ or in our own name. It makes good sense, then, that the Psalter is very often bound together with the New Testament. It is the prayer of the church of Jesus Christ. It belongs to the Lord's Prayer.

Those Who Pray the Psalms

Of the 150 psalms, 73 are attributed to King David, 12 to the choirmaster Asaph appointed by David, 12 to the levitical family of the children of Korah working under David, 2 to King Solomon, and one to each of the master musicians, Heman and Ethan, probably working under David and Solomon. So it is understandable that the name of David has been connected with the Psalter in special ways.

It is reported that after his secret anointing as king, David was called to play the harp for King Saul, who was abandoned by God and plagued with an evil spirit. "And whenever the evil

spirit from God came upon Saul, David took the lyre and played it with his hand, and so Saul would be relieved and feel better, and the evil spirit would depart from him” (1 Sam. 16:23). That may have been the beginning of David’s composition of the psalms. In the power of the spirit of God, which had come upon him with his anointing as king, he drove away the evil spirit through his song. No psalm from the time before the anointing has been handed down to us. David first prayed the songs, which were later taken up into the canon of Holy Scripture, after he was called to be the messianic king—from whose lineage the promised king, Jesus Christ, was to come.

According to the witness of the Bible, David, as the anointed king of the chosen people of God, is a prototype of Jesus Christ. What befalls David occurs for the sake of the one who is in him and who is to proceed from him, namely Jesus Christ. David did not remain unaware of this, but “being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants upon his throne, he foresaw and spoke of the resurrection of the Christ” (Acts 2:30f.). David was a witness to Christ in his kingly office, in his life, and in his words. And the New Testament says even more. In the Psalms of David it is precisely the promised Christ who already speaks (Heb. 2:12; 10:5) or, as is sometimes said, the Holy Spirit (Heb. 3:7). The same words that David spoke, therefore, the future Messiah spoke in him. Christ prayed along with the prayers of David or, more accurately, it is none other than Christ who prayed them in Christ’s own forerunner, David.

This short observation about the New Testament sheds significant light on the entire Psalter. It refers the Psalter to Christ. How that is to be understood in detail is something we still have to consider. It is important for us that even David prayed not only out of the personal raptures of his heart, but from the Christ dwelling in him. To be sure, the one who prays these psalms, David, remains himself; but Christ dwells in him and with him. The last words of the old man David express the same thing in a hidden way: “The oracle of David, son of Jesse, the oracle of the man whom God exalted, the anointed of the God of Jacob, the dear psalmist of Israel: ‘The Spirit of the Lord speaks through me, his word is upon my tongue.’ ” Then follows a final prophecy of the coming king of righteousness, Jesus Christ (2 Sam. 23:2ff.).

With this we are led once again to the realization that we had affirmed earlier. Certainly not all the Psalms are from David, and there is no word of the New Testament that places the entire Psalter in the mouth of Christ. Nevertheless, the hints already stated must be sufficiently important to us to apply to the entire Psalter what is decisively linked to the name of David. Jesus himself says of the Psalms in general that they announced his death and resurrection and the preaching of the gospel (Luke 24:44ff.).

How is it possible that a human being and Jesus Christ pray the Psalter simultaneously? It is the incarnate Son of God, who has borne all human weakness in his own flesh, who here pours out the heart of all humanity before God, and who stands in our place and prays for us. He has known torment and pain, guilt and death more deeply than we have. Therefore it is the prayer of the human nature assumed by Christ that comes before God here. It is really our prayer. But since the Son of God knows us better than we know ourselves, and was truly human for our sake, it is also really the Son’s prayer. It can become our prayer only because it was his prayer.

Who prays the Psalter? David (Solomon, Asaph, etc.) prays. Christ prays. We pray. We who pray are, first of all, the whole community of faith in which alone the entire richness of the Psalter can be prayed. But those who pray are also, finally, all individuals insofar as they have a part in Christ and in their congregation and share in the praying of their prayer. David, Christ, the

congregation, I myself—wherever we consider all these things with one another, we become aware of the wonderful path that God follows in order to teach us to pray.

Names, Music, Verse Form

The Hebrew title of the Psalter means much the same as the word “Hymns.” Ps. 72:20 calls all preceding psalms “prayers of David.” Both terms are surprising and yet understandable. To be sure, at first glance the Psalter does not contain exclusively either hymns or prayers. In spite of this, the didactic poems or the songs of lamentation are basically hymns, for they serve to praise God’s glory. Even those psalms that do not address God a single time (e.g. 1, 2, 78) may be called prayers, for they serve to submerge us in God’s purpose and will. A “psalter” was originally a musical instrument, and only in a metaphorical sense is the word used for the collection of prayers that were offered to God as songs.

The Psalms, as they have been handed down to us today, were for the most part set to music for use in worship. Singing voices and instruments of all kinds work together. Again it is David to whom the specific liturgical music is traced. As his playing upon the harp once drove away the evil spirit, so holy and worshipful music is such an active power that occasionally the same word can be used for it as for the prophetic proclamation (1 Chron. 25:2). Many of the headings of the psalms that are difficult to understand are actually directions for the choirmaster. Likewise, the word *selah*, which often occurs within a psalm, probably indicates an interlude inserted at this point. “The Selah indicates that one must be still and quickly reflect on the words of the Psalm; for they demand a quiet and restful soul, which can grasp and hold to that which the Holy Spirit there presents and offers” (Luther).

The Psalms were probably most often sung antiphonally. They were also specifically suited for this through their verse form, according to which the two parts of each verse are so bound to one another that they express essentially the same thought in different words. This is the so-called structural parallelism. This form is not accidental, rather it summons us not to break off our prayer. It invites us to pray together with one another. That which seems to be unnecessary repetition to us, who are accustomed to praying too hurriedly, is in fact true submersion in, and concentration on, the prayer. It is at the same time the sign that many, indeed all, believers pray with different words one and the same prayer. So the verse form specifically summons us to pray the Psalms together.

The Worship Service and the Psalms

In many churches psalms are read or sung every Sunday, or even daily, according to a regular pattern. These churches have preserved for themselves a priceless treasure, for only with daily use does one become immersed in that divine prayerbook. With only occasional reading these prayers are too overwhelming for us in thought and power, so that we again and again turn to lighter fare. But whoever has begun to pray the Psalter earnestly and regularly will “soon take leave” of those other light and personal “little devotional prayers and say: Ah, there is not the juice, the strength, the passion, the fire which I find in the Psalter. Anything else tastes too cold and too hard” (Luther).

Where we no longer pray the Psalms in our churches, we must take the Psalter that much more into our daily morning and evening worship. Every day we should read and pray several psalms, if possible with others, so that we read through this book repeatedly during the year and

continue to delve into it ever more deeply. We also ought not to select psalms at our own discretion, exhibiting disrespect to the prayerbook of the Bible and thinking that we know better than even God does what we should pray. In the early church it was nothing unusual to know “the entire David” by heart. In one eastern church this was a prerequisite for an ecclesiastical office. The church father Jerome says that in his time one could hear the Psalms being sung in the fields and gardens. The Psalter filled the life of early Christianity. But more important than all of this is that Jesus died on the cross with words from the Psalms on his lips. Whenever the Psalter is abandoned, an incomparable treasure is lost to the Christian church. With its recovery will come unexpected power.

Classification

We will organize the subject matter of the psalm-prayers in the following way: creation, law, the history of salvation, the Messiah, the church, life, suffering, guilt, enemies, the end. It would not be difficult to arrange all of these according to the petitions of the Lord’s Prayer, and thus to show how the Psalter is entirely taken up into the prayer of Jesus. But in order not to anticipate the result of our observations, we want to retain the division taken from the Psalms themselves.

Creation

Scripture proclaims God as the creator of heaven and earth. Many psalms call upon us to bring God honor, praise, and thanksgiving. There is, however, not a single psalm that speaks only of the creation. It is always the God who has already revealed the divine self to God’s people in the Word who is to be acknowledged as the creator of the world. Because God has spoken to us, because God’s name has been revealed to us, we can believe in God as the creator. Otherwise we could not know God. The creation is a picture of the power and the faithfulness of God, demonstrated to us in God’s revelation in Jesus Christ. We worship the creator, revealed to us as redeemer.

Psalm 8 praises the name of God and God’s gracious deed to humanity as the crown of God’s work, something which is impossible to grasp on the basis of the creation alone. Ps. 19 cannot speak of the splendor of the course of the stars without at the same time, in sudden and unexpected interjections, reflecting on the much greater splendor of the revelation of God’s law, and calling us to repentance. Ps. 29 allows us to wonder at the fearful power of God in the thunder, and yet its goal lies in the power, the blessing, and the peace which God sends to God’s people. Ps. 104 fixes our eyes upon the fullness of the work of God and sees it at the same time as nothing before the one whose honor alone remains forever, and who finally must blot out sins. The creation psalms are not lyrical poems, but provide guidance for the people of God by which they are to find and honor the creator of the world in the grace of salvation that they have experienced. The creation serves those who believe, and everything created by God is good when we receive it with thanksgiving (1 Tim. 4:3f.). But we can give thanks only for that which stands in harmony with the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. The creation with all its gifts is there for the sake of Jesus Christ. So we thank God with, in, and through Jesus Christ to whom we belong, for the splendor of God’s creation.

The Law

The three psalms (1, 19, 119) that in a special way make the law of God the object of thanksgiving, praise, and petition, wish above all to make clear to us the blessing of the law. Under “law,” then, is to be chiefly understood the entire redemptive act of God and direction for a new life in obedience. Joy in the law, in the commandments of God, fills us when God has given to our life the great transformation that comes through Jesus Christ. That God might sometimes hide God’s own command from me (Ps. 119:19), that God might someday not let me recognize the divine will, is the deepest anxiety of the new life.

It is grace to know God’s commands. They free us from self-made plans and conflicts. They make our steps certain and our way joyful. We are given God’s commands so that we may fulfill them, and “[God’s] commandments are not burdensome” (1 John 5:3) for those who have found all salvation in Jesus Christ. Jesus himself was under the law and fulfilled it in total obedience to the Father. God’s will became his joy, his food. So in us he gives thanks for the grace of the law and grants us joy in its fulfillment. Now we confess our love for the law. We affirm that we hold it dear, and we ask that we continue to be preserved blameless in it. We do not do this in our own power, but we pray it in the name of Jesus Christ, who is for us and in us.

Psalm 119 becomes especially difficult for us perhaps because of its length and uniformity. Here a rather slow, quiet, patient movement from word to word, from sentence to sentence is helpful. We recognize, then, that the apparent repetitions are in fact always new variations on one theme, the love of God’s word. As this love can have no end, so also the words that confess it can have no end. They want to accompany us through all of life, and in their simplicity they become the prayer of the child, the adult, and the elderly.

The History of Salvation

Psalms 78, 105, and 106 tell us about the history of the people of God on earth, the electing grace and faithfulness of God and the faithlessness and ingratitude of God’s people. Ps. 78 is not addressed to God at all. How ought we to pray these psalms? Ps. 106 summons us to thanksgiving, praise, commitment, and petition, to the confession of sin and to the cry for help in the light of the past history of salvation. Thanksgiving for the goodness of God, which continues for God’s people into eternity, which we also today experience as did our parents; praise for the wonderful works which God accomplished for our sake, from the redemption of God’s people out of Egypt all the way to Golgotha; commitment to keep the command of God more faithfully than before; petition for the grace of God to keep it according to God’s promise; confession of our own sin, faithlessness, and unworthiness in the face of so great a mercy; crying out for the final gathering together and redemption of the people of God.

We pray these psalms when we look upon everything that God once did for God’s people as having been done for us, when we confess our guilt and the divine grace, when on the basis of God’s former wonderful works we hold God to promises made and pray for their fulfillment, and when we finally see the entire history of God’s people with their God fulfilled in Jesus Christ, through whom we have been helped and will be helped. For the sake of Jesus Christ we bring God thanksgiving, petition, and confession.

The Messiah

God's history of salvation comes to fulfillment in the sending of the Messiah. According to Jesus' own exposition, the Psalter prophesied about this Messiah (Luke 24:44). Psalms 22 and 69 are known to the Christian community as the psalms of the passion of Christ.

Jesus himself prayed the beginning of Psalm 22 on the cross, and thus clearly made it his prayer. Heb. 2:12 places verse 23 [22] in the mouth of Christ. Verses 9 [8] and 19 [18] are direct prophecies of the crucifixion of Jesus. If David himself once prayed this psalm in his own suffering, he did it as the king anointed by God and therefore persecuted by men. From this king, Christ was to come. He did it as the one who bore in himself the Christ. But Christ appropriated this prayer, and for the first time it acquired its full meaning. We can pray this psalm only in community with Jesus Christ as those who have participated in the suffering of Christ. We pray this psalm not out of our random personal suffering, but out of the suffering of Christ that has also come upon us. But we always hear Jesus Christ praying with us and through him that Old Testament king. Repeating this prayer, without ever being able to measure or experience it in its entire depth, we walk with Christ praying before the throne of God.

In Psalm 69, verse 6 [5] tends to present certain difficulties, for here Christ complains about his foolishness and guilt to God. Certainly David spoke here of his own guilt. But Christ is speaking of the guilt of all people, also David's guilt and my own, which he has taken upon himself and borne, and for which he now suffers the wrath of the Father. The truly human Jesus Christ prays in this psalm and takes us into his prayer.

Psalms 2 and 110 testify to the victory of Christ over his enemies, the establishment of his reign, the worship of him by the people of God. Here also the prophecy links up with David and his kingdom. But we already recognize in David the coming Christ. Luther calls Psalm 110 "the truly supreme, main Psalm of our dear Lord Jesus Christ."

Psalms 20, 21, and 72 no doubt referred originally to the earthly kingdom of David and Solomon. Psalm 20 asks for the victory of the messianic king over his enemies, for the acceptance by God of his sacrifice; Ps. 21 gives thanks for the victory and the crowning of the king; Ps. 72 asks for justice and help for the poor, for peace, stable government, and eternal honor in the king's realm. We pray in these psalms for the victory of Jesus Christ in the world, we give thanks for the victory already won, and we pray for the establishment of the kingdom of justice and of peace under the king Jesus Christ. To this group also belong Ps. 61:7ff. [6-8] and Ps. 63:12 [11].

The much debated Psalm 45 speaks about love for the messianic king, about his beauty, his wealth, his power. At her marriage to this king the bride is to forget her people and her father's house (v. 11 [10]) and swear allegiance to the king. For him alone she is to adorn herself and come to him with joy. That is the song and prayer of the love between Jesus, the king, and his church, which belongs to him.

The Church

Psalms 27, 42, 46, 48, 63, 81, 84, 87, and others sing of Jerusalem, the city of God, of the great festivals of the people of God, of the temple and the glorious services of worship. It is the presence of the God of salvation in the midst of God's people for which we here give thanks, about which we rejoice, for which we long. What Mount Zion and the temple were for the Israelites is for us the church of God in all the world, where God always dwells with the people of God in word and sacrament. This church will endure in spite of all its enemies (Ps. 46); its captivity under the powers of the godless world will come to an end ([Pss.] 126, 137). The

gracious God who is present in Christ to the congregation is the fulfillment of all thanksgiving, all joy and yearning in the Psalms. As Jesus, in whom God truly dwells, longed for community with God because he had become human like us (Lk. 2:49), so he prays with us for the fullness of God's nearness and presence with those who are his.

God has promised to be present in the worship service of the congregation. So the congregation conducts its worship service according to God's order. But Jesus Christ himself has offered the perfect worship service, in that he fulfilled all the ordained sacrifices in his own voluntary, sinless sacrifice. In his own person Christ offered God's sacrifice for us and our sacrifice for God. For us there remains only the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving in prayers, songs, and in a life lived according to God's commands (Ps. 15, Ps. 50). So our entire life becomes the worship service, the thank-offering. God wishes to acknowledge such a thank-offering and to show salvation to those who are thankful (Ps. 50:23). These psalms wish to teach us to become thankful to God for the sake of Christ and to praise him in the congregation with heart, mouth and hands.

Life

It is striking to many earnest Christians as they pray the Psalms how frequently there occurs a petition for life and good fortune. When looking at the cross of Christ there arises in many the unhealthy thought that life and the visible earthly blessings of God are in themselves certainly a questionable good and in any case not to be desired. They then take the corresponding prayers of the Psalter as an early first stage of Old Testament piety that is overcome in the New Testament. But in doing so they want to be even more spiritual than God is.

As the petition for daily bread includes the entire sphere of the needs of bodily life, so the prayer that is directed to the God who is the creator and sustainer of this life necessarily includes the petition for life, health, and the visible evidence of God's friendliness. Bodily life is not disdained. On the contrary, God has given us community in Jesus Christ precisely so that we can live in God's presence in this life and then certainly also in the life to come. For this reason God gives us earthly prayers so that we can know, praise, and love God all the more. It is God's will that it go well on earth for those who are devout (Ps. 37). This desire is not set aside by the cross of Jesus Christ, but is established all the more. And precisely at the point where in following Jesus people must take on many privations, they will answer the question of Jesus, "Did you lack anything?" as the disciples answered it: "No, not a thing." (Luke 22:35). The assumption behind this is the teaching of the psalm: "Better is a little that the righteous person has than the abundance of many wicked" (Ps. 37:16).

We really ought not to have a bad conscience in praying with the Psalter for life, health, peace, and earthly good, if only like the psalm itself we recognize all these as evidences of God's gracious community with us and thereby hold fast to the knowledge that God's goodness is better than life (Ps. 63:4 [3], 73:25f.).

Psalm 103 teaches us to understand all the fullness of the gifts of God, from the preservation of life to the forgiveness of sins, as a great unity and to come before God with thanks and praise for it (cf. also Ps. 65). For the sake of Jesus Christ, the Creator gives us life and sustains it. So God wants to make us ready, finally, through the loss of all earthly goods in death, to obtain eternal life. For the sake of Jesus Christ alone, and at his bidding, we may pray for the good things of life, and for the sake of Christ we should also do it with confidence. But when we

receive what we need, then we should not stop thanking God from the heart for being so friendly to us for the sake of Jesus Christ.

Suffering

“Where do you find more pitiful, miserable words of sadness than in the psalms of lamentation? There you see into the heart of all the saints as into death, even as into hell. How sad and dark it is there in every wretched corner of the wrath of God” (Luther).

The Psalter has rich instruction for us about how to come before God in a proper way in the various sufferings that the world brings upon us. The Psalms know it all: serious illness, deep isolation from God and humanity, threats, persecution, imprisonment, and whatever conceivable peril there is on earth (13, 31, 35, 41, 44, 54, 55, 56, 61, 74, 79, 86, 88, 102, 105, and others). They do not deny it, they do not deceive themselves with pious words about it, they allow it to stand as a severe ordeal of faith, indeed at times they no longer see beyond the suffering (Ps. 88), but they complain about it all to God. No single human being can pray the psalms of lamentation out of his or her own experience. Spread out before us here is the anguish of the entire Christian community throughout all time, as Jesus Christ alone has wholly experienced it. Because it happens with God’s will, indeed because God alone knows it completely and better than we ourselves, therefore only God can help. But then, all our questions must also again and again storm directly against God.

There is in the Psalms no quick and easy surrender [Ergebung] to suffering. It always comes through struggle, anxiety, and doubt. Our confidence in God’s righteousness and, indeed, in God’s good and gracious will, is shaken, for it allows the pious to suffer misfortune but the godless to escape free (Pss. 44, 35). God’s ways are too difficult to grasp. But even in the deepest hopelessness, God alone remains the one addressed. Help is neither expected from other people, nor does the sufferer in self-pity lose sight of God, the origin and goal of all affliction. The one who suffers sets out to battle against God for God. God’s promise, God’s previous redemptive deeds, the honor of God’s name among all people, are again and again held up before the wrathful God.

If I am guilty, why does God not forgive me? If I am not guilty, why does God not end my torment and demonstrate my innocence to my enemies (Pss. 38, 79, 44)? There is no theoretical answer to all these questions in the Psalms any more than in the New Testament. The only real answer is Jesus Christ. But this answer is already being sought in the Psalms. It is common to all of them that they cast every difficulty and tribulation [Anfechtung] upon God: “We can no longer bear them, take them away from us and bear them yourself, for you alone can handle suffering.” That is the goal of all the psalms of lament. They pray about the one who took upon himself our sickness and bore our infirmities, Jesus Christ. They proclaim Jesus Christ as the only help in suffering, for in Christ is God with us.

The psalms of lament are concerned with full community with the God who is righteousness and love. But Jesus Christ is not only the goal of our prayer; he himself is also with us in our prayer. He, who bore every affliction and brought it before God, prayed in God’s name for our sake: “Not what I want, but what you want.”²⁰ For our sake he cried out on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Now we know that there is no longer any suffering on earth in which Christ, our only helper, is not with us, suffering and praying with us.

On the basis of this conviction, the great psalms of trust emerge. Trust in God without Christ is empty and without certainty; indeed it can only be another form of self-trust. But whoever knows that God has entered into our suffering in Jesus Christ himself may say with great confidence: “For you are with me, your rod and your staff, they comfort me” (Pss. 23, 37, 63, 73, 91, 121).

Guilt

There are fewer prayers for the forgiveness of sins in the Psalter than we expect. Most psalms presuppose complete certainty of the forgiveness of sins. That may surprise us. But even in the New Testament the same thing is true. Christian prayer is diminished and endangered when it revolves exclusively around the forgiveness of sins. There is such a thing as confidently leaving sin behind for the sake of Jesus Christ.

Yet in no way is the prayer of repentance absent in the Psalter. The seven so-called penitential psalms (6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143), yet not these alone (Pss. 14, 15, 25, 31, 39, 40, 41, etc.), lead us into the very depth of the recognition of sin before God. They help us in the confession of guilt. They turn our entire trust to the forgiving grace of God, so that Luther has quite rightly called them the “Pauline Psalms.” Usually a particular occasion leads to such a prayer. It may be heavy guilt (Pss. 32, 51); it may be unexpected suffering that drives us to repentance (Pss. 38, 102). In every case all hope is fixed on free forgiveness, as God has offered and promised it to us for all time in God’s word about Jesus Christ.

The Christian will find scarcely any difficulty in praying these psalms. Nevertheless, the question could arise concerning how we are to understand the fact that Christ also prays these psalms with us. How can the sinless one ask for forgiveness? In the same way that the sinless one can bear the sins of the world and be made sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21). Jesus prays for the forgiveness of sins, yet not for his own but ours, which he has taken upon himself and for which he suffers. He puts himself completely in our place; he wants to be a human being before God as we are. So Jesus prays even the most human of all prayers with us and, precisely in this, shows himself to be the true Son of God.

It is often particularly striking and objectionable to the Protestant Christian that in the Psalter the innocence of the pious is spoken of at least as often as is their guilt (cf. Pss. 5, 7, 9, 16, 17, 26, 35, 41, 44, 59, 66, 68, 69, 73, 86, and others). Here seems to be evidence of a residue of the so-called Old Testament righteousness through works, with which the Christian can have nothing more to do. This point of view is completely superficial and knows nothing of the depth of the Word of God. It is certain that one can speak of one’s own innocence in a self-righteous manner, but do we not realize that one can also pray the most humble confession of sin very self-righteously? Speaking of one’s own guilt can be just as far from the Word of God as speaking of one’s innocence.

But the question is not what possible motives stand behind a prayer, but whether the content of the prayer itself is true or false. Here it is clear that believing Christians have something to say not only about their guilt, but also something equally important about their innocence and righteousness. To have faith as a Christian means that, through the grace of God and the merit of Jesus Christ, the Christian has become entirely innocent and righteous in God’s eyes—that “there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1). And to pray as a Christian means to hold fast to this innocence and righteousness in which Christians share, and for which they appeal to God’s Word and give God thanks. If in other

respects we take God's action toward us at all seriously, then we not only may, but plainly must, pray in all humility and certainty: "I was blameless before [God], and I kept myself from guilt" (Ps. 18:24 [23]); "If you test me, you will find no wickedness in me" (Ps. 17:3). With such a prayer we stand in the center of the New Testament, in the community of the cross of Jesus Christ.

The assertion of innocence comes out with particular emphasis in the psalms that deal with oppression by godless enemies. The primary thought here is of the justice of God's cause, which also, to be sure, vindicates the one who embraces it. The fact that we are persecuted for the sake of God's cause really places us in the right over against the enemy of God. Alongside objective innocence, which can of course never be really objective because the fact of the grace of God likewise always meets us personally, there can then stand in such a psalm the personal confession of guilt (Pss. 41:5 [4], 69:6 [5]). This is again only a sign that I really embrace God's cause. I can then ask even in the same breath: "Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause against an ungodly people" (Ps. 43:1).

It is a thoroughly unbiblical and destructive idea that we can never suffer innocently as long as some kind of fault still remains in us. Neither the Old nor the New Testament makes such a judgment. If we are persecuted for the sake of God's cause, then we suffer innocently, and that means we suffer with God. That we really are with God and, therefore, really innocent is demonstrated precisely in this, that we pray for the forgiveness of our sins.

But we are innocent not only in relation to the enemies of God, but also before God, for we are now seen united with God's cause, into which it is precisely God who has drawn us, and God forgives us our sins. So all the psalms of innocence join in the hymn: "O blood of Christ, O Lord of Righteousness / my Robe of Honor, my Adorning dress, / Before God's throne I'll be clothed with you / When in heavenly glory I'll live anew."

Enemies

No part of the Psalter causes us greater difficulty today than the so-called psalms of vengeance. With shocking frequency their thoughts penetrate the entire Psalter (5, 7, 9, 10, 13, 16, 21, 23, 28, 31, 35, 36, 40, 41, 44, 52, 54, 55, 58, 59, 68, 69, 70, 71, 137, and others). All attempts to pray these psalms seem doomed to failure. They really seem to lay before us the so-called preliminary religious stage [religiöse Vorstufe] in relation to the New Testament. Christ prays on the cross for his enemies and teaches us to do the same. How can we call down God's vengeance upon our enemies with these psalms? The question is therefore: Can the imprecatory psalms be understood as the Word of God for us and as the prayer of Jesus Christ? Can we pray these psalms as Christians? Note carefully that again we are not asking about possible motives, which we cannot in any case discover, but about the *content* of the prayer.

The enemies referred to here are enemies of God's cause, who lay hands on us because of God. Therefore it is nowhere a matter of personal conflict. Nowhere do those who pray these psalms want to take revenge into their own hands; they leave vengeance to God alone (cf. Rom. 12:19). Therefore they must abandon all personal thoughts of revenge and must be free from their own thirst for revenge; otherwise vengeance is not seriously left to God. Indeed only those who are themselves innocent in relation to the enemy can leave vengeance to God. The prayer for the vengeance of God is the prayer for the carrying out of God's righteousness in the judgment of sin. This judgment must be made known if God stands by God's Word, and it must be made known to those upon whom it falls; with my sin I myself belong under this judgment. I

have no right to want to hinder this judgment. It must be fulfilled for God's sake. And it has certainly been fulfilled in a wonderful way.

God's vengeance did not fall on the sinners, but on the only sinless one, the Son of God, who stood in the place of sinners. Jesus Christ bore the vengeance of God, which the psalm asks to be carried out. Christ calmed God's anger against sin and prayed in the hour of the carrying out of the divine judgment: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing!" No one other than he, who himself bore the wrath of God, could pray like this. That was the end of all false thoughts about the love of a God who does not take sin very seriously. God hates and judges the enemies of God in the only righteous one, the one who prays for forgiveness for God's enemies. Only in the cross of Jesus Christ is the love of God to be found.

So the psalm of vengeance leads to the cross of Jesus and to the love of God that forgives enemies. I cannot forgive the enemies of God by myself, only the crucified Christ can; and I can forgive through him. So the carrying out of vengeance becomes grace for all in Jesus Christ.

Certainly it is important whether I stand with the psalm in the time of promise or in the time of fulfillment, but this distinction holds true for all the Psalms. I pray the psalm of wrath in the certainty of its wonderful fulfillment; I leave the vengeance in God's hands and pray for the carrying out of God's justice to all enemies. I know that God has remained true and has secured justice in wrathful judgment on the cross, and that this wrath has become grace and joy for us. Jesus Christ himself prays for the execution of God's vengeance on his body, and thus Christ leads me back daily to the gravity and the grace of his cross for me and all the enemies of God.

Even today I can believe God's love and forgive enemies only through the cross of Christ, through the carrying out of God's vengeance. The cross of Jesus applies to everyone. Whoever opposes him—whoever corrupts the word from the cross of Jesus, on whom God's vengeance had to be executed—must bear the curse of God either now or later. The New Testament speaks with great clarity, and in no way differs here from the Old Testament, about this curse that falls on those who hate Christ; but the New Testament speaks in addition about the joy of the Christian community on the day when God will carry out the final judgment (Gal. 1:8f.; 1 Cor. 16:22; Rev. 18:19; 20:11). In this way the crucified Jesus teaches us to pray truly the psalms of wrath.

The End

The hope of Christians points to the coming again of Jesus and the resurrection of the dead. In the Psalter this hope is not expressed in so many words. That which has been, since the resurrection of Jesus, spread out for the church as a long line of events of salvation history moving toward the end of all things, is from the viewpoint of the Old Testament still a single undivided whole. Life in community with the God of revelation, the final victory of God in the world, and the establishing of the messianic kingdom are all subjects of prayer in the Psalms.

There is no difference in this respect from the New Testament. To be sure, the Psalms pray for community with God in this earthly life, but they know that this community does not end with this earthly life but continues beyond it, even stands in contrast to it (Pss. 17:14f., 6, 34). So life in community with God is certainly always directed beyond death. Death is indeed the irreversible bitter end for body and soul. It is the wages of sin, and this must not be forgotten (Pss. 39, 90). But on the other side of death is the eternal God (Pss. 90, 102). Therefore death will not triumph, but life will triumph in the power of God (Pss. 16:9ff., 56:14 [13], 49:16 [15],

73:24, 118:15ff.). We find this life in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and we pray for it now and forever.

The psalms of the final victory of God and of God's Messiah (2, 96, 97, 98, 110, 148–150) lead us in praise, thanksgiving, and petition to the end of all things when all the world will give honor to God, when the redeemed community will reign with God eternally, and when the powers of evil will fall and God alone will retain power.

We have taken this brief journey through the Psalter in order to learn to pray better some of the psalms. It would not be difficult to arrange all the Psalms mentioned according to the petitions of the Lord's Prayer. We should need to change only slightly our arrangement of the order of the sections. But what alone is important is that we begin anew with confidence and love to pray the Psalms in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

“Our dear Lord, who has given to us and taught us to pray the Psalter and the Lord's Prayer, grant to us also the spirit of prayer and of grace so that we pray with enthusiasm and earnest faith, properly and without ceasing, for we need to do this; he has asked for it and therefore wants to have it from us. To him be praise, honor, and thanksgiving. Amen.” (Luther).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible*, ed. Gerhard Ludwig Müller, Albrecht Schönherr, and Geoffrey B. Kelly, trans. Daniel W. Bloesch and James H. Burtness, vol. 5, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 155–177.