

Singing the Psalms with Christ (Part VI: Penitential Psalms)

Introduction

We've seen in our study on the Psalms that all the psalms of David are ultimately the psalms of Jesus, David's greater Son. When we sing the Psalms, we are in a very unique way singing them along with Jesus and under His direction because they're uniquely His songs.

Now it's easy to see how this works with many of the psalms. But with some of the psalms, this is more difficult to see – at least initially. So we looked last week at the imprecatory psalms—the psalms of cursing and prayers for vengeance—to see if these psalms could truly be the songs of Christ and if we could truly sing these songs today, with Him. Now this week, we're going to look at the penitential Psalms – or at least Psalms that include penitential sections. These are the Psalms where the king confesses his sin and guilt and expresses sorrow over his iniquity and transgression. So the question is: Does Jesus sing these psalms, too?

We know that in His true and full humanity, Jesus was made in every way like us, and even tempted in every respect as we are – “**yet [He was] without sin**” (Heb. 4:14). We see this clearly in the wilderness temptation in Matthew chapter four.

- 1 Peter 2:22 — He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth.
- 1 John 3:5 — He appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin.

Jesus Himself challenged His opponents:

- John 8:46 — Which one of you convicts me of sin?

The writer of Hebrews says:

- Hebrews 7:26 — It was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, **holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens.**

How could the holy, innocent, and unstained Son of God – the one who we know was wholly without sin – how could *Jesus* sing the penitential psalms?

I. Psalm 118

The first thing we need to remember is this: The **king** and the **people** are so intimately united together that the king, in some sense, never speaks as *just* a “private” person. Let's take as an example Psalm 118 which is applied to Jesus in the New Testament (Mat. 21:42; Acts 4:11; Eph. 2:20; 1 Pet. 2:4-7) and which Jesus almost certainly sang with His disciples at the end of the Passover meal on the night that He was betrayed (Mat. 26:30). The Psalm begins with the king exhorting all the people:

- Psalm 118:1-4 — Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever! **Let Israel say**, “His steadfast love endures forever.” **Let the house of Aaron say**, “His steadfast love endures forever.” **Let those who fear the LORD say**, “His steadfast love endures forever.”

But no sooner has the king exhorted *all the people* to give thanks to the Lord for His steadfast love, than it might *seem* as though the king forgets entirely that the people are there. For the next seventeen verses, the king speaks entirely in the 1st person singular:

- Psalm 118:5–7, 19–21 — Out of **my** distress **I** called on the LORD; the LORD answered **me** and set **me** free. The LORD is on **my** side; **I** will not fear. What can man do to **me**? The LORD is on **my** side as **my** helper; **I** shall look in triumph on those who hate **me**... Open to **me** the gates of righteousness, that **I** may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD. This is the gate of the LORD; the righteous shall enter through it. **I** thank you that you have answered **me** and have become **my** salvation.

What happened to all the rest of the people who the king exhorted at the very beginning? After telling the people to thank the Lord for His steadfast love, does he really *only* celebrate the Lord's goodness to *himself*? When we come to verse 22, all of a sudden it's not the king who's speaking, but the people. So listen to what they say after the king's 1st person singular prayer:

- Psalm 118:22–27 — The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This is the LORD's doing; it is marvelous in **our** eyes. This is the day that the LORD has made; let **us** rejoice and be glad in it. Save **us**, **we** pray, O LORD! O LORD, **we** pray, give **us** success! Blessed is **he** [the king] who comes in the name of the LORD! **We** bless **you** from the house of the LORD. The LORD is God, and he has made his light to shine upon **us**. Bind the festal sacrifice with cords, up to the horns of the altar!

What's the stone that the builders rejected? This rejected stone is all the people of Israel represented and embodied in their king. Therefore the Lord's salvation of all the people is embodied and celebrated in the salvation of their king. Even though for seventeen verses the king was using words like "I" and "my" and "me," the people never felt left out. They knew all along that he was speaking *for them all*. And so after the people, when the king speaks again, he still speaks in the 1st person singular; and then he exhorts the people:

- Psalm 118:28–29 — You are **my** God, and **I** will give thanks to you; you are **my** God; **I** will extol you. Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever!

In light of this reality that when the king spoke in the 1st person singular he was speaking for all the people let's read now verses 17-18 where the king proclaims:

- Psalm 118:17–18 (cf. Jer. 30:11; 46:28; Hab. 1:12) — **I** shall not die, but **I** shall live, and recount the deeds of the LORD. The LORD has disciplined [chastened] **me** severely, but he has not given **me** over to death.

Can you see how the king was singing these words for the people? The point wasn't strictly his own personal sin, but rather the sin of all God's people as a whole. When the king says, "the Lord has chastened me severely" (through the oppression of foreign enemies) the people all heard him representing them and speaking with them and for them: "The Lord has chastened *us* severely [for our sin], but he has not given *us* over to death."

With this foundation laid, let's look now at Psalm chapter forty.

II. Psalm 40

Psalm forty is a prayer of David the king. As we read verses 1-5, see if you can imagine Jesus, in His earthly life – as a true human being – singing these words:

- Psalm 40:1–5 — **I** waited patiently for the LORD; he inclined to me and heard **my** cry. He drew **me** up from the pit of destruction, out of the miry bog, and set **my** feet upon a rock, making **my** steps secure. He put a new song in **my** mouth, a song of praise to **our** God. Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the LORD. Blessed is the man who makes the LORD his trust, who does not turn to the proud, to those who go astray after a lie! You have multiplied, O LORD **my** God, your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward **us**; none can compare with you! **I** will proclaim and tell of them, yet they are more than can be told.

Isn't it easy to think of Jesus praying and singing these words with His disciples? So now listen to what David prays in the very next verses and ask if you can hear Jesus also praying and singing these words:

- Psalm 40:6–8 — In sacrifice and offering you have not delighted, but you have given me an open ear. Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required. Then I said, “Behold, I have come; in the scroll of the book it is written of me. I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.”

Now remember, these are first of all David's words. And are you hearing his heart? He's acknowledging that it's not ultimately sacrifices and offerings that God wants. What God wants is our heartfelt obedience and love. It's not rituals and going through the motions that God wants – not ultimately. What God wants is a true delight in His will and a wholehearted submission to His law.

- Psalm 40:6a — “In sacrifice and offering you have not delighted,” David says, “**but you have given me an open ear**” (lit. “ears you have dug for me”).

What this means is that God has given David an ear to pay careful heed and careful attention to God's word. The open ear stands for David's willing heart and therefore it stands for his whole body and his whole self being given over to the service of God. This is why the Greek Septuagint can translate: “but a body you have prepared for me” (instead of “ears you have dug for me”). The meaning of wholehearted devotion and glad obedience is exactly the same. Not only did God give to David an “open ear,” but He also spoke the word that David delights to hear and obey. David says:

- Psalm 40:6b–7 — Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required. Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come; in the scroll of the book it is written of me.’”

The “scroll,” here, is a reference to the law of Moses. So I believe David especially had in mind these verses which were written down in the scroll of the book, in Deuteronomy seventeen:

- Deuteronomy 17:18–20 — “And when [the king] sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law, approved by the Levitical priests. And it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD

his God by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes, and doing them, that his heart may not be lifted up above his brothers, and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, either to the right hand or to the left, so that he may continue long in his kingdom, he and his children, in Israel.

Doesn't this help us to make sense of David's words in Psalm chapter forty?—"Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required. Then I said, 'Behold, I have come; in the scroll of the book it is written of me. I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.'" Could you and I also pray with words just like these? Would they be an accurate and true expression of *our* hearts, too? But, of course, these are especially the words of the king, so can you especially imagine Jesus, in His earthly life, praying and singing with these words? Maybe you already know that we don't just have to "imagine." The writer of Hebrews tells us:

- Hebrews 10:5-7 — When **Christ** came into the world, **he** said, "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, 'Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.'"

Now how does the writer of Hebrews know that at some point during his earthly life, Jesus actually spoke these words? The author of Hebrews was an inspired prophet, so he could know this through divine revelation, or he could also have discovered this through someone else's eyewitness testimony. But the point here isn't that at some specific moment in His earthly ministry Jesus officially quoted these words from David and that the author of Hebrews was made aware of this through eyewitness testimony or divine revelation. The author of Hebrews sees all the psalms as in some way "messianic" (that means psalms ultimately fulfilled in the coming King) and so for the writer of Hebrews all of the psalms are in some way the songs of Christ – the Messiah. Therefore, when the author of Hebrews wanted to talk about Christ's obedience in offering Himself up as a sacrifice for sin, He didn't need a special divine revelation to see Psalm chapter forty as a "prophecy" of this perfect obedience. He didn't need a special divine revelation to see David's words taken up and spoken by Christ, and now invested with a deeper and fuller meaning on the lips of Christ than they could have ever possessed as the words of David only.

This explains how Matthew and Paul could quote apparently "**random**" passages from Psalms that most people don't identify as Messianic and yet see these passages fulfilled as the very words of the Christ. David writes in Psalm 18:

- Psalm 18:43, 49-50 — You delivered me from strife with the people; you made me the head of the nations; people whom I had not known served me... **For this I [David] will praise you, O LORD, among the nations, and sing to your name.** Great salvation he brings to his king, and shows steadfast love to his anointed, to David and his offspring forever.

And then Paul says in Romans:

- Romans 15:8-9 — I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, "**Therefore I [Jesus] will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name.**"

In Psalm seventy-eight, Asaph writes under the oversight of the king:

- Psalm 78:1–3 — Give ear, O my people, to my teaching; incline your ears to the words of my mouth! **I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old**, things that we have heard and known, that our fathers have told us.

And Matthew writes of Jesus' parables in Matthew thirteen:

- Matthew 13:35 — This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet: “**I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world.**”

What we have to remember is that these words in Psalm chapter forty were first of all *David's* words – words that he wrote concerning *himself*. It was David who first said *of himself*: “Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me [David]; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, ‘Behold, I [David] have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me [David] in the scroll of the book.’” It’s not like the Holy Spirit was dictating to David words that Jesus would speak when He came into the world, but words that David could never speak for himself.

And yet even as David was writing these words of himself he was also writing these words *as one member of a royal house and a royal line*. What this means is that David could write things of himself as a member of the royal line that were at the same time bigger and grander than just himself. Fast forward to Jesus: When Jesus came He took up the psalms of David as His very own, and He fulfilled them as one who was Himself the fulfillment of the whole royal line. Therefore, when Jesus took up the psalms of David and sang them as His own, unlike David He never sang anything bigger or grander than Himself. To put it another way: The Psalms are all invested in some way or another with a deeper and fuller meaning on the lips of Christ than they could have ever possessed as “only” the words of David. So let’s continue on now in Psalm chapter forty after the words that the writer of Hebrews ascribes to Jesus. Can you hear Jesus also, in His earthly life, praying and singing with these words?

- Psalm 40:9–11 — I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation; behold, I have not restrained my lips, as you know, O LORD. I have not hidden your deliverance within my heart; I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation; I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness from the great congregation. As for you, O LORD, you will not restrain your mercy from me; your steadfast love and your faithfulness will ever preserve me!

Can you imagine Jesus, in His earthly life – as a true human being – singing with words like these? (cf. Ps. 18:43, 49-50 & Rom. 15:8-9; Ps. 22:20-22 & Heb. 2:11-12). The fact that the author of Hebrews saw part of this Psalm as the very words of Christ tells us that *in some way* he saw the whole Psalm as the words of Christ because the Psalms are all organic units, meant to be read and sung as a single whole. So, then, what are we to make of the very next verse in Psalm chapter forty? David writes:

- Psalm 40:12 — For evils have encompassed me beyond number; my iniquities have overtaken me, and I cannot see; they are more than the hairs of my head; my heart fails me.

How can the writer of Hebrews ascribe to Jesus any words that come from the *same* Psalm where we hear David confessing his iniquities? Does it seem strange to you that after David writes words like these: “you have given me an open ear... Behold, I have come; in the scroll of the book it is written of me. I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart”—does it seem strange that after these words David goes on to say: “my iniquities have overtaken me, and I cannot see; they are more than the hairs of my head; my heart fails me”? This is what leads one commentator to write:

“The king is troubled by the adversities caused by his enemies (cf. vv.14-15). The relationship between sin and suffering was well known to the OT saints. However, it is not easy to decide whose sin was responsible for the renewed adversities. Though the king speaks of ‘my sins,’ he may personify the national sin as his own. As a theocratic leader he takes on himself the sin of the nation as his own and pleads with the Lord to have compassion on the condition of the nation.” (VanGemeren)

If it's true that David was personifying the sin of the people as his own and essentially taking that sin upon himself, can we hear in Christ's singing of these words a meaning far bigger and grander than they ever had on the lips of David? When Christ sings these words (“My iniquities have overtaken me, and I cannot see; they are more than the hairs of my head; my heart fails me”) is He really singing of the iniquities of all His people as their covenant head? Is He personifying the people's sin as His own and then taking those sins and bearing them all the way to the cross? I think that's very possible here in Psalm forty, but what about other places where David is clearly talking about his own personal sin (cf. Ps. 51)?

III. Psalm 41

Last week, we saw how Jesus quoted from Psalm forty-one:

- John 13:18 (cf. Ps. 41:9) — I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But the Scripture will be fulfilled, “**He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.**”

Remember that these were first of all David's words, and that he was speaking of his own personal experiences. And yet Jesus says that these words of David had to be fulfilled as words that He—the Messiah—could speak for Himself! It's important to see that Jesus wasn't cherry-picking this phrase out of context. Jesus knew very well what were the very next words of the psalmist:

- Psalm 41:10–12 — But you, O LORD, be gracious to me, and raise me up, that I may repay them! By this I know that you delight in me: my enemy will not shout in triumph over me. But you have upheld me because of my integrity, and set me in your presence forever.

Isn't it easy for us to hear Jesus Himself also praying and singing these words? So what are we to do when, in the same chapter, just a few verses earlier, the Psalmist writes:

- Psalm 41:4 — As for me, I said, “O LORD, be gracious to me; heal me, for I have sinned against you!”

Did Jesus skip these words when He sang this psalm? Or did He never sing this psalm at all? But then how could Jesus see part of this psalm “fulfilled” in Himself when the psalms are all organic units – each one meant to be read and sung in its entirety as a single whole?

IV. Psalm 31

- Luke 23:46 — Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” And having said this he breathed his last.

In the moment of His deepest agony was Jesus just mechanically quoting a random phrase from Psalm thirty-one? Certainly not! I think we have to assume that Psalm thirty-one was a psalm that Jesus had sung and meditated on all His life so that now, in His deepest torment, these words arose from deep within Him as His very own words. And once again, Jesus wasn’t cherry-picking a random phrase out of context. He certainly would have known and taken comfort in praying the very next words in the Psalm:

- Psalm 31:5–8 (cf. 1-4, 11-24) — Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God. I hate those who pay regard to worthless idols, but I trust in the LORD. I will rejoice and be glad in your steadfast love, because you have seen my affliction; you have known the distress of my soul, and you have not delivered me into the hand of the enemy; you have set my feet in a broad place.

If we can hear Jesus praying these words, too, on the cross, then what are we to do when we read in the very next verses of the very same psalm:

- Psalm 31:9–10 — Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am in distress; my eye is wasted from grief; my soul and my body also. For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my iniquity, and my bones waste away.

As Jesus sang this Psalm during His earthly life, did He always skip these verses when He came to them? Was He silent, while everyone else went on singing? Or could Jesus, in His earthly life and even on the cross, have prayed these words, too? And if so, *how*? What could this mean? Before we conclude with an attempt to answer this question, let’s look at one other psalm.

V. Psalm 69

Psalm 69 is quoted five separate times in the New Testament in such a way that every time the words of the Psalmist are seen to be the very words of Christ.

- Psalm 69:9a — Zeal for your house has consumed me...
- John 2:17 — His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me.”
- Psalm 69:9b — ...the reproaches of those who reproach you have fallen on me.
- Romans 15:3 — Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, “The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.”
- Psalm 69:4 — More in number than the hairs of my head are those who hate me without cause...

- John 15:25 — The word that is written in their Law must be fulfilled: “They hated me without a cause.”
- Psalms 69:21 — They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink.
- John 19:28–29 — Jesus... said (to fulfill the Scripture), “I thirst.” A jar full of sour wine stood there, so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to his mouth.
- Psalms 69:25 — May their camp be a desolation; let no one dwell in their tents.
- Acts 1:20 — It is written in the Book of Psalms, “May his camp become desolate, and let there be no one to dwell in it.”

Remember again that all these were first of all David’s words, and that he was speaking of his own personal experiences. And yet Jesus says again that these words of David had to be fulfilled as words that He—the Messiah—could speak for Himself! All the rest of the Psalm is interwoven with these verses as a single unit, and so it’s easy to see how all the rest of the Psalm would also have been prayed and sung by Christ – all except one part. What are we to do with these verses:

- Psalms 69:5 — O God, you know my folly; the wrongs I have done are not hidden from you.

Did Jesus always skip these words when He came to them, or did He sing these words, too, as He lived and ministered, and perhaps even as He suffered and died?

Conclusion

We know that Jesus could never have sung words like these with any personal consciousness of His own sin for He was wholly without sin. Jesus was—and He is—the spotless and unblemished Lamb of God.

But we also know that John baptized with a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (cf. Mat. 3:1-6) and that Jesus came to be baptized by John. This wasn’t because Jesus was a sinner who needed to repent and be forgiven. Jesus was expressing at the very beginning of His public ministry His willingness to be numbered with sinners and in the end even to bear all the sins of His people in His own body on the cross in obedience to His Father’s will. (cf. Mat. 3:13-15; Isa. 53:12; 1 Pet. 2:24). So Paul says in second Corinthians:

2 Corinthians 5:21 — For our sake [God] made [Jesus] **to be sin** who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

By our sins being charged to the account of Christ, He became personally answerable for those sins – He became personally answerable for *our* sins. And so when I think of Jesus singing the penitential Psalms, I might think not so much of us singing these songs with Him, but rather of Him singing these songs *with us* as one willing to be wholly identified even with us *sinners*, though He was wholly without sin. Jesus singing the penitential psalms with us is like Jesus standing in line with sinners to be baptized. In singing these songs, he wasn’t mourning His own personal sin, but rather expressing His willingness to be wholly identified with us – and even to be made personally answerable for the sins of all His people.

I think of Jesus singing the penitential Psalms with us not only as our substitute but also as our mediator and intercessor before the throne of God. We saw last week that one of the best ways to pray for our persecuted brothers and sisters is to sing with them the imprecatory psalms. This week I wonder if we could say that one of the best ways to think of Christ praying and interceding for us before the throne of God is to think of Christ singing the penitential psalms *with us* – and even, ultimately, singing them *for us*, taking our confessions of sin and bearing them up Himself and in His own person before the throne of God.

All of the Psalms are “Messianic”; they’re all Christ’s, but they’re all His in different ways. They’re all invested in some way or another with a deeper and fuller—and a bigger and grander—meaning when they’re taken up and sung by Jesus than they could have ever possessed as “only” the words of David. And so the penitential Psalms are ultimately Christ’s songs because apart from His willingness to sing them with us, and even for us, we could never sing them ourselves with any true assurance or hope. But when we know who sings with us, we sing the penitential psalms with 100% assurance, with perfect hope, and even in our sorrow with an unbounded joy. One of my prayers has been that as we learn to sing the psalms with Christ and to know that He sings them with us, we’ll come to grasp the theological reality of our union with Christ experientially – maybe as we never have before.

Do you know this morning that Christ is your advocate and your intercessor before the throne of God? (1 Jn. 2:1; Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:25) Do you know that on the basis of His identification with sinners and His shed blood on the cross, Jesus takes your confession of sin and bears it up Himself and in His own person before the throne of God? Do you know all this on the basis of a true, saving faith in Jesus Christ?