

The Fourth Step

We're continuing our series in Psalm 3, and in fact, this is the last chapter of our series on Christian spirituality. We said that there are four steps on the journey of Christian spirituality. Let me recap them for you real quick. First, we must receive the word of God. We did not write it, we did not seek it out one morning and discover it. It came to us. We found it in a hotel room, sitting on our side table. Our parents gave it to us. A friend knocked on our door and told us about it. Someone preached to you, spoke to you. It may have been on the internet, but you received the word of God.

First, you receive it, and then what do you do? You read with delight. Out of a heart of delight, you read it. You feed on it. You eat it, as God told John to do in the book of Revelation. So do you have it right now in your hand? I hope. Receive it right now into your life and into your heart.

Whatever we're about to say, would you bow the knee to it? You say, "But I don't know what he's about to tell me." Listen, he's God. He wants to dance with you. He offers his hand; will you not take it? I know it's going to be scary, but take it; he's God. Will you submit to what he's about to tell you? Bow to it, receive it. "Whatever you have for me, Lord, I'll take. You're the king, after all. I'll let you woo me, I'll let you rebuke me; you start the conversation. Let's read."

Then after we read it, what's the next thing? We meditate on it or reflect on it. The word is "to chew." Remember what we said last chapter? To chew on it like eating corn on the cob with butter. We rotate it, we chew just a little bit, we digest it, we turn it, and we continue to chew. We absorb it; we spend time with it. That's the third step.

In this chapter we consider the fourth step of Christian spirituality, responding. We receive the Word, we read it, we reflect on it, and now we must respond to it. And the way Christians for thousands of years and the psalmist does it is respond to it in prayer. And so what we're going to do in this chapter is do this together as a church.

What I desire is that our community reading, reflecting, and responding would spill over into your individual lives, and as you receive the word of God alone in your homes, you read, reflect, and respond to it. I want this to spill over into that and for that to spill over into this. So we're going to do this together. It's going to be a different kind of sermon; in fact, I'm breaking many of my personal rules about sermon-giving to do this. But I think it's very important.

Real Life Prayer

If you would, let's start at the very beginning in Psalm 3. We read in the very beginning there is a note. (Don't skip over those notes; they've been there for

thousands of years. They're there for a reason.) The note says, "A Psalm of David when he fled from Absalom, his son."

We just read it, now what's the next thing we must do? We have to reflect on it. Granted, I've been reflecting on it for a while, so I'm probably going to be able to generate a few more reflections than you in three seconds. But you can do this at home. A little study Bible, something on the internet. Just a few little things. You can read this and reflect on it.

Let's practice; you ready? "A Psalm of David." Now, David, you can identify with a little bit, can't you? In fact, we know more about David than any other person in all of human history. (That's my opinion, but many people have that opinion.) We know more about David than Jesus!

We know about David's childhood, we know about his adolescence, we know him as a shepherd, as a king, as a soldier. We know about him as an adulterer and a murderer. We know about him as a failure as a father and a failure as a king and a success as a father and a success as a king. We know about him on his deathbed. Can you find something in there to identify with? You should be able to find *something* in the life of David.

So now, we are ready to pray the word of God. Our prayer gets plugged into Psalm 3, which is the first prayer of the psalter. And it also gets plugged into the very life of David, as he's about to pray. You see how that title, "A Psalm of David," allows our prayers to have a story behind them?

Read this carefully: We all want a righteousness that is our own. Would you agree with that? Many of you don't know what I mean by that. You see, we are all looking for something to make us a success, to prove that we're worth something. The reason we're all looking for that is because we know deep down inside that we all miss the mark; we don't measure up. We're not quite there.

And we're constantly stretching and reaching. Some of us strive through piety and moralism. Some of us strive through political pursuits. Some of us strive through our prayer lives, even. We want a prayer life that is "super spiritual." Something lofty. Something elitist. Something escapist. We want a Downton-Abbey-esque type of prayer. Something that's just surreal.

But this psalm right here starts off "A prayer of David written while his son just stabbed him in the back." You see, this little title right here reminds us that our prayers are tied down to the real world. They're real prayers by real people in real trouble. We don't get to float up like balloons into a lofty prayer life. No, we're down in the nitty-gritty, day-to-day operations of life, just like our God, who became a carpenter.

Christian spirituality is carpenter business. It's auto mechanic business. It's stay-at-home-mom business with poopy diapers and dishes. It's that kind of a Christian

spirituality, and this prayer reminds you this is not a guy with his harp sitting on the side of a grassy slope. This is, in fact, a man—as we'll learn from 2 Samuel 14–17—cowering in a tent, afraid for his life, while a million-man lynch army is chasing after him.

Real people in real life with real trouble, praying: That's a powerful prayer. You take prayers out of the real world, and you neuter them of all power. Real prayer happens in the real world, and this title reminds us of that. But it doesn't just plug us into a story—your prayers are plugged into your story—there's more to it than that. We're reflecting on this title. What does it mean to us?

Because we all know that we miss the mark and we're all constantly reaching through morality, some of you study your Bible just to prove to God that you're something special. What happens when you do that? You're climbing up that ladder. Well, there are always other people below you a few rungs, aren't there? And you develop a tone of condescension. There's nothing more repugnant to the gospel than that. "Grace alone!" Grace alone means you quit having arrogance and condescension. You didn't climb up; he came down!

We also reach with our prayer lives. Have you heard of the Pharisees? If you haven't, they were the religious elite of the day. They were known for their piety—their purity—their separation from the world. Good, but they used their morality to club other people over the head. They used their morality to make themselves feel worthy. And when they had a few successes under their belt, they looked down at other people. "Look at all those lowly sinners and tax collectors. Thank God I'm not like them!"

But they weren't just known for clubbing people over the head with their morality; they also clubbed them over the head with their prayer lives. They were always going on and on about how dedicated they were. And they would try and induce guilt in others by their very prayers. Anybody guilty of that? Let me try to convince you that we all do this.

My daughter and my son still share a room—they're four and five. They share a room and we tell them together, "Pick up your toys." Well, if you have any kids, you know how this works. Neither of them do, unless you're right there in the room helping them, like God coming down and helping them obey the law. They need help. If you just tell them and go away, they never do it.

But almost every single time, my daughter comes and says, "Daddy, Jude is not picking up his toys. He's playing." And so I have to say, "Well, what did I tell you to do?" "You told me to pick up my room." "And what are you doing right now? Are you picking up your room?" "No..." "What are you doing?" "I'm telling on my brother."

So, which is worse? The one who disregards the command or the one who spends his entire time consumed with the fact that other people are disregarding the command? Which is worse? They're both rebellious. See, there are two ways to rebel against God and try to control your life. One is libertarianism and the other is legalism, and I don't

mean that in a political sense. One is breaking all the commandments in total disregard and the other one is consuming yourself with the fact that other people don't keep it as well as you do.

Listen, if you're praying and the main topic of your conversation with God is that other people don't pray as well as you do, you're not really praying. You're tattling. That's Phariseeism. That's not what we're talking about. When you read this title, "The Psalm of David when his son, Absalom, rejected him," you're reminded that these are not the prayers of people who think of themselves highly. These are prayers of people who are hurting.

The Betrayal of Absalom

Can you do that? Can you hurt? Then you can pray like the psalmist. It also tells us the story of Absalom and David. Have you heard about Absalom before? I'll tell you a little bit about Absalom, since it introduces us to him at the very beginning of Psalm 3. Absalom was a beautiful young man. He inherited his good looks from his father, David, and David, being a king, was able to choose from the most beautiful women in the land.

So Absalom was a stunning young man, a real Tim Tebow. Except he grew his hair out long and lustrous, and he had to cut his hair every spring because it got so heavy. It says that his hair weighed two pounds when he cut it. He wasn't just beautiful; he was also passionate. He avenged the rape of his sister with a murder. He ran for his life. He burned down a barley field in order to get his father's attention. (Some of David's failures were catching up with him.)

He was not only a beautiful and passionate man; he was an arrogant man as well. There came a time in Absalom's life when he would get on the back of a chariot and horses would draw him throughout the city. 50 men would run out in front of him, and with his hair flowing in the wind, he gathered the praises and attentions of all the peoples.

Soon, he began to park himself outside of the palace, and when people would come to see David, he would play the mediator gossip. He would say, "David is a little busy right now. He doesn't have time for you, but I'll take care of you. I'm such a good person, aren't I?" And after four years of playing the mediator gossip, he stole the hearts of God's people from David.

When believed that he finally had enough power taken from David through this little secretive plan of his, he asked David permission to go off and sacrifice praises to God in Hebron. But when he "went off to sacrifice praises to God in Hebron," he didn't actually do that. Instead, he formed a capitol and established a coups d'etat, a rebellion against the king.

And with all his armies, he began to march on Jerusalem. David heard about what his son had done, and he took all his wives except 10, the soldiers, and the children, and they all had to march out of Jerusalem so that they wouldn't be destroyed. They marched out of Jerusalem bare-footed with mourning cloths over their heads. And they walked slowly up the Mount of Olives, weeping.

At one point David has the Ark of the Covenant, and he tells the priest, "Leave it in Jerusalem. If God has rejected me, then kill me." He mourns, he weeps, and he walks up the Mount of Olives, and as he does, people are throwing rocks at him and rejecting him and crying out to him that he is a worthless man. One man named Shimei would throw rocks and say, "You worthless man, you're on your walk to hell!"

Look at it in Psalm 3:2: "There is no salvation for him in God." That's what they're saying. He's a cursed one. Everything that he did to Saul, he's getting paid back for that. He gets to his encampment that night. He goes into his little tent. He weeps, and he writes this Psalm.

If you want to pray right, you have to get into the story of the real world. There he is, praying. And what does he say? Let's look at it in verse one: "Oh, Lord, how many are my foes!" Do you feel that way sometimes? "Many are rising against me. Oh, Lord, they're saying stuff about my soul. They're saying that there is no salvation in God for me."

Did you read it? Now, what do we have to do next? What do we do after we read it? We reflect on it. We meditate on it. Notice three things here. One, there are many people against him. He's in the minority now. He's trying to do what's right. He's following God. And in following God, he's come against a brick wall, and he is now in the minority. Do you ever feel that way? Can you identify with him?

Not only that; many are rising up against him. That means that while he is down, his friends are kicking him. In 2 Samuel, we read that his favorite counselors go off to follow Absalom. His friends see that and they turn on him; there's blood in the water and the sharks attack.

And then they are saying that there is no salvation for his soul. They're saying he's not even a Christian. They're saying he's not following Jesus anymore. They're saying he is a failure as a father, as a king, and as a spiritual leader and God has finally turned his back on him. They are attacking David right at the point of his identity, right where it hurts. Think about the thing that makes you feel good in life; that's where they're hitting him.

Time to Respond

Are we ready to respond? We read it, reflected on it, and tried to identify with the psalm; now, we respond to God, letting him start the conversation. I wrote a prayer

down, and I wrote it down quickly, so that you could know that anyone can do this. Let me read it for you:

“Father, I thought I was on the right path. I thought I was on the path of blessing, and I learned in church that to delight in your word is to become like a tree, but I feel like chaff. I don’t have an army encamped around me, but my family thinks I’m nuts for following you. The passive aggression, the jabs, the constant critique and criticism—they all think that I’m judgmental and angry. I’m really not!

“I’m a fanatic, apparently. A fundamentalist. My neighbors think I’m divisive and angry, but I love them. They aren’t fair in their assessments of me. I turn on the TV and the radio and the world thinks I’m nuts too. They’re against me and my people. I feel like an army has encamped around me. I feel like I’m hiding in a cave, a little Christian cave.

“What about the promises of reigning with you? What about the meek inheriting the earth? What about your glory covering the face of the deep? What about your promises that you made to me back in Jerusalem?”

We go into verse three: “But you, oh LORD, are a shield about me, my glory and the lifter of my head.” Notice that word “but.” It’s one of the most beautiful words in all the Bible. It changes everything! “*But* you—they’re all against me, they all think I’m nuts, they don’t think I’m even a Christian—but *you* are a shield about me. You are my glory. You are the one who lifts up my head.”

Now let’s think on those three things, starting with “shield”: The Bible talks about shields all over the place. Sometimes they’re big shields for offense, sometimes they’re little shields for defense. Did you ever have to play offense or defense? Who’s your shield?

David had a shield. One time David counted his army, and God said it was a sin. He plagued him for it. But is counting people a sin? No. What was the sin? The sin wasn’t that he counted the army; the sin was that he was counting *on* the army. Just like you counting your bank accounts. Just like you count on your fancy homes and your good looks and your charm and your personality and your ambition and your career—the list goes on and on. We all have shields, don’t we?

But now David is in a little tent. That’s not much of a shield, is it? One piece of fabric between him and the hordes from Dan to Beersheba that have gathered around him—they’re about to fall on him like the dew falls on the morning grass. He’s got nothing but God. He thought he had an army, but not anymore. There goes his old shield.

“God, you’re my shield.” (You can meet God when you have moments like that.) Then he says, “But you are also my glory.” You know David; he had many, many wives. He looked out from his palace, he saw Bathsheba, and he said, “If I could only have her, then I’d be a somebody. Then I’d have glory.” And he murdered for her. He committed adultery. And he said, “Now, Bathsheba, my trophy wife, my glory.”

The word “glory” means a lot of things, and what it’s talking about here is someone who takes glory in other things. And that’s not inherently wrong, but it is if you have a glory over and above God. Is it your career? “That’s my glory! That’s what makes me shine! Look at my children; look at how good they are in football! Man, that’s my *glory* out there running on the field!” That’s okay, but God must be your ultimate glory.

But now, David has lost all shields and glories in this world; he’s only got one glory left: God. “You’re my only glory left. You’re the only thing that makes me feel like I’m walking in the sunlight anymore.” And then he says, “You, God, you lift my head. I’ve been rejected by the entire nation. I’ve been shown as a failure as a dad, as a king, and as a spiritual leader. I am an absolute failure, and here I am, with a sheepskin of a tent between me and death.

“You’re my shield, you’re my glory, and you lift my head. They all shove my head in the dirt, taking jabs at me and attacking me. They are against me, but you lift up my head. I used to lift up my head when those girls would sing my praises—‘David killed his hundreds of thousands!’ I used to have my head high when they sang my praises, but now no one’s singing my praises; they’re throwing rocks at me.

“But you, Lord, still lift up my head.” You see, he’s got nothing. He’s living in the desert. He’s getting manna from heaven and water from a rock and his only friend is God; that’s all he’s got left in this world. Now, we respond. We reflected on it; now we pray. Here I’m trying to teach everyone how to do this and that you can do it yourself.

Let’s respond—and I wrote this prayer, once again, off the cuff, after reading and meditating on this passage: “Father, I’ve put my stock in my career.” Who can say amen to that? Some of you say, “Not me, my career is awful. I’m totally miserable.” But aren’t you trying to? Aren’t you jealous of others who make it? Just because you haven’t been successful in your idolatry doesn’t mean you’re not actually committing idolatry.

It’s handling the success and wanting it too badly that’s just as bad. Sometimes God gives it to us as a test and sometimes he *doesn’t* give it to us as a test. “Father, I’ve put too much stock in my career, or trying to have one. I put too much stock in my successes, my calling. I felt like a somebody and successful. But my life still feels incomplete. My boss is never satisfied. Others don’t esteem me. My head is lowered, my glory has turned out to be a shadow, and my shield is getting smaller with every attack.

“Oh, would you take the place of my career in my heart? Would you make me someone? *You* are my glory. *You* lift my head. Then I could withstand any shortfall, any bad day, any layoff, any lack of appreciation. I could keep my face set. Forgive me, Lord. I love you; help me to love you more.” Receive the Bible, read it, reflect on it, and respond to God.

Let me give you some reasons why you should do this—the four R’s of Christian spirituality. Why pray the Psalms? Here’s a few reasons:

Praying the Psalms

Because it will help you avoid vain repetition. Who here has vain repetition in your prayers? I know you do; I hear some of them. We all do. Jesus said to avoid vain repetitions; quit using the Lord's name in vain! If you pray the Psalms, you can avoid vain repetitions.

Who here, when praying, you just make it up as you go along? That's okay sometimes, but how about responding to God as you go along? You're there with God on the couch; he talks to you, you listen, you chew on it, and then you talk back. You let him lead the conversation.

This is the journey of Christian spirituality. It can help you avoid churchy language and filler: "Um, Lord, lead and direct us, and plant a hedge of protection around us, and bless the hands that prepared this meal..." Quit that nonsense! That's not real prayer. There's no prayer in the Bible like that. These are people hurting and they're pouring out their souls to God. Praying the Psalms can help you avoid that kind of stuff.

You know why else you should pray the Psalms? Because the early church did. When they were thrown in prison, when they were gathered together in Acts 4, what did they all do? They all prayed the Psalms. They, in fact, prayed Psalm 2, and they probably prayed it from memory, because as a congregation, they memorized their Psalms together.

Also, pray the Psalms because Jesus did. In fact, scholars will tell you that every single prayer that Jesus prayed on the cross was a repetition of a Psalm or an allusion to a Psalm. As Jesus cried out, "*Eloi Eloi, lama sabachthani?*" (My God, my God, why have thou forsaken me?), he was quoting the psalmist. He was identifying with David in his prayer life.

And he was more than likely doing that because as a boy he memorized the Psalms. And when he found himself in a place of trouble, the Psalms just poured out. Why pray the Psalms? Because the Psalms are inspired prayers. How would you like to pray Holy-Spirit-inspired prayers? You can pray those after God. It's beautiful.

And last, pray them because in church history, Christians have always been doing this. Have you heard of George Mueller? If you haven't, he is the "patron saint" of orphans. He is the king of adoptions. (I think he adopted like half of a city.) He had in his prayer journal over 50,000 specific answers to prayer. A prayer warrior.

Listen to what he said, even this mighty prayer warrior, and see if you can't identify with this: "Formally when I rose, I began to pray as soon as possible, and generally

spent all my time until breakfast in prayer, often after having suffered much from wandering of mind for 10 minutes to a quarter of an hour.”

He’s distracted by everything. Who feels like that when you pray? His mind’s going all over the place, he’s so distracted. “Or even half an hour of pure distractions. I scarcely ever suffer now in this way, for my heart being nourished by the Truth, being brought into experiential fellowship with God, I speak to my father about the things that he has brought before me in his precious word.”

So listen, Church: Obviously this is not the only type of prayer. But I encourage you as a church to take the Psalms into your heart through memory, with you and your word of God, into your prayer closets. If you don’t have a prayer closet, take your exercise room and add a couch or chair to it. If you don’t have an exercise room, take your TV room and turn the TV off and turn it into a prayer room.

That’s easy, right? If you don’t have an exercise room or a TV room, just walk outside; no one goes out there anymore. And you will be all alone with God walking and praying the Psalms. Just think, when you find yourself in a tent and there’s hordes of armies surrounding you, the Psalms will pour out of your mouth.

Let me give you one more reason why we should pray the Psalms: Because Psalm 1 says it leads to blessing (v.1), tree-likeness (v.3), and being known by God (v.6). You want to be like a tree? David is a tree. He’s up there in that tent and he is as solid as an oak tree. He’s got his roots so far down in a stream that we can hardly even see. He does not budge because he is blessed. You say, “I can’t believe that *he* is blessed; he’s got an army around him!” He’s blessed. Like we said in the last chapter, he’s in the valley of illusion, but he’s blessed.

Let me show it to you. If you keep reading in Psalm 3, David says this: “I cried aloud to the LORD.” He’s praying to the Lord. But you say, “He’s praying, but I don’t see him responding, like you’re saying.” You’re not looking closely enough. If you look in your translation, you’ll see that he’s crying out to the LORD, capital L-O-R-D. That means he’s crying out to *Yahweh*. And where do you think he learned that name from? *Torah*.

Yahweh is the God who spoke out of the burning bush. *Yahweh* is the God who split the Red Sea. *Yahweh* is the special, promising name of God just for Israel in the Old Testament. David is crying out to *Yahweh* and saying, “What about all your promises?” He’s responding to a name that he already knows of God. He’s responding to a character that has already been revealed to him.

But then he goes on to the next verse: “I cried out to the LORD and he answered me from his holy hill.” What is the holy hill? That’s the temple mount in Jerusalem: Zion. Do you think David is sitting there in his tent and he’s praying and he hears an audible voice coming over the hills? What’s going on here?

He’s *remembering* what God said to him from his holy hill. It says “answered,” in the past tense, does it not? He’s *remembering*. The word of God is becoming a member of

his body once again. He is recalling it, he's chewing on it, he's meditating on it, he's reading it from his mind's eye; he might even have a scroll out. He's remembering in his mind what Nathan the prophet told him from the holy hill.

"David, you'll never leave this throne until the day you die. David, I'm going to establish your throne forever; one of your descendants, the Messiah, is going to sit on it forever, and his kingdom is going to cover the entire globe." David's sitting in that little tent, and does that promise look like it's ever coming true? Doesn't look like it. But what does he have in his mind and in his heart and in his will?

He has the Bible, in his life and probably even in his hands. He says, "I'm crying out to you, LORD," and what is God saying back? "Remember what I told you from my holy hill. Remember my words. Get them down in your heart!" David is doing just what we are to do: Receive, read, reflect, and then respond.

And look at the next verse, my favorite verse in the whole chapter. He goes to sleep! Who could go to sleep in a situation like that? We can hardly go to sleep if our calendar's going to be messed up the next day. He goes to sleep. "I lay down and slept; I woke again, for the LORD sustained me."

How beautiful is that? That is a man who is blessed. That is a man who is as solid as an oak tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, whose leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers. It doesn't look like it, but it's so true. He is blessed. Would you like to sleep like that? There's a million-man lynch mob out there. Nobody thinks he's even following Jesus anymore. That is beautiful; that is blessed. That's why we pray the Psalms.

One Final Reflection

The next morning he wakes up from his sleeping sound like a baby. He gathers his armies; he divides them into three—Joab is one of his generals. Absalom gathers his armies as well. And the armies collide. But just before David's army goes out, David says this one last word to them: "Be gentle with my son, Absalom."

They ride off into battle. But Absalom, riding on his mule, for some reason rides up under the branches of a tree. Perhaps the mule was spooked, perhaps he missed his direction. But he rides up under the branches of a tree and his flowing hair gets caught up in the branches of this tree. And there he is, dangling, hanged on a tree. His mule has gone out from under him.

And most of the soldiers remember what David said. They remember David said to be gentle with his son. His son betrayed him. Stabbed him in the back. Hates him. But David loves him. And there his son, hanging on a tree, is brutalized and beaten by those soldiers. Finally it ends when Joab stabs him in the heart and the blood pours out. They lower his body from the tree and they bury him in the woods below a pile of rocks.

If you've been a Christian for a while, you recognize that story, don't you? David is waiting back at his camp, waiting to find out news of the battle, and he sees a runner coming up to him and he thinks, "Well, it *must* be good news because there's just one runner." And the runner comes and says, "Victory is ours! Victory is ours!" And David asks, "What about my son?" He didn't know. Another runner comes up, and David says, "It *must* be good news because there's only one runner." And the runner says, "Victory! Victory!"

And David says, "But what about my son?" And he finds out his son was killed. David lurches himself over a wall, and he says, "Absalom, my dear, dear son! Oh, that it would have been me rather than you, my death rather than your death! Absalom, my dear, dear son!"

Those words are your salvation. Do you see that? It would be many years later that God would cry out, "My son, my son. My children. Would it be me rather than you, my death rather than your death!" And he doesn't just cry it. He comes down to earth and he dies. He's hanged on a tree; he's brutalized and beaten and stabbed in the heart. For us. Our substitute. It's brutal, it's bloody, but it is his death that equals our life. Reflect on that.