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PRAYING THE PSALMS IN UNION WITH CHRIST

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ABSTRACT. The believer's oneness with Christ creates profound roots within the believer's soul. This union undergirds the believer's spiritual life as he or she prays the Psalms. This essay explores the theological realities that explain the spiritual resonance Christians experience when praying the Psalms. I propose that as believers pray the Psalms in union with Christ, their souls resonate with the Spirit of Christ, the sonship of Christ, the sufferings of Christ, the body of Christ, and the intercession of Christ. Believers share this salvific oneness with Christ by faith, so that they share in his life, death, resurrection, ascension, inheritance, and beloved status as God's righteous son. In praying the Psalms, believers echo the Spirit of Christ, sense the sonship of Christ, taste the sufferings of Christ, harmonize with the body of Christ, and join in the intercessions of Christ.

KEYWORDS: Psalms, Psalter, union with Christ, prayer, Spirit

Introduction

Praying the Psalms is like breathing. In all generations, the church has known that the Psalms are oxygen for the soul. 'All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable' (2 Timothy 3:16), and particular authors, books, and genres are also profitable in their own unique ways. In his letter to Marcellinus on the Psalms, Athanasius acknowledges the equal inspiration of all Scripture while emphasizing the special contribution of the Psalms (Athanasius of Alexandria 1980: 101–2). This psalmic oxygen is uniquely life-giving for new covenant believers as we pray the Psalms in union with Christ.

Every Christian prays the Psalms in union with Christ, whether knowingly or unknowingly. But what is the significance of psalmic prayer in light of this union? What is happening in the soul of a believer united with Christ when he or she

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engages in psalmic prayer? By 'psalmic prayer' I mean reading, reciting, praying, singing, or chanting the Psalms as prayers, whether personally or corporately. Psalmic prayer could also include meditating on the words, phrases, and themes in the Psalms, rephrasing them in personal conversation with God (Piper 2004: 163-65; Whitney 2015).

This essay explores theological realities that help explain the phenomenon of spiritual resonance that Christians experience when praying the Psalms. I will propose that as believers pray the Psalms in union with Christ, our souls resonate with the Spirit of Christ, the sonship of Christ, the sufferings of Christ, the body of Christ, and the intercession of Christ. I will briefly describe union with Christ, then explore these five resonances Christians experience in psalmic prayer.

Union with Christ

In recent years a raft of books has been published on this vital doctrine (Billings 2011; Letham 2011; Campbell 2012; Butterfield 2015; Reeves 2015; Macaskill 2018; Thate, Vanhoozer, and Campbell 2018; Wilbourne 2018; Macaskill 2019; Beale 2023). Many agree with John Murray, who wrote in 1955, 'Union with Christ is really the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation' (Murray 1955: 161). What is union with Christ? No brief summary can ultimately capture its depth, breadth, and richness. But in basic terms, union with Christ is the salvific oneness believers share with Christ by faith, so that we share in his life, death, resurrection, ascension, inheritance, and beloved status as God's righteous son. Erickson thus identifies four ways this union can be misunderstood in ways that are 'too strong' or 'too weak.' The union is not metaphysical or mystical (too strong), and the union is not psychological or sacramental (too weak) (Erickson 1998: 962-65). We experience this union in real time as we enjoy intimate and vital communion with Christ and his people through his word and Spirit.

Network of Benefits

Every gift of salvation is rooted in this union. Anthony Hoekema writes, 'Through union with Christ we receive every spiritual blessing' (Hoekema 1994: 67). '[God] has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places' (Ephesians 1:3).

This union stretches from eternity past through eternity future. From start to finish—from before the beginning until after the end—we are redeemed, secure, and blessed in Christ. The network of benefits we receive can almost be described in chronological clusters like a loose *ordo salutis*. Yet these many spiritual blessings constantly overlap, forming more of a kaleidoscope than a tight chronology.

We are *chosen* in Christ (Ephesians 1:14), *redeemed* in Christ (Ephesians 1:7), *brought near* in Christ (Ephesians 2:13), and *sealed* in Christ (Ephesians 1:13). We are *crucified* with Christ (Romans 6:1-3, 6; Galatians 2:20; 2 Timothy 2:11), *buried* with Christ (Romans 6:4), *raised* with Christ (Colossians 3:1), and *seated* with Christ (Ephesians 2:6; Colossians 3:1). We are *reborn* in Christ (1 Peter 1:3), *created* in Christ (Ephesians 2:10), *loved* in Christ (Ephesians 1:6), and *secure* in Christ (Romans 8:38-39). We are *justified* in Christ (1 Corinthians 6:11), *adopted* in Christ (Ephesians 1:4-5), *heirs* with Christ (Romans 8:17; Ephesians 1:11), and we *suffer* with Christ (Romans 8:17). We will *die* in Christ (1 Thessalonians 4:14, 16), *rise* in Christ (1 Cor 15:22), *live* with Christ (2 Timothy 2:11), and *reign* with Christ (2 Timothy 2:12).

Scriptural Illustrations and Analogies

This profound union is clarified by several scriptural images or analogies. Christ is the vine; we are the branches (John 15:1-8). Christ is the head; we are his body (Ephesians 1:22; 4:15-16; 5:23; Colossians 1:18; 2:19). Christ is our husband; we are his bride (Ephesians 5:23, 29-30). Christ is the cornerstone; we are his temple stones (1 Peter 2:4-8). Christ is the new Adam; we are his new posterity (Romans 5:12-19; 1 Corinthians 15:19-49). These scriptural images use agricultural, biological, anatomical, marital, and material realities to flesh out this profound relationship.

Trinitarian Union

In addition, Scripture links our union with Christ to the relationships of the Father, Son, and Spirit (John 17:11, 21-23; 1 Corinthians 6:17; cf. John 14:23). Indeed, 'our union with Christ is Trinitarian'—'by virtue of being incorporated into the life of Jesus Christ, we participate in the life, love, and fellowship of the Trinity' (Johnson 2013: 42-45).

Mutual Indwelling

Not only do we abide in Christ; Christ abides in us. Jesus says, 'Abide in me, and I in you' (John 15:4). 'Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit' (John 15:5). Believers experience mutual indwelling. We dwell with Christ, and Christ makes his home in us. We are one with Christ, and Christ is one with us. We are in Christ, and Christ is in us. Paul explains that 'the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints' is 'Christ in you, the hope of glory' (Colossians 1:26-27). In Paul's own life 'it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me' (Galatians 2:20). The apostle is like a woman in labor 'until Christ is formed in you!' (Galatians 4:19). Christ is forming himself in us from the inside out, shaping us into his own image. Praying the Psalms is a vital part of this process.

Union with Christ and Psalmic Resonance

Why do the Psalms, written thousands of years ago in their own language, style, and culture, resonate with Christians around the globe and across the centuries? Why do the Psalms resonate so deeply with Christ's new covenant community?

There are many sensible answers. Psychologically, the Psalms are honest, giving vent to our souls. Grammatically, the Psalms are first-person compositions, making them deeply personal. The most common word-theme in the Psalms is 'I-you.' Situationally, the Psalms express every kind of struggle and emotion, giving us songs for any season. Literarily, the Psalms are poetry, filled with striking imagery and aesthetic warmth. Liturgically, the Psalms are prayed, recited, chanted, and sung, so they resonate with our souls due to their use in worship.

Each of these answers is reasonable and wise. But another reason the Psalms resonate with Christians must be *christological-spiritual*. The Psalms foreshadow Christ, previewing the patterns of his heart, his life, his righteousness, his ministry, his suffering, and his vindication. In the Psalms we hear a pre-echo of his voice. With this in mind, here are five reasons why the Psalms resonate with the believer's spirit as we pray them in Christ.

Echoing the Spirit of Christ

When we pray the Psalms in union with Christ, we are echoing the Spirit of Christ. When a Spirit-filled person prays a psalm, the lyrics resonate because the Spirit of Christ himself breathed out the words. Peter tells believers that 'the prophets… searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories' (1 Peter 1:10-11). In the NT, this third person of the Trinity is called 'the Spirit of Christ,' 'the Spirit of Jesus,' 'the Spirit of Jesus Christ,' and 'the Spirit of God's Son' (Acts 16:7; Romans 8:9; Galatians 4:6; Philippians 1:19; 1 Peter 1:11). According to Peter, the Spirit of the preincarnate Christ breathed out the OT prophecies about his own messianic sufferings and future eschatological glories. For example, the Spirit of Christ was guiding the 'prophet' David as David 'foresaw the resurrection of Christ' (Acts 2:30 explaining Psalm 16:8-11; cf. 2 Peter 1:21).

Therefore, in psalmic prayer, Christians led by the Spirit of Christ are reciting sacred lyrics breathed out by the same Spirit. We are echoing the words his Spirit expressed through David and all who authored the Psalms. We are praying along with the very Spirit of Christ. Some sentiments in the Psalms could not be expressed personally by the Spirit of Christ. For example, the Spirit of Christ would not confess personal sin. Yet we may say that in divine purity and merciful solidarity he acknowledges the sin of his people both as individuals and as a community. For this

reason, Athanasius encourages verbatim recitation of the Psalms. '[L]et him recite and chant… the things written just as they were spoken… so that even the Spirit who speaks in the saints, seeing words inspired by him in them, might render assistance to us' (Athanasius of Alexandria 1980: 127). Though Athanasius strongly opposes paraphrasing the Psalms in prayer or worship, I believe psalmic prayer can include utilizing the Psalms as a resource for expanded meditation, prayer, confession, and praise.

Sensing the Sonship of Christ

This Spirit who inspired the Psalms is 'the Spirit of God's Son' (Galatians 4:6). In addition, the Psalms are written in a paternal context. In the OT, God called Israel 'my son' and 'my firstborn son' (Hosea 11:1; Exodus 4:22). So the songs of Israel are poetic expressions of sonship. The Psalms rarely address or describe God as 'Father' (Psalms 68:5; 89:26; 103:13). But the Psalms are saturated with paternal concepts like leadership, provision, protection, compassion, and inheritance. Many titles for God in the Psalms reflect this paternal role over his covenant people.

Further, many psalms express the voice of the Davidic king, and God promised this king a father-son relationship. 'I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son' (2 Samuel 7:14; 1 Chronicles 17:13). 'He shall cry to me, "You are my Father"' (Psalm 89:26). This father-son relationship is ultimately fulfilled in Christ, the final Davidic king and divine Son of God (Hebrews 1:5).

Through union with Christ, believers share his sonship. 'For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith' (Galatians 3:26; cf. John 1:12; Romans 8:14-16; Galatians 4:5-6). Therefore, when Christians pray the Psalms, we are not only citizens hailing our king, sheep calling for our shepherd, sufferers seeking our refuge, and worshipers praising our God. We are also children praying to our Father. This sonship dimension is not added to the Psalter by new covenant believers. Rather, a pre-existing father-son dynamic is intensified for adopted believers praying the Psalms to God our Father through union with Christ his Son.

We are united with the final Davidic king, whom God promised would enjoy a filial relationship with him. So together with Christ, we cry to God, 'You are my Father!' (Psalm 89:26). This expression evokes the Spirit's inner testimony that new covenant believers are children of God. Paul describes this internal testimony in Romans 8:15-16: 'You have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God' (Romans 8:15-16; cf. Galatians 4:6-7).

> The internal testimony of the Holy Spirit… is the simultaneous testimony of the indwelling Holy Spirit and the human spirit heard in the adopted child's instinctive cry of "*Abba*! Father!" It is a recurring expression that issues from deep within the redeemed

soul, providing constant subjective assurance that the believer is indeed a child of God (Gundersen 2011: 18-35).

This witness of the Spirit can be expressed through psalmic prayer as Christians cry out to God as Father through the familial prayers of the Psalter. Adding a fatherly prescript to each psalm is unnecessary, because these psalms were already written and sung by sons of God—his national son Israel and his royal son David (almost half the psalms have a Davidic superscript).

To summarize, the Psalms are inspired by the Spirit of God's Son; they were originally sung by God's *corporate* son, Israel; they express the prayers of God's *royal* son, the Davidic king; they are fulfilled by God's *messianic* Son, Jesus Christ; and we now pray them as God's *adopted* sons, in Christ. Sonship is embedded in the Psalms, and as sons of God through Christ, Christians resonate deeply with this sonship as we pray the Psalms.

Tasting the Sufferings of Christ

In Scripture, sonship in Christ means suffering with Christ. 'We are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him' (Romans 8:16-17). Praying the Psalms is a crucial way Christians learn to 'share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death' (Philippians 3:10; cf. 2 Timothy 1:8).

The Psalter aches with groaning. Sometimes the psalmists mourn and confess their own sin (Psalms 32:3-4; 51:3-6; 90:7-8). But often they are 'righteous sufferers.' They do not claim moral perfection, but often they are responding to wrongful oppression or persecution (Psalms 7:8; 18:20-24; 26:1).

Yet the Psalms do not just retell the hardships of the saints; the Psalms pre-tell the sufferings of the Messiah. Christ's rejection in the Gospels continues, amplifies, and fulfills the pattern of suffering and deliverance woven through the Psalter. For example, both Jesus and Peter quote Psalm 118:22 to show how Jesus' rejection and vindication fulfilled a typological prediction in the Psalms: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone' (Matthew 21:42; Mark 12:10-11; Luke 20:17; Acts 4:11; 1 Peter 2:4-7).

But in the Psalms, the king does not suffer alone. Rather, king and people share the same fate (*e.g.*, Psalms 89:50-51; 102:10, 13; Psalm 102 has a Davidic hue due to its strategic placement between two titled Davidic psalms [101, 103]). 'In the Psalter, the focus is on David as covenantal head of the nation. If he achieves victory, his people triumph. If he is overcome, the whole nation is defeated' (Robertson 2015: 251).

In the NT, as well, the union of Christ with his people means cross before crown for both. We are 'crucified with him' and 'buried with him' (Romans 6:4, 6). 'We

have died with Christ' (Romans 6:8). Following the apostles, we embody this death through self-sacrifice in ministry, 'carrying in the body the death of Jesus' and 'being given over to death for Jesus' sake' (2 Corinthians 4:10-11). Yet in our discipleship, Christians do not primarily suffer *for* Jesus; we suffer *with* him (Philippians 3:10; 2 Timothy 1:8; 2:3; 4:5, 9).

When we mourn unjust treatment through psalmic prayer, we are tasting the sufferings of saints long past. But their hardships and laments prefigure David's greater son, so we are ultimately tasting his pain. Through predictive patterns in poetic form, we perceive the bitter cup he drank.

Harmonizing with the Body of Christ

The Psalms are for corporate use, even the psalms written in the first-person singular. The Psalter is a communal songbook also used personally, not a private journal also used corporately. Under the old covenant, the Psalms were used centrally in temple worship (Wenham 2013, 13-15). Under the new covenant, praying them in union with Christ should mean praying them often with his body. The church, in gatherings large and small, formal and informal, is a central arena for psalmic prayer. Jesus and his disciples sang from the Egyptian *Hallel* at his final Passover (Matthew 26:30; Mark 14:26; cf. Psalms 113-118). Paul and Silas, imprisoned in Phillipi, likely sang psalms together (Acts 16:25). Corinthian Christians blessed each other with 'hymns' in their gatherings (1 Corinthians 14:26). The 'cheerful' were called to 'sing praises,' which included psalms (James 5:13). Paul consistently calls his churches to 'sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs,' addressing both the Lord and 'one another.' Reading, reciting, praying, singing, or chanting the Psalms with the gathered church is a product of being 'filled with the Spirit' and having 'the word of Christ dwell in you richly' (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16).

Through union with Christ, every believer is not only one with the Trinity but also with each other. Several biblical images stress this unity. Christ is our head, and we are joint members of his one body (Ephesians 4:15-16). Christ is the cornerstone for God's new temple, and believers are 'living stones' fitted together 'in the Lord' (Ephesians 2:20-22; 1 Peter 2:4-5). The oneness Jesus sought in John 17 was meant for all believers to experience together (John 17:21-23).

In light of this intimate union that believers share, Gordon Wenham explains how the body of Christ can use lament psalms together:

> *Not everyone who comes to church is full of joy and happiness.* There are many who come with great burdens, both physical and spiritual: sickness, marital problems, financial difficulties, pressure at work, even harassment and persecution. Old age brings all sorts of problems with it… *By praying these psalms those who have no problems and*

> *difficulties in their lives can learn to sympathize with those in trouble and pray for those who are suffering or persecuted*… So let us use the laments to give more depth and sympathy to our prayers for our brothers and sisters in need (Wenham 2013: 47-48).

The same principle holds true for psalms of confession. Wenham explains that 'we can use the penitential psalms in the same way… we may know that members of our family have sinned, or that there is sin in our church or in our community or in our nation. We can and should pray these prayers then, not only on our own behalf but on behalf of the wider circles of life to which we belong' (Wenham 2013: 51-52) (Ezra 9:6-15; Nehemiah 1:5-11; 9:16-37; Daniel 9:3-19). As the body of Christ prays the psalms together in union with Christ our head, our cries and praises harmonize with each other.

Joining the Intercessions of Christ

Finally, praying the Psalms in union with Christ blends our spiritual desires with the intercessory heart of Christ. Through psalmic prayer, new covenant believers enjoy the same songs Jesus learned from his mother, heard in the temple, prayed in the synagogue, sang with his disciples, and recited from the cross (Matthew 26:30; Mark 14:26; Matthew 27:46). Jesus himself prayed the Psalms.

The NT teaches that the ascended Christ now intercedes for believers. In the priestly spirit of John 17, Christ continues advocating for his people (John 17:1-26; Hebrews 7:25; 1 John 2:1). Since he is our great high priest, our own worship is received only through him as we pray, sing, and recite the Psalms. We offer spiritual sacrifices to God 'through Jesus Christ,' and 'through him' we 'offer up a sacrifice of praise to God' (1 Peter 2:5; Hebrews 13:15). Praying properly means 'putting our prayers into the hands of this high priest' (Owen 2000: 1:258).

Because the Psalms are breathed out by Christ's own Spirit, the Psalms must resonate with his ongoing concerns for us. Therefore, when Christians pray the Psalms, our hearts are integrated with the sanctifying desires Christ has for us. Lovelace describes this integration:

> As Christ intercedes for us and for his kingdom at the right hand of God, the Holy Spirit moves our hearts into harmony with God's concerns… Through the leading of the Spirit in prayer our intercession becomes one with the intercession of Christ, our minds become attuned to his, and his concerns become ours (Lovelace 1979: 157).

One way we pray in unity with Christ is by praying the Psalms breathed out by his Spirit. The written prayers Christ inspired in the Psalms foretell the living prayers he now offers as he intercedes for us at God's right hand (cf. Matthew 6:10; 26:42; Luke 22:42; Romans 8:27).

Conclusion

Why do new covenant believers experience a deep resonance when we pray the Psalms? Certainly the poetry, artistry, honesty, and liturgy play significant roles. Yet the believer's oneness with Christ plants profound roots that nourish our souls with his own infinite life as we pray the Psalms. This union with Christ is the salvific oneness believers share with Christ by faith, so that we share in his life, death, resurrection, ascension, inheritance, and beloved status as God's righteous son. Our union with him is a vital reason our souls experience a deep resonance when praying the Psalms. In praying the Psalms, we echo the Spirit of Christ, sense the sonship of Christ, taste the sufferings of Christ, harmonize with the body of Christ, and join the intercessions of Christ.

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