

To Every Generation



Chuck Smith on the Psalms

Interviewed by **Chuck Smith Jr.**

Fondly I remember the lazy months of summer when the tradition in our home was to begin each day with “family devotions.” Dad read a portion of Scripture, gave a brief explanation (perhaps asking questions to see if we were paying attention), and then we would kneel and pray, each of us taking our turn, from the youngest to the oldest. The only break in this routine occurred on vacation when Dad directed a summer camp in Williams, Arizona. Then we shared morning devotions with the entire camp and Dad would invariably choose a psalm for our meditation. There is something about the Psalms that perfectly complements the beauty, grandeur and life-essence that we experience in nature. In fact, our sense of God’s nearness and our impulse to worship Him seem to be triggered by the natural world in exactly the same way they are triggered by the Psalms. Mom and Dad frequently quoted from passages in the Psalms. Dad seemed to enjoy their earthy word pictures, brutal honesty and declarations of God’s glory revealed in creation. Mom was drawn to the intimate expressions of God’s love and nearness, as well as the rich wisdom of the Psalms. I recently spent an enjoyable hour with my dad discussing his love for the Psalms and his use of them in worship and teaching. What

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follows is the essence of our conversation. I have to confess, I did not do a good job of “interviewing” Dad. Because his thoughts were so stimulating, I had trouble keeping my own mouth shut. My hope in sharing our dialogue is that you will discover the Psalms are the heart and soul of a good and healthy Christian life.

CSJ: Many Christians turn to the Psalms for encouragement or inspiration (or perhaps a “quick read”). Why?

CS: I believe that David was probably one of the most articulate men who has ever lived, and his ability to express the deepest feelings of his life are something we can all relate to. He more or less said things that we wish we would have said. He expressed his praise and thanksgiving in such a way that it becomes our prayer and praise. He seems to capture the whole gamut of human emotions.

CSJ: He not only articulated universal human experiences, but expressed them in the form of prayer.

CS: Yes. His prayers are wonderful, as you read of the great variety of things for which he prayed, you are amazed. However, he does not stop with just his petitions but moves into praises and thanksgiving. I think that people often fail to realize that thanksgiving and praise are even more vital to prayer than our petitions. What is commonly known as the Lord’s prayer begins and ends with praise.

CSJ: Perhaps he could teach a few lessons to the songwriters who are composing contemporary choruses?

CS: Right. Too often our songs do no more than endlessly repeat a phrase, but the phrase is not even profound.

CSJ: David repeats phrases, but often as a refrain.

CS: “For His mercy endureth forever.” In Psalm 136 David inserts a list of specific proofs of God’s mercy while repeating, “For His mercy endureth forever.” We don’t have this same kind of development of a theme in our choruses. If we were to write that same psalm, we would simply sing “His mercy endureth forever” over and over. We might not think to add all of these other beautiful things that speak in praise of God’s mercy.

CSJ: The other verses provide a context for God’s mercy.

CS: Right, exactly.

CSJ: What are the Psalms?

CS: The Psalms are described many times as the Hebrew Hymnal. I find it interesting that Jesus sang a hymn with His disciples the night they ate the Passover Supper. I can picture Jesus singing psalms with the disciples.

CSJ: What do you think the value of the Psalms is to Christian faith?

CS: I think that they give to us a wonderful expression of praise that is not limited to a nationality, but is universal. Even though David wrote psalms in which he wishes God’s judgment upon his enemies (and even though we might feel that way too), those sentiments don’t really fit with turning the other cheek at all, which is the moral grounding we get in the New Testament. Of course, many psalms are messianic and prophetic. I think people fail to see the prophetic aspect of David’s songs. He was a king, but he was also definitely a prophet. Near the end of his life, David ascribed his writings to the Holy Spirit—a claim that was confirmed both by Jesus and by Peter, who on different occasions said that the Spirit spoke “by the mouth of David.”

CSJ: In some of the Psalms we can see how the Psalmist works his way to praise,

but not all of them. There are psalms of lament that do not have a happy ending. Other psalms speak of acts of violence against Israel’s enemies, and others make reference to death as a state in which there is no breath or praise. What would you recommend when we come to those difficult passages in the Psalms?

CS: I think this answer may be problematic because it may sound unorthodox given the fact that Scripture is given “by inspiration of God.” But the difficult passages in the Psalms sound like our personal feelings for vengeance on those that have persecuted us or have hurt us. There are statements, in the book of Job for example, where someone will express a view of death in which everything is silent or one longs for the grave where all of life’s pain and pressures will be over. But when God comes on the scene, the first thing he does is rebuke them for speaking “without knowledge.” Then God questioned Job and his friends, whether they had been beyond the gates of death. In other words, He scolded them for talking like they knew everything about what happens after death. So, I think the response of God tends to negate words. He scolded them for talking like they knew everything about the validity of the earlier statements in the book of Job concerning what takes place after death. In the same way, we may wonder in the Psalms if perhaps David doesn’t lapse into his personal feelings or his own conception of things.

CSJ: Expressing the views of his culture and time. . .

CS: Yes.

CSJ: I wonder if our own hymnals express the most perfect theology.

CS: Well, actually, they don’t.

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CSJ: What would you suggest for getting the most out of the Psalms?

CS: Well, I think meditation is the best way to approach and absorb the Psalms. The more I meditate, the more I get out of each psalm. The idea of “ruminating” on a psalm, mentally chewing it, comes, of course, from the first psalm that speaks of “meditating on the Law of the Lord day and night.” They really do lend themselves tremendously to meditation.

CSJ: I totally agree with you. When you approach the technical analysis of a psalm. . .

CS: You lose it.

CSJ: Yes. The technical analysis often leaves me dry, but the word pictures and figures of speech can provide a month’s worth of meditation. Do you have a favorite psalm?

CS: You know, that is like asking the question, “Do you have a favorite color?” Well, if you’re asking about someone’s eyes, my answer is blue, not red. . .

CSJ: Mom’s eyes are blue.

CS: Yes. So a favorite color is relative to the object. My preference is for a blue sky and green grass. Therefore, given my different needs or different seasons of my life or experiences I go through, there is a favorite psalm. In reference to Jesus, Psalm 22 may be my favorite; in thinking of my relationship with the Lord it would be Psalm 23; and wanting to meditate upon the mercies of the Lord it would be Psalm 136; and then Psalm 139 in thinking of how my life is totally surrounded by God. So, there are favorites for different issues and needs that I have.

CSJ: Well, I know that you love Psalm 73.

CS: Yes, for gaining the eternal perspective, putting everything in its proper place. And then of course Psalm 37 is good for resting and committing your way to God.

CSJ: There are great psalms for confession of sin.

CS: Oh yes. Psalms 32 and 51 for the joy of forgiveness of sins.

CSJ: If you were feeling heartbroken or sad, and you wanted to read a psalm for consolation, which one comes to mind?

CS: Probably Psalm 42 and 43, “Why art thou cast down, Oh my soul, why art thou disquieted within me?” Then the psalm gives you the answer to a cast down soul, “Hope thou in God.” So, it’s when you lose God’s perspective or leave Him out of your situation, that is the cause of your sadness.

CSJ: Do you see the Psalms as being therapeutic in that sense?

CS: Yes, very definitely I think they are healing.

CSJ: If I’m not mistaken, I think you generally choose a psalm for the Scripture reading on Sunday morning. Why is that, rather than a gospel passage?

CS: Well, I think that probably it speaks more generally to the total issues of life and I usually try to pick a psalm that matches the thought of the message. Since life in its totality is pretty much expressed in the Psalms, you can find a psalm that usually is very appropriate for the message—because we talk about life. Often times I will include the psalm of the Scripture reading as an illustration or in affirming the particular truth that I am dealing with in the sermon’s text.

CSJ: What would your advice be to young ministers regarding their own relationship to the Psalms?

CS: Just meditate through them.

CSJ: Are there any other reflections on the Psalms you would like to make?

CS: The Psalms are capable of ministering to every emotion that we might experience—despair, sadness or, on the other end of the spectrum, extreme joy. The Psalms enable me to express those sentiments. I rarely feel adequate expressing the depth of the feeling in my spirit, that is, my feelings are far greater than my ability to express. But through the Psalms, David provides me with a vocabulary to address the gratitude, love, and appreciation of my heart. Interestingly, this week we are going through Psalms 11-15 in our Bible study and I’m going to concentrate on Psalm 13, which is one of those typical psalms that begins in the depth of despair. Four times the Psalmist asks, “How long?” How long before God answers, how long before God responds? It is a short psalm, but when you get to the last verse, the Psalmist is saying, “I will sing unto the Lord because He has dealt bountifully with me.” What a radical change! My sermon title will be, “Ashes to Beauty.” How did the change occur? Verse 5 says, “I’ve trusted in Thy mercy and thus my heart shall rejoice in Thy salvation. “What is the cure for our despair? God’s mercy. When we trust in Him, then we will end up rejoicing. The song helps to redirect our minds and hearts from our despair to the all-sufficiency of God. That’s what the Psalms do for us: they point us away from our problems to the all-sufficiency of God.