

REFLECTIONS ON THE PSALMS

PASTOR CHUCK SMITH

*How precious also are thy thoughts unto me O God!
How great is the sum of them! - Psalm 139:17*

Pastor Chuck Smith, founder and senior pastor of Calvary Chapel, Costa Mesa, known to most simply as Pastor Chuck is a lifelong lover of The Psalms. His thoughts and reflections on their meaning and value are nearly infinite and his appreciation is expressed in myriad ways, the most recent being a new recorded series. Pastor Chuck is renowned for his “golden” voice—warm, arresting, comforting, trusted—a welcome guest to millions of homes—and cars—through his *The Word for Today* radio broadcasts. Now, that inimitable voice has been blended with exquisite original music in a groundbreaking sequence of recordings, the first of which, *The Psalms of Comfort*, is already garnering praise and bringing hope and healing in its wake.

Poet of Prayer & Praise

Because nearly half of The Psalms were written or attributed to David, Pastor Chuck registers immense appreciation for the author’s eloquence and transparency. “I believe that David was probably one of the most articulate men who 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. 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.”

Primer in Worship

Pastor Chuck praises not only David’s ability to communicate and pray, but also to write meaningful and rich tapestries of worship in song. He comments, “Too often our songs do no more than endlessly repeat a phrase, but the phrase is not even profound. 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”

He elaborates on the worship in song aspect of The Psalter and connects one part of Scripture to another on a night that would reflect the kind of angst and overcoming faith we often see in The Psalms. Pastor Smith, says, “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.” Pastor Chuck’s ability to interweave, Old and New Testament, the life of David, and Christ and our current lives and history into one meaningful narrative is one of his special gifts.

Inspired Reality

“The Psalms give to us a wonderful expression of praise that is not limited to a nationality, but is universal,” declares Pastor Chuck. He then goes on to explain some of the aspects of The Psalms that are both puzzling and layered with obvious and hidden meaning and the multiple gifts and callings David exercised. “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.’”

In clarifying why some of David’s expressions seem counter to the goodwill expressed in the Gospels, Pastor Smith ruminates, “...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 who 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.’ 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 [contrary to his character]. In the same way, we may wonder in The Psalms if perhaps David doesn’t lapse into a personal feeling or his own conception of things.”

Mining the Depths

Pastor Chuck advises meditation as “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.”

A Word in Due Season

Asking Pastor Chuck which is his favorite psalm is much like asking a loving parent about their favorite child. “Given my different needs or different seasons of my life or experiences I go through, I have a favorite Psalm for each. 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.

Pastor Chuck recommends Psalm 73 “for gaining the eternal perspective, putting everything in its proper place.” He then adds, “Of course Psalm 37 is good for resting and committing your way to God. Oh yes, and Psalms 32 and 51 for the joy of forgiveness of sins.” For the heartbroken and those in need of consolation, Pastor Smith believes “Psalm 42 and 43” bring comfort and healing. “Why art thou cast down, oh my soul, why art

thou disquieted within me?” Smith asks the question along with David and then reminds us, “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. Very definitely I think they [The Psalms] are healing.”

In explaining his affinity for using a Psalm or for the Scripture reading in his Sunday service, Pastor Chuck relays: “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 a Scripture reading of a psalm as an illustration or in affirming the particular truth that I am dealing with in the sermon’s text.”

Perceptual Shift

“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,” proclaims Pastor Chuck. “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.” Pausing, Smith illustrates this by alluding to Psalm 13, describing it as “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! ...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... That’s what the psalms do for us: they point us away from our problems to the all-sufficiency of God.”