

Praying through the Psalms

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Preacher: Marion Maxwell

[0 : 00] Today we are most blessed. I've been trying to get Marian Maxwell to speak for a couple of years. I think she is the most organized woman at St. John's. I spoke to her this morning and she said she organizes 240 volunteers at St. John's. 240 what? 240 volunteers. So all of the little things that you see that happen or you don't see them happen because they happen so smoothly, this is because of Marian. But she has taken time out of her busy schedule to be here today to talk about something that she's passionate about. And I thought as a bit of an introduction we would do something different. If you don't mind, Marian, we're going to do an introduction which is called three questions. Sure. So I'm going to ask the first two and you get to ask the last one. Okay, but what you can't do is what one of my first ESL classes did when I asked them if they had any questions. The question was, how old are you? So that's banned. But other than that, so Marian, my first question is, how long have you been at St. John's? I've been here since summer of 2085. 1000.

19. 1985. It feels like I have 85 years. Yeah, 1985. And what is your favorite part of being the supreme organizer at St. John's?

I love working with volunteers. That's my favorite thing to do. Excellent. Alright. Now does anybody else have a question for Marian? What's the most challenging part of what you do?

Getting people to answer my emails so I can schedule. Alright. Well, Marian is here today to talk to us about praying through the Psalms.

Does everybody have a Bible or a prayer book? Alright. Excellent. Marian. Please welcome Marian. Well, I'm happy to be here.

[2 : 21] And you will need your prayer book or a Bible because I'm going to make you do some work during the day. So, and I need to say, I'm not here because I'm an expert prayer or anything like that.

I'm here because I've been trying to learn how to pray for the last 40 or so years. So this is, this will tell you a little bit about some of the things I've learned while I've been trying to pursue what it means to be a prayer.

So, we all believe that we should pray. We all think it's important. Jesus prayed all the way through Scripture.

People have prayed. All through the centuries, people have prayed. And as followers of Jesus, we pray. So, why is prayer so essential? Why is it that that's such a key thing?

I think it's because praying is the way that we grow in our relationships with God. praying is about developing and growing in, knowing who God is, loving God, and being aware of how much He loves us.

[3 : 32] So that's why prayer is so central. I'm going to make three assumptions. I make three assumptions. I'm going to tell you what those are. One, that we pray because we want to grow in knowing and loving Jesus.

prayer is about a relationship of intimacy with Jesus. And as we pray, we learn who He is, and we learn who we are.

We become most ourselves when we're communicating with God. Learning to pray is not about gaining skill, or becoming eloquent, eloquent, or any of those kinds of things.

It is about growing in relationship with Jesus. The point is not to be eloquent, but to love our Heavenly Father, and to understand more and more about how much He loves us.

The second point is that prayer needs to be a dialogue, not a monologue. And I think often we make prayer into a monologue where we're talking, but we never take time to listen.

[4 : 45] So, children learn to speak a language by listening, by people talking to them, and they listen, and then they learn to speak.

I think it's the same for us with prayer. We need to learn to listen to what God is saying, so that we learn how to speak so that He can hear us, and we can create a dialogue instead of a monologue. God speaks to us in lots of different ways. He speaks to us through people, He speaks through nature, He speaks into our hearts and into our minds, but most of all, He speaks through Scripture. And through Scripture, He speaks through His Son, who was the Word made flesh. So, Scripture is really key to being a way to learn how to listen to God, because the things that are in Scripture, we can trust, and they help us grow in our relationship.

I took, a long time ago, 1978, I was an InterVarsity staff member in Alberta, and I took two years off to learn how to be a listener, because I didn't really know what that meant, and it was quite a new concept to me at that point.

[6 : 11] But someone had said to me, if you don't learn to listen to God, prayer becomes a monologue, and finally, you give up praying, because you're not listening. So I went away to learn to be a listener, and it was a journey that I'm still on.

I'm still not there, I'm still learning. But, I start talking and then I leave where I am, so sometimes I just need to make sure I've actually said what I wanted to.

Okay, so scripture is the key way to learn how to listen. The third thing is that we need help in learning to pray.

It's interesting that the one thing, the only thing the disciples ever asked Jesus to teach them, he taught them lots of things, but the thing they asked him to teach them was he asked to learn how, they asked him to teach him how to pray.

And so he gave them a prayer that was instruction on how to pray. Now I think that along with the Lord's Prayer, and one summer I spent my summer going through all of the New Testament and praying all of the prayers in the New Testament.

[7 : 30] It's amazing how many there are if you just go through. There are a lot of prayers, just little short ones, and another summer I did all the Old Testament, not counting the Psalms.

So I went through all the places where there are prayers in the Old Testament and prayed through those for a summer. But the Psalms are really key to this.

It was the prayer book for the Israelites. It's been the prayer book that has been used all through the 2,000 years of our church history. and it's been people in every culture have used the Psalms as a way to pray and a way to learn about praying.

So, three reasons why we need help in learning to pray. First one is we need to be rescued from our self-centered lives.

Now, I don't know about you, but I'm definitely, I have a self-centered life and I definitely need to be rescued from that. Psalms are brilliant because they help us put God back at the center.

[8 : 48] They get us out of seeing everything from our point of view. They give us other points of views to look at God from, to learn to learn about God from.

They put our feelings in the proper place. Now, this is a touchy one. I'm not saying that feelings aren't good and important, but feelings should not really be the control center of our lives.

Scripture is a better control center. God is a much better controller than our own feelings because I don't know about you, but my feelings definitely are affected by how I slept last night, who I'm fighting with at the moment, what I ate and if I have indigestion.

Feelings definitely have, are definitely not the thing that you want controlling everything else about yourself. Prayer and using what God is saying is a much better director for your lives.

It doesn't mean that feelings aren't important. They're just not reliable direction centers, centers.

The other thing about prayer and about praying psalms is that the psalms broaden what we think about and the way that we pray and I'm going to give you some psalms that will demonstrate this in a little bit.

[10 : 22] You're going to do some work this morning, but I just want to get some intro done first. But psalms broaden the way we see because seriously, there are things in the psalms that I would never pray about if it was just me praying.

But because they're there and because I pray the psalms every day, day after day, week after week, year after year, I pray about things that would not be the things that I would pray about on my own.

And so it broadens out the ways that you think about prayer and the ways that you pray. The second thing is we need to learn how to and I've talked about this already but how to move to a dialogue from a monologue.

And one of the best ways of doing that is to pray the prayers that have been written and are God-inspired. They help us start speaking God language and over the months and the years they help form the way that we think about praying.

And it's not a quick process. I've been praying the psalms for 40 years and seriously I still find things I've never prayed before when I'm praying.

[11 : 46] but it's the obedience of praying. It helps me be regular about praying. When I pray the psalms I get up and I know that this is what I'm going to do this morning and this is the one I'm going to pray next and it really helps with my discipline.

I can be quite undisciplined without it. And so it helps keep me going every morning in my prayer life. And not so good about the night ones.

I have to confess. I am a morning person. I'm not a night person so I do much better in the morning than I do at night. Although I try to do the evening set.

Just not quite as good about those ones. Okay. I want us to think about praying and I'm now going to get you guys to do some work because I would like to I think what you learn will stay with you far better than anything I'm saying.

So I want us to start by thinking about what is the difference between reading a psalm and praying a psalm.

[13 : 06] So what I want you to do is I want you to open your Bibles and I want you to turn to Psalm 103. And I've just picked I could I just picked three psalms small parts to get you to sort of and what I would like you to do is I would just verses one to five so just a small piece of it.

I would like you to first of all just read it. Then I would like you to take well I'm going to give you like two or three minutes to do this so you've got some time.

So I want you to read it once then I want you to try and pray it and then I'm going to ask you to tell me what the difference is between reading and praying. So you may want to try praying it a couple of times try reading it once.

So I'd like you to try and then we'll get back and I will have a bit of a conversation. One to five. Yeah just a small chunk.

Okay. Okay. I know this isn't very long but you're going to get two more chances to do something similar. So I have three questions to ask you.

[14 : 27] Anyone can answer but you can only do one sentence. And you need to listen to what everyone else is saying so that you don't repeat what someone else has already said.

Okay so my first question is what's the difference between reading and praying or what is a difference or what's hard or is there a difference?

Okay Karen. Well for starters it takes it from the third person and puts it into the first person. So you're actually speaking to God based on this.

Okay so speaking to God based on this. That's definitely one of them. Any other things that people that struck people about trying to pray it or what was hard about trying to pray it versus just reading it?

Anyone else? Slow down. Pardon? Slow down when I pray. Yes. We slow down when we pray and that's a good thing. Okay anything else that you noticed or that you thought about?

[15 : 35] Maybe as a result of slowing down you the meaning expands. You have a chance to as you pray consider.

It's sort of like 3D. Yeah. Okay so the meaning expands and gets bigger as you because you've slowed down. Yeah. Okay. I found that I really had to stop and think about how I was going to switch this around so that I was talking to God and thanking him for all of the mercies that he's given.

Yes. Yes so it is. You do switch your brain around so that you are actually communicating directly with God.

John? There's a focus and a stillness and a silence that can happen there and the system can relax and you don't feel alone. Okay good.

Anything else? Okay I have a second question then. Think about how you normally pray. Are there some differences between what we just talked about and what you would normally do in a morning

prayer?

[16:56] And I'm not really talking about the shotgun prayers that we all do during the day when something happens and you're sending up an arrow to God.

But more if you have a time of prayer. Are there some things that are different in what you would normally do and what you've done this morning in breathe?

Anything that you noticed? Mary? We become more focused instead of just praying whatever comes into our mind. We are focusing on the birds and the fish.

Okay. And they then change the way because you're being directed by something else rather than your own thoughts and stuff.

Okay. Good. The replantiveness of the beginning sort of strikes me and causes me to realize bless the Lord oh my soul bless the Lord oh my soul all of that is about God and not about me.

[18:00] And it is quite there's so much about God before there's any sort of focus on myself.

Yeah. Now and some prayers that some of the psalms that wouldn't necessarily be but I've sort of chosen these psalms but there's nothing very good about just going through them all.

But this one yes that's really true. Anything else that you noticed about doing this? I don't use any metaphors when I pray.

Oh I said I don't use any metaphors when I pray. Okay. And here are a few. Yeah. So again it just changes your language. It gives you bigger language to talk to God in.

And if you pray them over and over you start developing habits of language even and of thought that help you in your prayer life.

Spread it out. Make it bigger. Okay. Any other comment anyone wants to make before we go on to the next? Harvey.

[19:11] There's a kind of bridge between read, pray and the bridge seems to go both ways. I pray, read, I read, pray and they become one on that bridge. Yes.

I think that's really true. And so it helps you slow down your reading so that you're paying more attention in your reading. It also helps you with your praying. And Marian?

Yeah? There's another level I think there's read it, pray it and sing it and sing it adds another whole other dimension to it. Well and singing it can be another way of praying.

So yes, but that's true. So singing is another whole area, especially when you're singing scripture.

Yeah. yeah, but actually even some of the really great hymns and stuff is another level of it's part of worship and worship that as those that Karen and people can tell music has a whole other way of expressing things that you can't express.

Absolutely. Absolutely. That's definitely true. And not just singing but even just listening to hymns and prayers. Yeah.

[20:24] Yeah. No, exactly. Okay. So we're going to talk a little bit about the listening as well as speaking.

So I want you to now take Psalm 27 verses 7 to 14. And I want you to do the same thing.

Read it once and then try and pray it a couple of times. And then we'll talk about it in a minute. So Psalm 27, 7 to 14.

Okay. So how might this, I mean any psalm, but this psalm, is there any way that it has helped you move from monologue to dialogue?

Okay. It's far more difficult. It's more difficult. Yeah. Now why is it more difficult?

[21:34] I guess I didn't quite understand it completely on the first run through and then when I tried to pray through it, I was like, where is this going? What's happening? And how do I switch this over?

It was really difficult for me. There are others that will be even worse. Okay, anyone else?

Karen? Well, this is one of my favorite psalms, and I was just reading it last night actually, and my very favorite part is, my heart says to you, your face Lord do I seek, hide not your face from me.

And I think that the Lord is really calling us to focus on him. That's kind of the focus of this whole psalm, I think, is we direct our prayer to him, seek him first above everything else.

And so this one is particularly useful around the dialogue part, because it actually has some actual dialogue right there for you. But is anyone else anything about doing this as dialogue that has been, that you have questions about, or that's been helpful?

[22:57] I think that, this is where, where we, when we maybe pray, that we give a moment after a sentence so that there is a chance to hear.

you know, you have said, seek my face. Okay. I just have to you, Father.

And so... Can you guys hear what she's saying? No. Okay, speak a little bit louder. better. I'm just saying that because it gives you words of dialogue, that it's helpful to give a space at the end of the sentence, just to let you reflect on what it means as you pray.

So, you know, teach me your way, oh Lord, and lead me on a level path because of my enemies.

Well, I have what enemies called. Oh, you know, like, because these things are, you know, occur to us, and then, so that we can ask questions of, what's there and have that conversation.

[24 : 31] What are you talking about? And, well, No, it's true. No, that's good, Beth. But that's how, when I, if, you know, when I would be praying about it, whereas if I was reading it, I wouldn't take the time to ask those kind of questions.

and I guess that's one of the things to do when you pray is, okay, God, what does this mean anyway?

And then sit and wait and see what he says. Can I just say something? Yeah. I was in Job 7, 27, so I was in Job 7.

I was in Job 7. I was in Job 7. Job 7. I was in Job 7. I was in Job 7. I was in Job 7. I was in Job 7.

Oh, you're in Job 7.

I was in Job 7. I was in Job 7. I know, I thought it didn't sound right. Oh, that would be much harder. Oh, yeah.

[25 : 38] Much harder than Psalm 27. What's going on here? Okay, well, definitely stay in the Psalms. Yeah. It seems like in this one the psalmist is kind of wrestling with God, you know, don't turn me away in your anger.

You've said, seek your face and various things, you know, and don't give up on me, that sort of thing, you know, really desperately needing God's help, you know, and which is a good thing.

When we're feeling like that, we need to be wrestling and debating and discussing with God. And there are times when, especially, there are times when you don't have the words that you need and sometimes the Psalms can give you, the last time I prepared, I did this, was we used Psalm 22, but I decided not to use Psalm 22 today because we had a whole day in which to do that one chapter. but, you know, there's just really strong, you know, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? And there are times when we feel like that and the Psalm gives you the words that you need to be able to talk it out.

And this is, there's things in, many of the Psalms have chunks of things in them that give you words to express what's going on that you may not even really be aware of until you're praying the Psalm, how much you need those words to be said for your, at that point.

[27 : 20] Anyone else, anything? Okay, I'm going to give you one more. This is a Psalm. Don't, don't go to Job again.

Okay, I want you to go to Psalm 107. verses 1 to 9 and have a little go at that one.

So, Psalm 107, 1 to 9. Okay, how does this help you change the way you, your perspective around, about your life, about God, about what's going on?

Or does it? it shows about, the verses that stuck out at me. Verse 7, he led them in a straight way.

And then, also, verse number 9, soul he fills. So, it's like something gets reset.

[28 : 31] Something's, the path is straight, and the person is spilled, so it's like when machines, you have a reset button. So, this Psalm is your reset button?

Yeah, you could say it that way. If someone is upset, there's a need to reset. Okay. Well said, John. Other things? Anything that? It gives me a sense of more people, like a larger population, or somebody else's history, somebody else's story.

It gives me a sense of narrative, and, yeah, someone else's story, something bigger than myself. A lot of people.

good. Anything else? Yes, Virginia? It brings me towards thinking of the things that I can praise God for, that he has done for me.

[29 : 40] All these different stages of the journey, of thinking of other people's story, like was mentioned, and also my story. Oh, yeah, I remember when God did that for me, and God did that for me, and met me there, and kind of giving praise back to God for those, and remembering them of myself.

Yes, absolutely. Being thankful. Harvey? This one, we did read through nine, but we weren't supposed to really.

To nine. Oh, good. Yeah, to nine. This leaps out at me here. We are praying with Jesus. He satisfies the longing soul. The hungry soul he fills with good things. The Lord says that in the Bible. Maybe he's thinking of these words. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. They shall be satisfied. The Lord's mind is immersed in the Psalter, praying with Jesus when we pray Psalm 17.

And in fact, Jesus uses words out of a number of the Psalms in the New Testament. He prayed these Psalms.

[30 : 56] Yes. Bill, you were going to say something. Well, they're just good words for being an inhabitant of a secular wasteland, or if there's a spirituality, it's kind of Buddhist and not very personal.

you're fed and led into a good place throughout these songs.

And God is personal as a good relationship as opposed to some force. Karen, what were you going to say?

Oh, well, just that verse 9 brought to mind the Magnificat too. Richie is empty away and hungry fills with good things.

George. He has a very broad perspective because he's talking about gathered in from the east and west, et cetera. And then he said there's wondrous works to the children of man.

[32 : 11] So it's a whole wide spectrum. It increases your view from the local and yourself and local to the whole world.

Dorcas. The picture that came from was refugee came out. Ah. In the desert. And then he talks about him.

He met them until they reached a city to dwell. Hmm. Hmm. Did you all hear what Dorcas said? Did you all hear her? No. Okay, good. And this is the beginning of Ramadan. So it's a time when people are praying, they're seeking God, so it's a really important time for us to pray for, people. God will speak to them and they will see who here is Wilson and see his goodness in their lives that he is. Mm-hmm. In the middle of not goodness.

[33 : 16] Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Oh. Do you have any thoughts on why the disciples needed to be asked to learn how to pray when all these wonderful prayers were at their fingertips?

I think it wasn't so much that there wasn't resources already available. I think it was that they had a felt, that they felt like this was something that they needed more help with.

that's my guess anyway because it's, like I said, it's not like this was the only thing that Jesus ever taught them.

He was teaching them all the time. But this was the one thing where they asked for more help even. And I'm sure, I mean, I'm sure they prayed the Psalms.

You know, Jesus, and I'm sure Jesus prayed Psalms with them because obviously Jesus was totally immersed in the Psalms.

[34 : 23] So, I don't know. That's my guess. Maybe you want a new way of praying? I don't think it was so much that they wanted something new.

My guess would be that they wanted help with how to do it more than, I'm not sure they wanted something different or something new that they didn't have. Okay, Beth and then.

I was just going to say that, Jesus was always disappearing on them to go and pray. And so they may have wondered, well, what is this about?

I mean, how are you praying then? Okay. Because he modeled that. He was always... You're right, he was always disappearing to pray.

I'm sure he prayed with them as well, but... He went off. He went off to pray. Alexandra. And just to follow on that, I mean, I think for me, you know, if you look at the Old Testament and the New Testament, there is that different kind of spirit, right?

[35 : 26] That you can approach directly, which must have been a complete shift for them. Good point. Okay, that answers your question, Ruby.

There was something different. Plus, it was Jesus. When you asked him if you had him right in front of me, how to pray, they could see the results of his prayer.

He was different than anyone else. If you had the rock star or the authority on a certain thing in front of you, would you take the advantage and ask, that person for what they could tell you, the BDS could tell you about it?

Yeah, yeah. Bill, you were going to... Well, I just, a little thing, or a big thing, there were scrolls around that rabbis or scribes had access to, but the average rural person would not, you might have phrases of these songs, but the average, we have a great luxury to sit, be able to read, and have these in front of us.

They didn't have these things, most of them, I would guess. That's true. All they would have is what they heard. Yeah. Although they were probably better at listening than we are.

[36 : 51] Yeah. Yeah. But it's probably, they didn't go to synagogue all that often, at certain times of the year. Yeah. Hard to say.

Yeah. Okay. Any other? Yeah. I was talking to one of our parishioners and her husband's gotten quite friendly with some Jewish people. This is the Jewish people.

She says they use the Psalms a lot. They pray the Psalms quite a lot. In confirmation at St. John Sean, we're taught to pray scripture. So in the morning, evening, office, sometimes I do all the morning, all the offices together in the morning, the old, the morning, evening, and I'll pray the Psalms instead of just reading them and pray the Old Testament, New Testament, but the praying the Psalms, because I've seen the Jewish prayer book, it goes from back to front, whereas ours is front to back, because when they get a thing here and here, it used to be the writing was right to left, and the Psalms back to front, and I'm looking at it, that's very interesting, seeing how the Jewish prayer books are, because I've been, I had a customer taking to the Seder Supper at the synagogue, and I didn't tell them how my religion was, I didn't lie, but I just fit right in, and it was very interesting how they do that, but praying

Psalms, you don't think of it, it's a good idea if something really shakes you up, you don't have anyone to talk to, well do that, or go for a walk, or maybe do a favor for somebody too, thing, you know.

Okay, any last comments, then I'm going to do, I'm just going to give you a few wind-ups here, and it's almost 10 o'clock, and I have work to do.

[38 : 38] Just a very general comment, obviously moving from a monologue to a dialogue is a great thing, but there are limitations in the idea of dialogue, in the sense that when we have dialogue in secular society, we expect immediate response, and it seems to me that Psalm 27 gives us the answer here, the weight, it's not necessarily dialogue, it's immediate response.

No, the Psalms are definitely not, are not going to immediately do dramatic things, it's doing them over and over, and being, and they change you a small bit at a time.

Okay, just to wind up, I think that we live in a world that teaches us that we're entitled to a good life, and that's one of the things that this Psalm 107 talks about a little bit, is that often when something goes wrong in our lives, then we blame God for that, rather than being willing to be thankful for the things that God has put into our lives.

things. And I think that Thanksgiving is a really important antidote to this attitude of self-entitlement. I worked with women who were in the sex trade, who had babies, who were drug addicted for six or seven years before I started working for St.

John's. women and a friend of mine said to me, aren't these women just so thankful for what you guys are providing for them? And I sort of stopped and I said, no, they're not thankful at all.

[40 : 36] They feel like we owe this to them. They feel that they are entitled to every single bit of what we're giving them. And then I started to stop and talk.

Oh, you know, I'm just like that. I'm not often thankful for the things that God does give me. I only complain about the things that are not going the way I would like them to go.

So I think the Psalms help us because they move us out of this sort of feeling that we are entitled. I think we live in a society that is just permeated with this sense of entitlement.

and the Psalms are one of those things that we can use to move us out of that sense of entitlement. I think the Psalms help us to pray obediently, day after day, week after week, year after year, and I think that really helps us. I think they help us also with our spiritual forgetfulness.

[41 : 44] I think we forget all that God has done. There are certain Psalms, you know, like Psalm 106, 105 and 106, sort of rehearse the whole history of Israel.

And I think that they were there because rehearsing the history and thinking back over what God has done helps you realize all that God has given to you and how much he has done and gives you a sense of joy and thankfulness for what he has done rather than grumping about what you think he should have done.

So I think that the Psalms really help us with that. And I think the trick is you pray them over and over again, one after the other.

If you miss a day, you just keep going. You don't go back and try and fill in because if you do these over and over every month, you'll get back to the ones that you missed this time.

You will find new things when you're praying them. I mean, I've been doing this for years and sometimes I think I have never seen that before. I've never read that. That has not been in these Psalms for the last 40 years and now here it is.

[43 : 03] So I think that's important that you just keep reading them, praying them, and that God will be gracious and teach you more about himself.

And the key is that what we want is to love God more and to start realizing how much he loves us. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you, Mary. Thank you.