



Read and Response

I love the ritual of read and response that our pastor has initiated on Sunday mornings, in the reading of Psalm 119. I find myself latching on to certain words and phrases, pondering what they truly mean. Sometimes, my mind is too analytical – so much of the psalms are understood by the heart. And I love that about them. The psalms have comforted and brought me through some pretty disastrous times in my life.

I say that now, but I haven't always appreciated the psalms. When I first came into a relationship with God after running life on my own terms for quite a few years, the psalms baffled and disturbed me. I reacted with a strange anger and disgust when I first started reading them. That in itself was disturbing to me.

The only psalm I was truly familiar with at the time was Psalm 23. Just about everybody in the world knows it or has heard it. *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...* It's comforting. I think that's what I was expecting from the psalms, not the raw emotion that swung the pendulum from begging and pleading for help and rescue, then directly to thanking God for his help (the "helpmehelpmehelpme - thankyou,thankyou,thankyou" syndrome I privately dubbed it). The despair, the weeping, the running and hiding for one's life, the desire for God to wreak revenge, humiliation and punishment on some purported enemy, to worst of all for me, the "neediness" made me roll my eyes with impatience. Talk about conspiracy theories and sounding unstable. I privately thought this guy was crazy and needed to get some therapy. That was not comforting at all, but very uncomfortable for me. I was disturbed and irritated in a way I didn't understand.

Frankly, not to be sacrilegious, I thought the writer was a nut job. It made me mad that he was so whiny and dramatic about everything. But then, he would be almost euphoric, which made me think he had a serious mental problem. It was a crazy roller coaster ride to read the psalms and I've never been a fan of roller coasters.

He had way too many problems plaguing him all the time. I thought it was ridiculous that he had written all this stuff down for posterity – but there it was, a wide-open look into his wildly fluctuating emotional life for all to see for the next few thousand years. Not what I would've wanted to be remembered for.

Couldn't he get things under control? I thought that if I was so see-saw crazy like that all the time, (and I assured myself that I certainly was not), I would definitely not want everybody to know about it. Maybe he brought it all on himself. Get it together, man; that was my attitude. I stopped reading the psalms, pronto. They didn't seem to have anything at all to do with me and I wondered why anybody would want to read such lame and over-wrought writing. It was embarrassing. He seemed weak. He was weak.

You may think that I'm exaggerating and embellishing my reaction. I am not.

Well, thank God we have the psalms. When I did start reading them again after a couple of years of avoiding them, I couldn't believe it. I could totally relate. That crazy guy was ME!!

OH NO!!

How could I have not recognized myself?

I'll tell you why. Because I had a lot invested in having it together, being in control of my life, of not being at the mercy of my emotions or anyone else's. Yeah, that was me. And I was proud of it. I thought it was a sign of strength and overcoming the adversities in my life.

Since I only had limited experience walking with God at that point, I wasn't that aware of spiritual warfare, the concept or the reality of it. Yes, I'd heard the phrase bandied about, but it was some spiritual jargon that didn't mean much to me. Yet. I didn't realize that the enemies the psalmist was freaking out about didn't always refer to a flesh and blood enemy, like being chased by a person with evil intentions to do grave bodily harm.

It could, but most often as not, our enemies are the lies in our head that we believe, circumstances and situations in our lives completely out of our control, being at the mercy of bureaucracies, a corrupt political system, the toxins in our environment, toxic people in our lives, cancer in our cells, diseases in our bodies, mental illnesses, disabilities, addictions, poverty, rejection, violence, being unfairly victimized – the list goes on and on. I finally got it, that our biggest enemy is the enemy of our souls.

The psalms are a good model and a mirror; in reading them I recognize myself when maybe I don't really want to. But that's OK, I know I'm not alone in my emotions and that a guy over 2000 years ago paved the road when he poured out his emotions and troubles and exultations. A guy 2000 years ago knew where his help came from, just as I know today where my help comes from. After all, God is the same today as he was yesterday and will be tomorrow.

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