

Lessons from the Prayer Life of David

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Introduction

David was a man after God's own heart (1Sam.13,14). Should it not also be our desire to please the heart of our God and Father? Therefore, let us try to understand and learn from David's wonderful relationship with God. If we would know the circumstances in which David prayed his Psalms, then surely, we should come closer to this understanding.

In a number of the Psalms, these important details of David's circumstances are given to us in the title, while in other Psalms, it is the content of the Psalm itself which points to particular situations in David's life. These references make it possible to view the Psalms in light of their corresponding situations in David's life*). In this article, several prayers of David will be considered in chronological order in conjunction with his various life experiences.

*) References in the Psalms enable us to align them with specific circumstances in the life of David. For example, references made to Jerusalem (Ps.122,2-31) or to Zion (Ps.14,7), would indicate that these Psalms could only have been written after the conquest of Jerusalem (2Sam.5,6-10). Further examples include the reference made to Jeduthun (Ps. 39.1 / 2 Chr. 16,41) or to the congregation which David arranged to give thanks and praise to God after the Ark of the Covenant had been transferred to Jerusalem (Ps.39.1 / 2 Chr.16,41). Yet another example is the reference to the house of the Lord, i.e. the Temple (Ps.27,4 / 2Sam.7), a prospect, that brought joy to David's heart after the transfer of the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. When he refers to the house of the Lord, David was most likely thinking about the tent for the Ark of the Covenant in Jerusalem. Bearing in mind that David lived through two major periods of persecution – first, he was pursued by Saul, then much later, after the conquest of Jerusalem, he had to escape from Absalom – if a Psalm was prayed during an escape and reference to Jerusalem or Zion is made, it was during Absalom's revolt.

A Love song for God, the mighty deliverer

Let us begin our considerations with some thoughts on Psalm 18. The title reads *“A Psalm of David the servant of the Lord, who spoke to the Lord the words of this song on the day that the Lord delivered him from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul.”*

This is followed by a wonderful song of praise: *“I will love You, O LORD, my strength. The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer; My God, my strength, in whom I will trust; My shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold”*

Reading these words, we find ourselves sharing in the Psalmist's rejoicing. This Psalm starts like a love song of David to his God, who had wondrously helped him through every trial and tribulation that he experienced while under the persecution of Saul and the Philistines. We can read of these experiences in the Psalms whose titles correspond to the circumstances in which they were written. (Ps.59 / 1Sam.19; Ps.56 u. 34 / 1Sam.21; Ps.57 / 1Sam. 22; Ps.54 / 1Sam.23).

Moreover, in Psalm 18, David remembers the help that God has given him and his wondrous deliverance, and sings Him this song of praise. In the subsequent verses, David describes the extent of the depths which he passed through, and how God delivered him. From verse 20 onwards he explores what he sees as the reason for this deliverance: *“The Lord rewarded me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands He has recompensed me.”* In verse 33, he describes his relationship with God in terms of his position: *“He makes my feet like the feet of deer, and sets me on my high places.”* This prayer was said at the time when David became King, and God had delivered him from the hands of the enemies – from Saul and the enemies outside of Israel, the Philistines.

It was not until later, that David came to a better knowledge of not only his God, but also his own heart. He contemplated that which he had prayed in Psalm 18 and now prays

the following in Psalm 30: *“Now in my prosperity I said, I shall never be moved. Lord, by your favour You have made my mountain stand strong; You hid Your face and I was troubled.”* There is a very noticeable change in tone between Psalm 18 and Psalm 30. In the period of time between the two Psalms being written, David experienced circumstances, through which he came to a deeper understanding. Beforehand, he had thought, that God had saved him because of his own righteousness. What had occurred to change his way of thinking and to lead him to the words of this prayer?

David had fought many battles, had cried to God for help and asked God for direction, and God had helped him. Everything was wonderful in that regard. – But without even realising that it had happened, he had placed more weight on the advice of a human than on the advice of his God. Given that we know that David trusted in God, and had always sought his counsel, we are taken aback when we read (2Sam.16,23): *“Now the advice of Ahithophel, which he gave in those days, was as if one had inquired at the oracle of God. So was all the advice of Ahithophel both with David and with Absalom.”* In the course of time his trust and dependence had shifted from God to a human – Ahithophel.

Now, God began to show David what his own righteousness is worth. David let his General Field Marshall go to war alone, because everything seemed to be going well and he had much time. But for David, the expression: *“Idle hands are the Devil’s playthings”*, proved true; as he looked down from his palace, he saw a beautiful woman bathing in the courtyard of her house – from his elevated position at the top of the palace, he could see inside the courtyard. Lust in his heart was aroused, similar as Eva’s lust for the fruit, and he committed adultery with the wife of Uriah, one of his most famous heroes. After he had committed this sin, he tried to conceal it, but his initial plan, which relied on Uriah being considered the father of the child, failed. Therefore, he ordered Uriah to be killed. David, who had relied so much upon his righteousness, had now become both an adulterer and a murderer!

In the following months, David lived in alienation from God, and he was devastated. This is expressed in Psalm 32,4: *Day and night your hand was heavy upon me: my strength is turned into the drought of summer.* But then God sent the Prophet Nathan to him, who told him a story. David did not realise, that he was the one being referred to in the story and unknowingly pronounced the death sentence upon himself. Then Nathan said to David: *“You are the man!”* ... *“You have killed Uriah the Hittite with the sword; you have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the people of Ammon.”* God also made the consequences of his wrongdoing clear to him: *“Now therefore, the sword shall never depart from your house.”* David acknowledged: *“I have sinned against the LORD.”* Nathan said to David: *“The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die”*. But despite the fact that David experienced forgiveness, the consequence of his sin still came to pass.

It is also of great importance to us that we distinguish between the punishment for sin and the consequences of sin. All who ask for forgiveness of sin in faith can know that: *“The chastisement for our peace was upon Him”* (Is.53,5) but often, however, we still need to face the consequences of sin in our lives. This was also the case for David. Despite genuine repentance and forgiveness, David had to experience the consequences of his sins in his own family. After a few years, his son Amnon raped his half-sister. In revenge, Tamar’s brother Absalom, killed his half-brother. Rape and murder – committed by his own children! David’s sins were forgiven but he experienced family tragedies as a consequence of sin.

David’s Sin before God alone

Let us now turn our attention to David's repentance. He prays in Psalm 51 which is entitled *"when Nathan the prophet went to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba"*: *"Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the multitude of Your tender mercies, ... Against You, You only, have I sinned and done this evil in Your sight."*

Here we see the depth of his repentance. David had grossly sinned against humans – he had brought about the death of his just and loyal hero with the weapons of his enemies; but now he prays, after experiencing God's holiness, goodness and grace, *"Against You, You only, have I sinned"*. To him, it has become clear, that the true awfulness of sin – while he has done wrong to other people – the kernel of the issue is his sin against God. He had sinned against his dear Father in Heaven, who had delivered him from his enemies, and to whom he had previously sung a song of love, praise and thanks. It was against the Lord he had so shamefully behaved. At last David sees how deep he had fallen.

This example speaks to us. When one is overwhelmed by the holiness of God and sees his sin in this light he will confess: „The worst of my sin is, that I have sinned against You“. If we are sorry that we have caused hurt to others, that is good and right; but the most important repentance from our wrong way – from our pride, the root of our enmity with God – will not begin unless we realise that we sinned against God and dishonoured Him. Then just like David we will regain our faith and the joy of our salvation.

A Consequence of David's Sin: Absalom's Revolt

Absalom was banished for his murder was then reprieved of this sentence and subsequently permitted to return. After a few years had passed Absalom had used clever tactics to win over the hearts of the people. He then led an uprising in Hebron, and David knew, that all the people had associated themselves with Absalom. David's only hope was to flee. He took all who were close to him: his guard, wife and children and a few loyal friends. He fled from Jerusalem in the noonday heat, proceeded through the Kidron Valley and ascended the Mount of Olives on the other side. On the Mount of Olives, he sought out Hushai who was older than himself, from among his companions and sent him back to Jerusalem saying *"Try to overwrite the advice of Absalom."* While fleeing, he is mocked and insults are hurled at him. This is expressed in the words of several Psalms (e.g. Ps.31, 12; 22,7+9; 69, 13). After that, he finally fled towards Jordan, into the desert of Juda, and further towards Jericho.

David submits to the chastisement of God.

At Bahurim, curses and stones hail down upon David. Shimei offends the escaping King, one of David's generals wants to kill him, but David replays: *"So let him curse, because the Lord has said to him, 'Curse David.' Who then shall say, 'Why have you done so?'"* To his loyal companions, he added: *"See how my son who came from my own body seeks my life. How much more now may this Benjamite? Let him alone, and let him curse; for so the Lord has ordered him."* David and his men went their way, while Shimei walked along beside them at the side of the mountain, swore as they went, threw stones at him, always following right alongside him, and threw soil at him.

The King, and all the people who were with him, arrived at the waters of Jordan, totally exhausted. Here they sought rest and refreshment. The literal meaning of the text is that David was able to breath easily again. During his journey, he prayed the words of Psalm 38: *"O Lord, do not rebuke me in Your wrath, nor chasten me in Your hot displeasure! ... But I, like a deaf man, do not hear; and I am like a mute who does not open his mouth. Thus, I am like a man who does not hear, and in whose mouth is no response. For in You, O Lord, I hope; You will hear, O Lord my God."* In this prayer, David poured out his heart before God and God

gives him the strength to bear the scorn – and not just for half an hour. The road from Jerusalem to Jordan is long and hard.

Ahithophel and Hushai advise Absalom.

In the meantime, Hushai returned to Jerusalem. Absalom had already entered into Jerusalem, receiving great honour as the new, celebrated King. Meanwhile Absalom had many more followers compared to his father David. A large council was convened and Ahithophel was consulted. We have seen that his words were considered more important at that time than the Word of God. He gave the following advice: "Scrutinise 12 000 men immediately and under my leadership track down and kill David, this very night! Then David's followers will go their ways and all the people will forever be on the side of the new King Absalom." Absalom listening to this advice says: "That is certainly an interesting piece of advice, but let's hear Hushai's advice as well."

In the meantime, Hushai had already sent two priests to David with the following message: "You must cross the river Jordan this very night! Your life is at great risk because of Ahithophel's plan!" Hushai knew that David wanted to spend the night on this side of the Jordan.

Now Absalom listened to Hushai who said: "Ahithophel's advice is dangerous because David has selected soldiers to fight together with him. If this surprise attack is not successful, David would still be able to save himself, and if the losses on our side become known, the people could lose heart. I advise against being hasty in this matter, but suggest instead complete mobilisation. Therefore, King Absalom, you ought to gather all the people together and fight against the small band of people which David still has. There will be a mighty battle, and you will simultaneously be the famous commander, victor and King." This advice appealed to Absalom, and thereupon decided to take it. Ahithophel knew that the situation was lost and hanged himself.

The Darkest Night in the Life of David

David did not know what was happening in Jerusalem. As he was settling down to get some rest at Jordan, evening had fallen, and the two priests bring David the following message: "Ahithophel is coming tonight with 12 000 men! If you do not immediately cross the Jordan, you will all die."

What now follows is the darkest night in the entire life of David. In the late evening, when he was just preparing to go to sleep, David had to cross the Jordan with his entire family and entourage. There was no bridge. To cross the Jordan, a river with a strong current, is dangerous – and they have to do this in the dark! David prepares himself for this crossing and cries to God. The entire situation is so horrific because David's relationship with God was broken. He had heard Shimei's curse, has put everything in God's hand and waits for God's answer. He then cries to God (Ps.22): *"My God, My God, why have You forsaken me? ...All those who see me ridicule me; they shoot out the lip, they shake the head, saying, he trusted in the LORD, let Him rescue him; Let Him deliver him, since he delights in Him!"* (He had received this ridicule in Jerusalem). And now he prays further: *"Be not far from me, for trouble is near; for there is none to help. Many bulls have surrounded me; strong bulls of Bashan have encircled me. They gape at me with their mouths, like none to help. Many bulls have surrounded me; strong bulls of Bashan have encircled me."* (He fears Ahithophel's army behind him, and the Jordan ahead of him). *"I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it has melted within me."* Then he thinks back to the enemies' current activity in Jerusalem, Absalom with his men: *"They divide my garments*

among them, and for my clothing they cast lots." They were feasting bountifully in the palace. The first piece of advice that Ahithophel gave was that Absalom should build tents on top of the rooftop garden, in the same place where David had looked down, and had seen Bathsheba. There, Absalom set up tents and committed adultery with David's concubines. The rebels are now living in his palace and are dividing the spoil and the royal garments among them. Envisaging this David writes *"They divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots."* And in this prayer, David is led by the Spirit of God, to express something, which we are completely incapable of grasping. *"They pierced my hands and my feet."*

While praying, David feels and has the impression that he is totally abandoned by God. David cries out to God in prayer. Nevertheless, this experience – this seemingly abandonment from God – is under the direct guidance of the Holy Spirit. He prays and endures this circumstance as a prophetic picture of the details which will come into fulfilment through the perfect servant's sufferings on the cross.

David struggles in prayer until his prayer is answered and he is strengthened.

David continues to pray, continues to struggle and waits for God to answer: *"Save me from the lion's mouth! — You have answered me."* In this moment it became clear to him, "now my prayer has been heard". He now makes God a promise: *"In the midst of the assembly I will praise You."* It was David himself who had organised these choirs and musicians for praise and thanksgiving to God (1Chr.16,37-42). In this large congregation, he wants to stand up and publicly acknowledge, what God has done for him – how he had delivered him.

Somewhat later, he prays Psalm 3, which is entitled: *"A Psalm of David when he fled from Absalom his son"*. *"Lord, how they have increased who trouble me! Many are they who rise up against me. Many are they who say of me, "There is no help for him in God."* But in his heart, a colossal transformation has taken place, despite the fact that no outward change is visible; he is after all on the other side of the Jordan and has personally experienced the help of God. No one out of his entire family has perished; and in that regard he has experienced, how God upheld him with his hand. Although the enemies are as numerous as they were previously, he has peace and stillness in his heart, and he prays before the next night: *"I lay down and slept; I awoke, for the Lord sustained me. I will not be afraid of ten thousands of people who have set themselves against me all around"*.

In the meantime, thanks to Hushai's advice, it had been brought to his attention that he will be faced not by a mere 12 000 men coming at him, but rather tens of thousands of soldiers. In his heart, he has gained the peace of God, which is greater than any human reasoning. This is expressed in Psalm 27: *"The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? When the wicked came against me to eat up my flesh, my enemies and foes, they stumbled and fell. Though an army may encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; Though war may rise against me, in this I will be confident... And now my head shall be lifted up above my enemies all around me; therefore, I will offer sacrifices of joy in His tabernacle; I will sing, yes, I will sing praises to the LORD. Hear, O LORD, when I cry with my voice! Have mercy also upon me, and answer me."* A wonderful song of praise, full of faith, in a time, when a great war is rising up against David and he does not have any idea, how few or many people are going to be on his side – but God is on his side!

The Final Battle

He continues to flee into the Transjordan area, towards Gilead. On this arduous journey, he is approached by an old friend, the affluent Barzillai, who brings him large quantities of food, blankets and everything, that the king's family require as they flee. He literally prepares David a table in the presence of his enemies. Now, he prays (Ps.31): *"Deliver me in Your righteousness ...Into Your hand I commit my spirit."* (Another prayer, which the Lord Jesus had prayed upon the cross.)

Then he continues to pray: *"Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I am in trouble; my eye wastes away with grief, yes, my soul and my body! For my life is spent with grief, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my iniquity, and my bones waste away."* Do we realise, how different things now look in his heart? What has happened? He has now, as we can draw from verse 22, arrived in the city of Mahanaim, and the final battle is already raging.

Initially, he wanted to fight in the battle himself, but his generals told him: "You remain in the city; Your life is worth more than ten thousand of us; and only if we are defeated, should you come out of the city with the rest to provide help."

The battle is raging in the forest, and David neither sees nor hears it anymore, but in his heart, doubt lingers. How is it going to work out? In his doubt, he cries to God: *"Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I am in trouble!"* And he thinks back to how things were in Jerusalem: *"I am a reproach among all my enemies, but especially among my neighbours, and am repulsive to my acquaintances; those who see me outside flee from me."* He had experienced all of that in Jerusalem and now, doubt is troubling his heart, but he turns this doubt and burden into a prayer. Subsequently, he is now able to experience the strengthening that God gives him, and he prays: *"My times are in Your hand; deliver me from the hand of my enemies, and from those who persecute me."*

Two messengers arrive at the same time. Since single messengers come, not a retreating army, the watchman on the tower expected good news. The guard shared this with David, and David praises the Lord (Ps.31,21): *"Blessed be the Lord, for He has shown me His marvellous kindness in a strong city!"* This city is Mahanaim. He thinks back to the hours of serious doubt: *"For I said in my haste, 'I am cut off from before Your eyes'; Nevertheless, You heard the voice of my supplications, when I cried out to You."* And then he continues to pray: *"Oh, love the Lord, all you His saints! For the Lord preserves the faithful, and fully repays the proud person."* With these words he submits to God's decree, that his son, Absalom, who had acted pretentiously, had to die.

While David had wanted to spare Absalom his life, Joab had already defied the King's command and executed the death penalty on Absalom, while he was hanging by his hair on a terebinth tree. David was deeply saddened by the loss of Absalom, but later he expressed his agreement with the death sentence, which God had pronounced upon his son: *"The Lord... fully repays the proud person."*

The final battle is won, and David can return. Now he prays Psalm 30, from which a few verses have already been quoted at the beginning of this article. The title reads *"A Song at the dedication of the house of David."* The footnote of the new German Elberfelder version states "the dedication of the house of David, namely the temple." But the word, that David uses here, is not the word that is used for the temple, but for another, particular house. And this house can only possibly be his own palace. We have already clarified, how Absalom had defiled this palace. Upon the renewed dedication of his palace, David prayed. He has contemplated how God led him in his ways and had given him guidance and then he exclaims: *"Lord, by Your favour You have made my mountain stand strong; You hid Your face,*

and I was troubled. I cried out to You, O Lord; and to the Lord I made supplication: "What profit is there in my blood, when I go down to the pit? Will the dust praise You? Will it declare Your truth? Hear, O Lord, and have mercy on me; Lord, be my helper!" You have turned for me my mourning into dancing; You have put off my sackcloth and clothed me with gladness, to the end that my glory may sing praise to You and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks to You forever."

The Return to Jerusalem and to the House of the Lord

Upon his return to Jerusalem he remembers all the horror he has experienced, but also the wondrous grace of God and his deliverance, and he prays Psalm 23: *"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in pastures; He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake."* David realised: it is God, who leads me in the paths of righteousness, it is not my own righteousness and he acts *"for His name's sake"*. *"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;"* – He literally experienced this, the valley of the shadow of death during the horrific night he spent in the valley of Jordan and after that, the table prepared for him by Barzillai in the presence of the approaching army of Absalom. – *"You anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; And I will return*) to the house of the Lord forever."* He can return to this tent in Jerusalem, where he can worship God, there, where the Ark of the Covenant with the Mercy Seat is, and it is his joy, that he can constantly return to it throughout his entire life.

*) This translation – "return" rather than "dwell" is taken from the revision of the German Elberfelder translation – in accordance with the Masoretic text.

In his deepest distress, he prayed Psalm 22. Now thinking about his experiences and the joy over his return, he prays Psalm 23 and after that, upon the entry to Jerusalem, he prays Psalm 24. In Psalm 24, the Messiah's entry into Jerusalem at a later time is also foreseen: *"The earth is the Lord's, and all its fullness, the world and those who dwell therein. For He has founded it upon the seas, and established it upon the waters. Who may ascend into the hill of the Lord?"* (That is Jerusalem – Jerusalem is built upon a hill, 800m high.) David was allowed to ascend it. He may ascend the hill of the Lord again. Who else is allowed to ascend this hill? *"He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who has not lifted up his soul to an idol, nor sworn deceitfully."*

David experienced it: He has clean hands on the basis of the forgiveness which he has obtained through the grace of God. And then he looks to his own entry into Jerusalem and sings: *"Lift up your heads, O you gates! And be lifted up, you everlasting doors! And the King of glory shall come in!"* Here, it is not David who is of any importance as he enters the city, but the King of glory shall come in! *"Who is this King of glory? The Lord of hosts, He is the King of glory."* He no longer thinks about his own ability to return to Jerusalem, but rejoices in knowing that the one whom God has promised to be his descendant will enter Jerusalem, God's anointed one, who will be the King Eternal.

The New Song of Grace

In Psalm 40 David summarises yet again, what he experienced with God: *"I waited patiently for the Lord; and He inclined to me, and heard my cry."* It is essential, even in times of crisis, when we feel completely abandoned by God, that we persistently wait upon the Lord until

he hears us again. *“He also brought me up out of a horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my steps.”* He had already prayed this in Psalm 18 and in Psalm 30 reflected upon it. And now, he has experienced it once again *“He... set my feet upon a rock, and established my steps. He has put a new song in my mouth - Praise to our God.”*

A new song? What kind of song is this? He has learned no longer to sing: *“God has saved me for my righteousness’ sake”* – but rather something very different – *“I have not hidden Your righteousness within my heart; I have declared Your faithfulness and Your salvation; I have not concealed Your lovingkindness and Your truth from the great assembly.”* He has now put into practice the vow which he had made to God; and now he only praises God's faithfulness and mercy, God's righteousness and above all things, his grace. He, David, had deserved the death sentence but instead obtained grace and mercy.

That is his new song *“Do not withhold Your tender mercies from me, O Lord; let Your lovingkindness and Your truth continually preserve me. For innumerable evils have surrounded me; my iniquities have overtaken me, so that I am not able to look up; they are more than the hairs of my head; therefore, my heart fails me.”* That is his view of himself – but then comes his view of the Lord: *“Do not withhold Your tender mercies from me, O Lord; let Your lovingkindness and Your truth continually preserve me! ... You are my help and my deliverer; Do not delay, O my God.!”* That is the new song of David, the man after God's own heart. From him, we can learn to live to the praise of the glory of the grace of God, which is indeed the purpose of our life (Eph.1,6), *“to the praise of the glory of His grace.”*

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