

When I was a boy my parents took me to Sunday School and we sang a song that may be familiar to some of you. “The B-I-B-L-E, yes that’s the book for me. I stand alone on the word of God, the B-I-B-L-E.”

Debie Thomas writes, “Depending on what kind of faith (or non-faith) tradition you grew up in, this kind of early introduction to the Bible might sound familiar—or really strange. I have Christian friends whose relationship with the Bible is reverent but remote; they read it only on holidays, or on special family occasions like baptisms. I have others who feel guilty that the book is gathering dust on their bookshelves, but find it too bewildering or triggering to crack open. I even have one friend whose mother actively *discouraged* her from reading the Bible when she was a teenager, for fear that it would ruin her faith.

Debie goes on: For my part, I grew up reading the Bible compulsively, as if Jesus’s approval of me depended on it, as if the ancient book had fallen straight out of the sky with my name on the cover; as if its meaning was obvious. As if it were (to borrow an acronym) **Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth.**”

Sometimes questions about the Bible’s reliability, historicity, interpretation, and misuse come up when people actually open the book to read it. But when we decide to no longer engage with the Scriptures we no longer know what it means to grow as a result of digesting the Bible’s message.

When I approach God’s Word I respect it, but I can also wrestle with it. Honestly I was surprised when I read Psalm 101 and saw that it pointed me toward *worship, purity and justice*. It re-awakened in me a hunger for the Good Book and filled me with a fresh sense of urgency about practicing these very things: *Worship. Purity. Justice.* Whether the verses of Psalm 101 will do the same for anyone else, I can’t say. But I’m happy this week to share what I’ve noticed about Psalm 101. Let’s begin with *worship*.

There’s a scene from the Old Testament book of Nehemiah chapter 8 which describes a beautiful and hard won moment in Israel’s history. Some quick backstory: Nehemiah is a minor figure in the court of Artaxerxes, the king of Persia. When Nehemiah hears that Jerusalem is a broken, fire-razed wreck, he begs the king to let him return to his homeland and rebuild the city of his ancestors. The obstacles to the rebuilding are fierce and numerous, but Nehemiah persists, and finally succeeds in restoring Jerusalem’s wall and its gates. He then invites his people back from exile, and asks them to gather in the square before the Water Gate for an assembly.

When the prophet Ezra “*opened the book. All the people could see him.*” He reads from the law of Moses “*making it clear*” (8:8). He reads until the assembly of men and women gathered in the square open their ears, understand, stand up, raise their hands, and worship “*with their faces to the ground,*” saying, “*Amen! Amen!*” (8:6) and weep as they hear the words God has for them, and then return to their homes to “*enjoy choice food and sweet drinks and send to those who have nothing prepared...for the joy of the Lord is your strength*” (8:10).

It’s an incredible scene of a group Bible reading experience that takes a diverse group of people on a journey from attentiveness to comprehension to affirmation to wonder to grief to worship to celebration. I have read that chapter over and over with a combined sense of curiosity, desire, and envy. When was the last time I read the Bible with such attentiveness and expectation? When was the last time I savored the sweetness and the sorrow it contains? When was the last time I trusted God’s Word to tell me my story;

to hold, recognize, and contain me; to name the contours of my past, present, and future—in ways that brought me to my knees in relief and gratitude? When was the last time I allowed the Good Book to draw me so deeply into community with fellow believers that I couldn’t help but celebrate and share the goodness of God with others that I care about?

What would it be like for us to open the Bible and find genuine meaning as we read it and hear it in this place on Sunday morning? It would be true *worship*.

Tremper Longman says that “Psalm 101 is a psalm that directs our wills by example. Other Psalms also place before us examples of righteous behavior particularly in the area of worship. That is where this Psalm begins. We not only learn more about the object of our worship, God, but also *that* we should worship and *how* we should worship: Verse 1 directs us to worship by singing of God’s *love and justice*. The psalmist is trying to teach us how we should behave toward God by example.”

P. B. Power, a student of the Psalms in the mid nineteenth century, wrote an interesting book with the title *The ‘I Wills’ of the Psalms*. He studied passages of the Psalms in which the psalmist made an affirmation of a course of behavior which he would follow.

A few examples include: *I will give thanks to the LORD because of his righteousness* (Psalm 7:17—we should thank God). *Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil* (Psalm 23:4—we should trust God). *I will tell of all your wonders* (Psalm 9:1—we should witness to God’s salvation). *Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you* (Psalm 51:13—we should bear witness to God’s law). *In the day of my trouble I will call to you* (Psalm 86:7—we should pray when we are in trouble). *I will run in the path of your commands* (Psalm 119:32—we should be obedient).

These are only a few of the many affirmations which the Psalm writers make in the course of their prayers. From them we can learn how we should act as well. But it is not just from these “I wills” of the Psalms that we learn. We must look at the whole of each psalm in its context to discern what God wants us to emulate. Psalm 101 clearly directs our wills by command. The setting of most of the Psalms is informal worship. A congregation’s presence is frequently assumed.

In his book, *How to Read the Psalms*, Tremper Longman also writes, “As we read a psalm, we learn about God and his care for us. We learn about ourselves as well. We understand our situation better because the whole gamut of human experience is expressed in the Psalms. As David Hubbard put it, the Psalms speak to all seasons of our souls. Our intellect is informed, our emotions are refined, and our wills are directed. What further motivation do we need to spend time reading and meditating on the Psalms?”

I wonder if for you the Bible—the book of Psalms in particular—is fresh or dull, organic or stagnant, alive or dead, in your own spiritual experience. Is the Bible a go-to book that you open when you’re searching for meaning and purpose? Do you allow it to shape your core longings? Would you ever search its pages in order to find and name whatever it is that you should be doing?

The final verses of Psalm 101 are David’s commitment to *purity* in the home. “*Whoever slanders their neighbor in secret, I will put to silence; whoever has haughty eyes and a proud heart, I will not tolerate. My eyes will be on the faithful in the land, that they may dwell with me; the one whose walk is blameless*

will minister to me. No one who practices deceit will dwell in my house; no one who speaks falsely will stand in my presence. Every morning I will put to silence all the wicked in the land; I will cut off every evildoer from the city of the Lord" (Psalm 101:5-8).

King David is publicly elevating his *purity* commitments for himself, for his family and for the kingdom! He wanted everyone to know that there would be righteousness in the palace and in every place wherever he could make a difference. We cannot control what goes on in the larger world, but we can follow Psalm 101's ethical instruction in our personal lives and in our homes!

I suppose that's why I no longer start the day by listening to the national news as I get showered and dressed. Since David the king said, "*Every morning I will put to silence all the wicked in the land,*" I decided that my best option is to quit listening to that daily dose of high anxiety and dubious descriptions that come through the morning news broadcasts. So I did. In many ways we have failed in the areas David warns us of in Psalm 101. In the year 2019 haven't we become far too comfortable with and desensitized to impurity and injustice?

For years Jayne and I have taken a couple days in June for an anniversary trip to Cook Forest State Park. There, we enjoy several days of beauty and quiet in the wonder of God's creation. The silence of creation always stuns me. When we take the trails in the park there are no cars. No planes overhead. No loud music. No noise pollution. When we return home from those trips one of the first things we notice back in "civilization" is the noise that constantly surrounds us. As people who have been surrounded by noise for so long, we often forget that it's even there. Until we separate ourselves from it we're not able to recognize its pervasiveness in our lives. We probably don't recognize how much television invades our lives. I didn't, until I stopped watching it while I drank my morning coffee. I wasn't hearing any good news anyway. We ought to recognize negativity and its influence and control over us, and do as David says, "*Every morning I will put to silence all the wicked in the land.*"

For me, breaking free of that negativity included an immersion in the Good News of God and of God's *justice*. Instead of refusing to pay attention to a book that I've read since I was a little kid in Sunday School—the B-I-B-L-E—I wanted to hear its words of life so that I can grow and not "die on the vine." Because of unfamiliarity with it, other folks may approach God's Good News with apathy or fear, but nearly everyone can plainly see the call for *justice* in the lines of Psalm 101.

Yet for all of us, the challenge is quite simple: Unroll the scroll. Read and receive. Find "*the joy of the Lord*" in this collection of ancient pages that brim with the life and testimony of the living God. If we can do this, we will be released to share God's good news with others and become a blessing to all.

Psalm 101 is a beautiful and genuine invitation to *worship, purity and justice*. Are any of us here today interested in finding out more about those things?

When we open the Psalms, or almost any book of the Bible, we will find that God has already answered many of our nagging questions. When you open Psalm 101, I'll bet you too will find an absorbing answer to the questions, "What can I do?" "What should I be doing?" I know I did. Amen.