

Season 5, Episode 10: Praying the Psalms: A conversation with Dan Wilt & Ryan Whittaker Smith

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Sarah: Welcome to two sisters and a cup of tea. We're excited to bring you a bonus episode off the back of our season in Psalm 119, and this episode delves into the idea of praying the Psalms. Sheltering Mercy is a book full of beautiful prayers in response to the Psalms, and Felicity in particular has found it really helpful in her prayer life. She got to speak with the authors Dan Wilt and Ryan Whitaker Smith recently, and I guarantee that this conversation will warm your heart with the desire to pray the words that God himself has given us. Grab a copy of the book, as ever at tenofthose.com and I hope that you really enjoy this episode and it fuels your heart to pray the Psalms for yourself.

Felicity : Welcome to two sisters & a cup of tea. My name is Felicity and today it's just me, one sister, but I'm delighted to introduce my guests to you. We've got Dan Wilt and Ryan Whitaker Smith, who have coauthored a brilliant book called Sheltering Mercy. The book is a collection of prayers in response to the Psalms and coming off the back of a season in Psalm 119 during which both Sarah and I have found that we've been wanting to pray in the Psalms more and more. We thought it would be great to have a chat with Dan and Ryan about that very idea of praying in the Scriptures, how to do that, what to do when praying doesn't come easily, and all the things that come with that. So Dan and Ryan, thank you so much for being with us.

Dan: Privilege. Thank you for having me.

Ryan: Having us, yes.

Felicity : So in amongst producing an excellent book like this, you do various creative things and can you just give us a flavor of your everyday lives? Dan, why don't we start with you?

Dan: Sure. So I spend my life in a variety of different types of things. I do write a lot for a living and have for the last 30 or so years and in different genres. A lot of devotional literature and prayer literature. And then as well, I'm a worship leader and a songwriter as well in the vineyard world that's continued to be a part of my story. And then currently I also serve with Seed Bed and New Room, which is a renewal organization in the US. That has a big focus on what's going on with the Methodist and Wesleyan community. So I write a lot as well for them and for us there great.

Felicity : And then a home life that kind of carries along with the creative.

Dan: Sorry, this is going to take too long.

Felicity : No.

Dan: My wife Anita, three amazing human beings, Anna, Abby and Ben, who are all in their early thirties to late twenties range. So I'm in that season of life.

Felicity : And Ryan, you're doing a variety of things. I feel like we've got two jugglers on here. There's various things going on.

Ryan: I'm not sure how talented I am at the juggling, but, yeah, I'm a filmmaker and an author. As a filmmaker, I'm Ryan Whitaker, and as an author, I'm Ryan Whitaker Smith. So there's a bit of a separation there, but yeah, I spent a lot of my time working on film projects and yeah, while trying to try my best to juggle some of these other book projects as well. I have a wife and four kids. We're a little behind Dan and Anita. Our youngest is nine and our oldest is 15. So we are entering the fun teenage years.

Felicity : A daunting prospect.

Ryan: Yes. Add that to the juggling.

Felicity : Well, just because we are on two sisters and a cup of tea. You guys are from Nashville? Both from Nashville. I was in Nashville recently, and my friend who lives there actually had to buy a kettle in order to worry about that. Serve our tea making desire. So are you tea drinkers biscuit eaters?

Dan: Absolutely.

Ryan: I am a coffee and a tea drinker. I love a good, strong cup of black tea with a dash of milk in it. Like you guys, I'm a fan, for sure. We have a kettle. We went a step further. We built a house that we've been in for about a year, and we actually have the little hot water tap things. We bypassed the kettle that may be breaking the rules. I don't know.

Dan: We're actually primarily, and one could almost say only tea drinkers in our home because all the coffee drinkers have looks of sadness on their face. And we tell them we're not sure if we have any coffee anywhere in the house. We're so sorry. And I think we have a single cup coffee maker if you really need it. So we're well equipped on the teafont. And all our British friends have told us, why are you washing your teapot? Please don't wash that teapot. Okay, so English breakfast and some what are they, walkers shortbreads? Scottish shortbreads?

Felicity : I don't even know when I invite you on that. We have such tea elite right here. My husband and I have so appreciated the book *Sheltering Mercier*, and what it is is this collection of responses to the Psalms that you've shaped into prayers that you're then praying, helping us pray. But can you tell us a bit more about why did you write this book? What was your desire for the people who are going to be reading it and tell us about the book?

Dan: Sure. Ryan, do you want to go ahead.

Ryan: And yeah, it's interesting. It really came about we talked about this a bit in the introduction of the book, but it really came about in sort of an organic way. Dan and I had been friends for several years and, you know, kind of prayer partners. And I think it's a bit blurry to me exactly how it originally initiated. I think I wrote one in just a time in a personal devotion time. And so that's kind of interesting. I took the Psalm and I sort of wrote a prayer in response to it. And Dan thought that was interesting. And then I think he wrote one and we just started sort of sharing them back and forth. And then we compiled, I don't know, what was it, Dan? About 20 or 25 or something into a little booklet that we printed out and shared with friends and family over Christmas. And we just got really great responses. One of the friends that we shared it with was Carolyn Webber, who wrote the book *Surprised by Oxford*, which I've just adapted into a film. And Carolyn was kind enough to share it with some publishers. And that was kind of the beginning about this happen.

Dan: I was just going to note that we've been friends and prayer partners for many years, and this was just kind of a natural overflow as Ryan began to do this. Even this morning, we're texting back and forth our prayer needs because we're just so aware of what happens in this conversation with God in life, watching him do things that are mysterious and wonderful, and the *Psalms Israel's Prayer Book*. And so as he began to do it, there's just delight in this exchange that emerged into the book.

Felicity : Yeah. So you just called the psalms *Israel's Prayer Book*? Can you help us? Why were the Psalms the choice? In some ways it's kind of obvious, but we have the whole Bible. How did you decide on the Psalms being the fuel for me?

Dan: There's so much we could say here about this, the gift of the Psalms. And I even sensed that it's part of why there's a resurgence in kind of reclaiming them and reentering them again and letting them reenter us. Why they have such longevity, even in world literature, not only in faith literature, is they just cover the range of human emotion in the way that only art and artistic expression can. And yet it is prayer and art integrated. And this is the part I love the most. It's not only a fountainhead of the emotions of the writers, because I think sometimes we talk about prayer, and many of our prayers I know, especially in suffering, in crisis, I say to Lord, I hope you can take these emotional fragments from my soul and hear the prayer that's running through them. But the Psalms break a covenant story, covenant love, covenant truths that have been keeping the world in its motion for thousands of years since they've been written. And there's this sense that when we read the psalms, when we pray the psalms, when we sing the psalms, when we do anything with the psalms, we're not only connecting with these deepest places within us, a sense of connection to our story and our real lives, because there is anger and there is lament and there's grief and there's joy and praise. But we're also entering into their covenant for us. Their covenant truth, the plotline that is guiding everything. And then we have this idea. I love it in church history, you've probably heard it. I love what you guys do in this work

you're doing with the podcast. But it's Lexarandi. Lex credendi lex Devendi. And what it means is that the rule of prayer impacts the rule of belief, impacts the way you live, the rule of life. And the basic idea is that there's interplay. It's not only, you know, I read the Scriptures and then I pray and they're all separate compartments. The idea is that the way I pray actually changes how I live, which is informed by my belief and shapes my belief. And then as I read the Scriptures, that shapes my prayers. And if I allow the Scriptures to shape my prayers, I'll start to live differently because now I'm praying eternal, lasting truth. I'm praying according to God's given words and they're going to now form my thinking, my emotions to those words. And I think that's why Jesus was just soaked in the Psalms with his people. They cover the scam and human experience. And as we pray them and say them, we become informed by their truth. And that's why praying the Scripture is so profound for that whole reason we are praying. Our belief is being formed. We're living differently and it all just kind of moves together and we're formed by it. And I'd rather be formed by like you, even in Psalm 119, we'd rather be formed by the word of God than simply formed by our emotions and reactions and responses to the world and simply pray out of those and kind of hope it works with a little bit of belief behind it. I'd rather like pray the truth and let that both resonate with God because it's his word to us. We're agreeing with God and it's changing me and I'm going to start to think differently about my circumstance.

Felicity : Wow, that's so defound.

Ryan: And I would just say, you know, why we chose the songs? It's for all those reasons, but also the really obvious reasons that they are songs. And so there is a lyrical element to the Psalms. And so in terms of thinking about how to write, sort of a poetic response, prayer response, it was sort of the Psalms are already almost prayers. In the beginning, I remember we thought this is kind of a strange concept to you, but the kind folks at Brazos caught a vision for it because we said this isn't a translation and it's not a paraphrase. It really is a lyrical response, prayer response to the text. So much of that is already kind of built in. But there is this home.

Felicity : Yeah. No, I agree. And there's a natural, it's more natural to pray that pray the Psalms in that sense. And I think in relation to what you were saying to that, I think that's been our experience as we've been in Psalm 119. The more you're in it and the more you want to pray it and the more you believe it. And it is a cycle, isn't it, that feeds your yeah. And the psalmist is always saying, and my hope is in the word of the Lord. And as you read that, you think, wow, how can you be so all in with that? So absolute. But actually, the more you hear the word, the more you believe it, the more you pray. And you're beginning to move towards being.

Ryan: In the Psalmist, I have to say. We just I don't know that it's been officially I suppose it's been officially announced. I don't know if the title has been announced, but we're doing a follow up volume that covers the back half of the psalms and so I only have bad memories of Psalm 119 right now, so I might need to listen to your podcast just to read the Endless work.

Dan: It's its own book, is what it is.

Felicity : Yes, that's for sure. You guys are gifted in creating and writing and you really do produce beautiful poems here and they are responses to the script. You're not pretending the Scripture or anything. They are beautiful responses to the Scriptures and they're helpful. My husband and I find it really helpful to pray them for ourselves, but it's also a little bit intimidating because my prayers are not as beautiful as these. And so it might be someone picks up and go, I don't pray like this, but I do want to pray the Scriptures. So can you help us think a little more broadly about that term of praying the Scriptures, not just in terms of the writing of them and what you've beautifully done in the book, but it sounds like a really good idea. Can you tell us how you go about that, why we might bother, what it means? Do you know what I mean? That kind of help us ground it for us normal folk who aren't in.

Dan: The creative realms, writing, I would say.

Ryan: And then, Dan, you can run with this too. But I would say that it's one of the gifts of the liturgical tradition, too, that the idea of it's not so much pressure on you to come up with the words, here's something that's been written, it's okay to pray. So I would say one side of it is take the pressure off yourself. It's okay to not have to come up with beautiful

lyrical poetry to pray, because often you can't do that. That's okay. So that's one side of it. And the other is, I think if I remember correctly, the first iteration of one of these prayers was not really an original poem. It was just taking one of the psalms and personalizing it a little bit. I think that was kind of the first iteration of it where I'm changing we to eye or whatever that sort of thing. And so I think there are ways, especially in the Psalms, to do that, to pray essentially what's just in the text. It's very easy to do that for yourself.

Dan: No, I love that. I think what you touched there reminded me in the introduction to *Sheltering Mercy*. And I think Ryan actually came up with this original image. You know, we felt like what we were doing was like an artist stumbles onto a beautiful sort of idyllic scene in a meadow, and she pulls out her paint, she pulls out her canvas and she paints. And it's not the scene, it's the response to the scene. And if a child does that same thing, if a person who's studying it or focused on it for years does that same thing, and everyone in the range in between, what happened is true. It's right, it's fitting, it's in accord. And I think that authenticity is more in essence, when it comes to praying. The Scripture. You know, we can think greater is he that's in me than he that is in the world, a Scripture like that, and it can be prayed as simply as father, you are greater in me than the one who is at work in the world. And therefore and that's just simply personalizing it. But then I think there's an expansion on that that I think we tried to do, and I hope we reached it. And it was to pray in a way that was authentic to who we are and authentic to the kinds of even literature we love or the kinds of moods we felt like a certain scripture created for us. I think of Psalm 73 in the moment where the psalmist is in between looking at the world and saying, my goodness, everyone has it better than me. Everyone. And then it says, and then I entered the sanctuary of God and it all came clear. And then the rest of the psalm is this intimate communion. And I looked at that one point, and we all have our favorite Psalms. I know Ryan does, and you guys probably do too. For me, Psalm 73 is like a life psalm. And that moment of and then I worshiped, and then I saw you as you are, and I saw me as I am, and I saw people as they are. And it's this conversion of perspective that then we found words that captured that sensibility, that mood. When you go in and you sing a worship song and you leave a different person than you were when you came in your shattered world, all of a sudden collapse in its pieces, and you say you are faithful. That's right. Sorry, forgot. I just forgot for a moment. And that's, I think, the gift of anyone taking any scripture and letting some form of it be on their lips, personalize as a conversation.

Ryan: And I would say I think it's important to mention, too, that something else we mentioned in the introduction of the book is that we very intentionally approached these through sort of a New Testament Christological perspective. And so we felt like we could draw from the entire canon of Scripture. So there are something like how many footnotes, dan, you were the footnote master?

Dan: Six or 700. I think there's six or 700. Somewhere between 607 hundred, yeah.

Ryan: That reference other Scriptures throughout the Bible, that became an unexpected joy for us to find ways to sort of point to other moments throughout Scripture, in the story of Scripture. I think that in and of itself is sort of hopefully that will inspire people to do the same thing in their prayer life. Even if they're not coming up with pretty words, it doesn't really matter. The honesty and authenticity of it is.

Felicity : The most important thing, and I think that's really evident. I think it resonates with authenticity of the Scriptures and of yourselves, and it's genuine prayer. And as you're saying, Ryan, that pointing to Jesus, like, taking us through the salvation story, really, and helping us to see how Christ is very much at the heart of the Psalms. And that covenant grace that you're talking about, Dan, is just so fulfilled in Jesus, isn't it? I think we've been talking about that as we've been in the Psalms, like how we sing the Psalms with Jesus, but also he is the choir master. So because of Jesus, we are able to sing in this way. And I think that's really evident in the way that you, as you say, that's a lot of footnotes. That must have taken a lot of work.

Dan: And I've listened to some of your podcasts as well. It's just beautiful. It's this idea of hiding a word in our heart. And I think what we found, we honestly, we stumbled on it, didn't we, Ryan? Like, we didn't start that way. And we started to see, well, the whole Council of the Scriptures, everything we're writing here is triggering a thought about something else. And all of a sudden you start to see these connections. And then I think we

just said, let's capture those, because that's when you hide the Word in your heart. Over time, you start to sing and pray one thing and it starts to connect with all the other covenantal threads, those belovedness threads that run throughout the whole Word. And that was delight. It was hard work, but it was just delight. It really was.

Ryan: Well, I think it comes back to it was the only way we could do it in some ways, because it's not a translation or paraphrase. Again, we state emphatically in the introduction that we are not qualified to do either of those things. If that were the case. It's really about sticking as close as possible to the original text. Whereas for us in praying the Psalms, I think for all Christians praying the Psalms, you can only see them through the lens of Christ. I can't pray the Psalms as the ancient Israelites did. I just can't do that. That's not my perspective. My perspective is on the other side of the cross and the resurrection. So in the same way that I think Paul and his conversion, it wasn't so much converting from Judaism as opposed to he had this completely new reframing of what it all meant, right? So now he was looking back and seeing this is where the story was headed, this is what it meant. And so I think in the same way, bringing that perspective to the Psalms, where is Christ hiding in the text? So again, that became a lot of fun for us. Occasionally it saved me from writing a line. I was like, I'll just quote all.

Felicity : Here the way that you guys have been talking and obviously you've been praying together for a long time, but for every Christian, prayer can be a thing which is a struggle. It can feel easier and then it can also feel really hard. Have you any advice for us as maybe we go through that undulation of when prayer is a delight and then actually it feels like hard work? What do we do in that?

Dan: Such a great question.

Ryan: Well, I would just go back to what I said earlier about it. I think there's no shame in using written prayers. And I'm not saying that only because we've written a book of written prayers, but I do think it can be really helpful in times like that where you don't feel like you have the words to pray. I think it's okay to go back to liturgy. It's okay to go back to prayers. A book that was a big influence on this one was John Bailey's *A Diary of Private Prayer*. I don't know if you've read that, but it's really lovely. I found that to be helpful in my own life and to have some of those resources to go back to, or simply praying the scriptures like we've been talking about. Sometimes when you don't have the words, it's as simple as just praying a song.

Dan: Yeah, I'm also with that, I'm a fan of patterns and getting patterns that are simply good for us going in our lives. And we're in a generation.

Ryan: We're in.

Dan: A generation that's very emotionally responsive. It's input in, response out, and I think social media is help push that. I'm just now responding to the world. And what I love about patterns is I always do this. My wife is like the iconic she every single day. Whether she's going through deep suffering and we've been through some in the last years, that has been really challenging. Just parts of our story that we never thought we'd see and experience. And she never failed to get in the word of God and to journal it, pray it, sing it, respond to it even. And literally, I don't think she mind me saying it's just tears streaming down her face, saying what is true, whether she feels it or not, knowing that it remains true no matter what her circumstances are, shouting in her ears all around her. And I think that's, you know, I use the daily examine of Ignatian spirituality as a bit of a prayer form. Basically got five moments to it that I'll use literally eight or nine times a day. If I start to feel something or whatever, I'll go through it's. Become aware of the presence of God, give thanks for whatever's happened before, become present to where you're at emotionally, give it to God, pick one thing that's a joy or a challenge, and pray it and just give it to God. And then look forward with hope to the next few hours. I'll do that literally eight or nine times a day because we need forms, we need sometimes if I'm an MRI machine and this is true for me, I can just pray whatever comes to mind, but I could also pray Scripture, things that are true. I will also recede into that daily examine form because it takes like, I can lose myself in it for 20 minutes and meet with God in an MRI machine or in a car drive somewhere. And so I think that's where if we can resist this idea that I have to feel like praying for it to be effective, I think over the course of a lifetime, we win because everything we do, especially when it's all dry and heaven is stone and we're just not getting it, we're not feeling it. If we

reorient ourselves to what's true and right and lovely and beautiful, it will begin to change our perspective and even our emotions over time. We can train those like we can train our minds. So habits, patterns, I think stick with them. Don't let go.

Felicity : Yeah. So helpful underneath that being the conviction that prayer really is real does work. And we are dependent upon God whether we pray to Him or not. So let's embrace that and pray. Yeah. Wow. Yeah. Thank you so much. Daniel, I wonder whether you might pray for us now, as we be a privilege wrap up. Thank you.

Dan: Yeah. Let's come before the Lord together. Father, we give you thanks that in these moments right now, you are with us, you are in us, you're moving in the world all around us, in our time and our place in history, in our time and our place in our circumstances, and that is simply true. And so we root our hearts in that truth that we are rooted and established in love, that the quality of Your love for us can aid us now, support us in overcoming our deepest fears and anxieties struggles. And at the same time, Jesus, Your spirit is here now to conform us to Your likeness. So as we pray the Scriptures, as we draw deep from Your Word and its well as we enter the scriptures and they enter us. Would you make us like you, Jesus? In our thoughts and our emotions, in our ways, in the world of touching others lives with your life? Let me give you thanks for these moments of joy, of revelation, of prayer, of conversation together. It's all done coram deo in your presence we come in Jesus, living in together.

Felicity : Amen. Well, thank you so much, Dan Ron. Really appreciate you being part of this conversation and keep enjoying those cups of tea. I feel like, you know, the tea drinkers are changing America like one cup at a time. Just weening them off for coffee and slow but sure. Slow but sure. Thank you so much. Thank you for listening everybody, and we'll be back soon.

Sarah: What a joy to hear that conversation between Felicity, Ryan and Dan. I hope you enjoyed that as much as I did. You can pick up Sheltering Mercy at tenovo's.

Felicity : Com.

Sarah: Do go and grab a coffee. Why not read it through this summer and enjoy praying the Psalms for yourself. This podcast, as ever, is sponsored by tenovo's.

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Sarah: We're so thankful for their sponsorship over the course of this season and we look forward to seeing seeing you back in September for season six.