

On Call

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The Book of Psalms is the best known and most loved part of the Old Testament. It is, by any measure, a unique collection of religious texts on many different topics, texts that perform many different functions. Yet despite their diversity, they all address the living God and speak about Him with amazing familiarity and surprising audacity. They seem to assume that God is always on call for His people. What is the reason for that? What warrant do they have for such apparent boldness and confidence? Does God encourage this almost presumptuous freedom of speech? Does He, in fact, authorize it and welcome it?

I maintain that He has authorized it by His frank self-proclamation to Moses in Exodus 34:5-7. There God rejects the vain attempt of the Israelites to secure His presence with them and gain ongoing access to Him with an idol. Instead, He gives them His most holy name to approach Him and receive help from Him. In this declaration God discloses Himself to them by His proper name and His will for them by His word to give them access to Him and His blessings.

Just earlier in Exodus 33:17-22, God had said that He would reveal Himself to Moses on Mt. Sinai by proclaiming His name and parading His goodness to him. Here He does that with these words:

**The LORD, the LORD,
a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,
keeping steadfast love for thousands (to the thousandth generation),
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,
but who will by no means clear the guilty,
visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to
the third and fourth generation.**

While this self-proclamation is, obviously, the explicit basis for psalms 25, 86, 103, and 145, it is also the foundation for many other psalms, if not the whole Psalter, which either recall it or depend on it.

In Exodus 34:5-7 God authorizes His people to do three things. First, He introduces Himself to them by His most holy name YHWH, the LORD. He gives them His personal name so that they can call on Him by name by speaking to Him (99:6; 116:4) or about Him (Ps 79:6; 80:18; 116:13, 17). He gives them access to Himself and His mercy and grace. That is what all the psalms do. His people therefore "call" Him (Ps 4:1, 3; 27:7; 34:6; 66:17; 69:3; 86:3; 102:2; 119:145; 138:3); they "call upon" Him for Him to answer them (Ps 3:4; 14:4; 17:6; 18:3, 6; 28:1; 30:8; 53:4; 55:16; 61:2; 86:7; 88:9; 89:26; 91:15; 116:2; 118:5; 119:145; 120:1; 130:1; 145:18). They address Him and confess their faith in Him; they speak to Him as He speaks about Himself to them. By way of the psalms God's people engage in a face-to-face spoken conversation with Him and with each other about Him as He meets with them. They do not initiate a private conversation with Him but listen in on a conversation that

began with Moses and David and join in with it. They find their voice as they find their own place with God in it.

Second, God does not just tell them who He is and how to address him; He discloses His nature and purpose to them, so that they know how to appeal to Him and what to expect from Him. Since He is “merciful and gracious,” they can appeal to His mercy and grace, like destitute people who are entitled to welfare payments. They therefore do not presume on His goodness and impose on Him with their petitions, but do what He wants them to do and receive the help that He has promised to give. In fact, with God’s encouragement they pray: “Lord, have mercy on me!” as they do so often in many psalms (Ps. 4:2; 6:2; 9:13; 25:16; 26:11; 27:7; 30:10; 31:; 41:4, 10; 51:1; 56:1; 57:1; 86:3, 16; 119:29, 58, 132). Since He is patient and slow to anger, they need not be intimidated by Him and afraid that He will be hasty in judging them (Ps 6:1; 27:9; 30:5; 86:15-16; 103:8-10; 145:8). Since He abounds in “steadfast love and faithfulness,” they can rely on His steadfast love and celebrate it with much gratitude and eager thanksgiving. No matter how much they have received of it, they can never exhaust it. There is always more to experience and enjoy. So, again and again they encourage each other to give thanks for the steadfast love of God, His generosity and lovingkindness. Unlike wrath, it is universal (Ps 57:10; 119:64), ubiquitous (Ps 107), and eternal (Ps 136). The whole Psalter is all about God’s steadfast love which is mentioned seventy two times in it.

Third, God’s self-proclamation culminates in His declaration in 34:7 of how He treats them when things go wrong for them. In his dealing with them He is not motivated by a rigid system of payback with rewards and punishments for them, a pattern of tit for tat. He is motivated by His limitless steadfast love in the covenant that He has established with them. He does that in three ways.

The blessings that they receive from His steadfast love are unlimited. They extend from one faithful person to thousands of people around him as well as from each of them to their descendants for millennia after them. In fact, God’s steadfast love overrides all human evil.

When His people sin, as they are bound to do, they are not doomed to pay the full penalty for their wrongdoing. They may appeal to His mercy. They may ask Him to remove their guilt for all kinds of sin and pardon all their wrongdoing as an act of clemency (19:12; 25:6-11; 32:1-7; 38:14, 18-22; 51:1-13; 79 9; 130).

Yet God’s readiness to forgive them does not mean that He overlooks and excuses evil-doing. After all, evil is evil because it has evil consequences. As a just Judge He limits its outcome so that it does not escalate. He restricts its severity by visiting the iniquity of fathers to no more than their grandchildren. He mitigates the penalty for their sin to lead them to repentance and faith in His mercy (Ps 103:6-13). Since He is a just Judge who does not turn a blind eye to wickedness, they may beg Him to deliver them from injustice and vindicate them from false accusation and unfair punishment. They may even dare to appeal to Him to punish those who have wronged them unjustly and deal with them justly as they deserve. So by their complaints to God, innocent victims of injustice and abuse pour out their hurt and pain on Him and hand over their anger and desire for revenge to Him, because He had promised that He would by “no means clear the guilty” but “visit” their iniquity on them.

I do not own a cellphone because I do not want to be on call always to everybody for any reason whatsoever. But God is not like that. He is like a local handyman who has put his phone number on his van with these words: "Mr. Fixit. Always on Call!" That is what God did for His people in Exodus 34:5-7. He put Himself on call for them. That gives them the warrant to use the Psalter to call on Him by name for help at all times and in all places. He gives them His prayers to pray to overcome their timidity and make it easier for them to call on Him.