

A Sermon for DaySpring

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Alleluia – Amen – Selah

Psalm 67

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As all who follow Jesus know, prayer is a very important part of the Christian life. It makes us who we are. Our Lord prayed all the time. He retreated alone to pray early in the morning and late in the evening, when he was at peace and when he was in danger; he prayed for guidance for himself, for strength for his friends, for mercy for his oppressors. Jesus prayed. The Apostles followed in his steps. They devoted themselves to a life of prayer. James was nicknamed “old camel knee” for how much time he spent on them seeking the Lord. St. Paul instructs us to pray without ceasing. Pray. And never stop praying.

Prayer takes many forms. Thoughtful prepared prayers by an individual or for a congregation can use well-crafted language, like the Psalms, to express our praise of God and petitions. Other prayers are spontaneous. They just come out of us. “Lord help me. Lord, have mercy. Lord protect our children.” That’s a prayer being prayed a lot these days.

Prayer takes many forms from the formal to the poetic to the guttural to the silent. It always has been. Three Bible words, and this is our focus this morning, three Bible words have been part of prayers since Old Testament times. Three Hebrew words that come to English just as they are—without being translated; the words themselves are prayers. Three simple words: a word of joy, a word of conviction, a word of trust. We need each of these prayers now as much as ever.

The first, a word of joy in the face of despair. *Alleluia*. The last word in the last psalm, psalm 150. Alleluia all through scripture means praise God. We need alleluias in our lives. George Frederick Handel made alleluia glorious. Leonard Cohen made it soulful. We need alleluias of all kinds in our lives; to have them in our lives, we have to be people looking for them, in everything; people in whom the praise of God rises from our hearts and onto our lips when the blessings pour out and when the darkness descends. We celebrate baptism today. Alleluia. The church community finds ways to love and support one another through all kinds of difficult times. Alleluia. We’re seeing a revolution happen before our eyes reckoning with our nation’s enduring racial sins. Alleluia. Jesus Christ died for our sins. We are being redeemed by grace. Alleluia. Praise God. There may be many reasons to wake in the middle of the night in despair for the world, but God is trustworthy and good. Alleluia, the Lord God omnipotent reigneth. Let the Alleluias always find a way to rise in our hearts and on our lips—may they always. A word of joy.

The second word, a word of conviction in the face of uncertainty: *Amen*. The last word in all the Bible. The final word in most prayers. Amen. Literally means so be it, but that sounds so flat. Amen says so much more than so be it. It is spiritual agreement, soulful solidarity, active participation with one another in conviction of faith. Another person may voice the prayer, but

my spirit joins with it. And when it does, I say Amen. Amen reminds us no one is alone in their prayers. We share the prayers together. In some traditions, preachers call out, “Amen?” And the congregation responds, “Amen.” The preacher isn’t looking for affirmation; he or she is inviting participation. Join your hearts here; let us be one in our proclamation and praise. Amen? Amen. We need Amen. We need to join our hearts and minds with our brothers and sisters in solidarity every chance we get. Let us encourage one another. Let us be encouraged. As the book of Revelation ends: “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God’s people. Amen.”

Alleluia and Amen. Joy and conviction. The third word is a word of trust. This one is different from the first two. Alleluia and Amen are prayers we utter. They are our spiritual work. The third is a silent prayer, as God works on our spirit... *Selah*. It is a word of trust in the face of self-reliance, a word of silence in the face of noise, a prayer of humility in the face of our pride.

Even though *selah* appears 71 times in the psalms, the actual meaning of the word is a mystery. No one today knows exactly what it meant. Most people think it was a musical direction for when the psalms were chanted or sung in worship. We think the word is an instruction, something in music like pause or rest. *Selah* is to music what Sabbath is to time. Something like rest, silence, pause, wait, pray, meditate, trust. When we are reading the Psalms and we come to *Selah*, we stop, and we let God’s Spirit work on us before we move into the next part of the Psalm. In baptism, the *selah* is the moment the person being baptized is lowered under the water. At that moment, they have fully put themselves in the hands of another, the trust is complete now; we belong to God, trusting that by trusting ourselves into God’s hands to be lowered into death, we will be lifted up to new life. The brief moment under the silent waters: that’s *selah*.

Unlike Amen and Alleluia which are familiar on our lips in prayer and music, *Selah* is a prayer word that not only is a mystery for what it means, but it’s just about forgotten. But not totally. You know who remembers it? Not most preachers. I guess the spirits of most preachers aren’t inclined to silence or to rest or to waiting. Musicians remember *Selah*. Music is the sound and the space between the sound. The notes and the pauses between the notes. Exploring, bending, inhabiting the empty space is as much a part of music as the vibration of strings or vocal cords. In choral sacred music and in music you wouldn’t expect—the *selah*, the pause is at the heart of it. And among those perhaps most unexpected, Kanye West’s song *Selah* is an unexpectedly powerful song on his equally unexpected album *Jesus is King*. The whole song is about the transformation that comes from leaving one way of life and becoming a new person. Kanye’s whole life seems like a struggle to embody the ways God keeps working on his soul, pray for him. His music often tells the story of that struggle. *Selah* ends with these lines:

Everything old shall now become new
 The leaves'll be green, bearing the fruit
 Love God and our neighbor, as written in Luke
 The army of God, and we are the truth.

A more ancient song on the same theme is Psalm 67. It's a short psalm, just 7 verses, but the whole way of God is bound up in the three moves of the psalm, each of which bound to the others by the musical and spiritual note: *selah*.

The psalm begins by asking. "God bless us." It echoes the ancient prayer, "May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us." If the prayer stopped there it would be a powerful and important prayer, worthy of an Amen and Alleluia. God, bless us. We need you.

But there is no Amen here, and there is no Alleluia. Rather, there's a *selah*. *May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us. Selah.* Now wait, pause, be still, rest. Something more is coming.

After the pause, the psalm's prayer picks up again. The focus of the prayer completely changes. *Let all the nations of the world praise you, let the peoples be glad in you.* This isn't a prayer for us; it's a prayer for them. Not for me, but for you. This isn't God bless me. This is God bless them. If my prayers, if my spirituality, if my faith or actions are only about me and what's best for me and for my family and for my people, Amen. I have stopped too soon. The *selah* doesn't just let me rest in the grace of God for me; it is a pause that opens up space in me for something more, space that may not have been there before, or I didn't know was there. When we rest in prayer and listen in silence for God, we hear God saying to us. Keep going. Even Kanye knows this, *Love God and love neighbor, as written in Luke*. This is especially important to hear at a time like this, when everything happening around us makes silly the notion that we are all just individuals. The poet John Donne knew that: *No man is an island*. None of us live on an island of individuality where what I do only matters to me and what I can get out of it. We're bound together. We breathe the same air. Is this not what we are learning in these days? Is this not what Jesus meant in the Gospel reading when he said that for true religion it matters more what comes out of our mouths than what goes into them? Is this not the spirit of Joseph, who when he saw his brothers who had wronged him so terribly, when he finally meets his brothers again, he opens his arms wide to be reconciled to them—that what has been good for Joseph would be good for all people.

Our lives are bound up with all the others around us. This is how God made us. We are made in God's image; God is Father, Son, Holy Spirit, three in one. How do humans come to believe they are each individuals? Nothing in creation is individual. Everything in creation is bound together in a web of relationship. When we pause long enough to see past our desires, we pause long enough to notice that we are not alone, and all the people around us are in need, too, of God's presence in their lives. And so we pray for them too. And then *Selah*.

The psalm isn't done yet. Another *Selah* meets us. Pause, pray, meditate, rest. And then keep going.

After the pause, the psalm finishes by binding the two prayers together. God bless us. God bless them. Now God, may you bless them through us. Here, the psalmist takes us to the heart of the matter: that in every way we are blessed, it is intended to be for the good of others. Every way we receive mercy, is to give mercy. Every way we are shown love, it is that we may more fully

love others. We do not possess our own grace of God; in us, God is at work for others. We come to the fullness of prayer and of faith life only when our lives are being given away. Is this not the message of the cross? Selah means rest, and then, keep going further.

Three words we need these days: Alleluia, Amen, Selah. To those who have already been baptized, to those who are on the journey to the waters, and those who are being baptized today, we say this to all: May your prayers for your life and the lives of all the world be powerful and never-ending. May the journey begun today continue on until your life itself becomes a prayer of alleluia, amen, and selah.

As you confess your faith, with you we say Amen.

As you are lowered down into the water, we, too, renew our trust in God. Selah.

And as you rise to walk in the newness of life, we say Alleluia, and we celebrate all that God has done and will do in and through you in this life and the glory of the life that is to come.

Let us prepare to go now and participate in the mystery of our faith.

Thanks be to God.