

PRAYING WITH THE PSALMS

“The more deeply we grow in the psalms, and the more often we pray them as our own, the more simple and rich our prayer will become.”

- Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*

“Not without reason, it is my custom to call this book [Psalms] ‘And Anatomy of All the Parts of the Soul’ since there is no emotion anyone will experience whose image is not reflected in this mirror.”

- John Calvin, *Commentary on the Psalms*

The Psalms are a tremendous resource for prayer and Christian spirituality. They form the collection of the prayers and songs of praise of ancient Israel, which have also become the prayers and songs of the Christian Church from its earliest days. When we recite and pray them together and on our own they teach us how to form our own personal prayers. Together they model an open and authentic way of relating to God.

The Psalms allow us to speak to God, yet because they are sacred Scripture they also allow God to speak to us. They are full of raw emotion, calm reflection and deep wisdom. The Psalms can teach us to pray and provide us with words when we are unable to express ourselves to God. Most importantly the Psalms allow us to come to God just as we are – there is no self-censorship in the Psalms.

Praying Through the Psalms

You can choose to work through all 150 Psalms in order or approach them thematically. There are a variety of ways to categorize the Psalms (with some overlap). Below are six commonly used themes:

Psalms of Praise & Devotion: 8, 19, 23, 33, 65, 100, 103, 104, 111, 113-115, 117, 134-136, 145-150

Psalms of Confession: 14, 32, 38, 51, 130

Psalms of Lament (Pain, Complaint, Anger): 12, 22, 42, 44, 58, 60, 74, 79, 80, 83, 90, 106, 123, 137

Psalms of Petition (Request): 3, 4, 13, 25, 26, 55-57

Psalms of Intercession (Help): 12, 27, 44, 58

Psalms of Thanksgiving: 30, 32, 34, 41, 65-67, 92, 105, 116, 124, 138

Some Psalms are easier to connect with our modern lives than others. Which ones speak to us often depends what is going on in our lives. Below are 40 that I may be helpful to you. 40 is a significant number in the Bible: Israel spent 40 years in the wilderness, Jesus spent 40 days in the desert in prayer following his baptism. You could pray these psalms through the 40 days of Lent leading up to Easter. Alternately you could try praying through these Psalms in a month. Set a goal of praying through 1 or 2 per day (and if you miss a day or two you can easily catch up).

40 Psalms

Psalm 1	Psalm 27	Psalm 67	Psalm 116
Psalm 6	Psalm 32	Psalm 73	Psalm 118
Psalm 8	Psalm 34	Psalm 77	Psalm 121
Psalm 10	Psalm 40	Psalm 84	Psalm 123
Psalm 13	Psalm 42	Psalm 86	Psalm 126
Psalm 15	Psalm 46	Psalm 91	Psalm 130
Psalm 19	Psalm 51	Psalm 95	Psalm 131
Psalm 22	Psalm 57	Psalm 96	Psalm 139
Psalm 23	Psalm 62	Psalm 100	Psalm 146
Psalm 25	Psalm 65	Psalm 103	Psalm 150

How to Pray with the Psalms

Find a place and a time where you can take 5 or 10 minutes to yourself. Take a few deep breaths to calm yourself and clear your thoughts. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you pray, and to make the words of the psalm a prayer for you. Read the psalm through once (either aloud or silently). Take a minute of silence to let it sink in. Consider what in the psalm spoke to you or to your needs today. Consider also what didn't speak to you, or seemed foreign. Remember that the Psalms are the prayers of real human beings, and express real emotions, even ones that are sometimes uncomfortable. Thank God for what spoke to you and for what challenged you or made you uncomfortable. Take another moment of silence and go on with your day keeping in mind what you have taken from the psalm.

Memorizing a Psalm

As you are going along you may find that a psalm speaks to you and your relationship with God in special way. I have found it helpful to memorize some of the psalms that I have found most meaningful so that I can always have them with me. If you're doing this for the first time it's easiest to pick a short psalm, but the most important thing is that you pick one that will be helpful to you.

Start with the first verse. Read it out loud a few times. Then close your eyes and try to say it from memory. It may take a few tries to do this. Add one or two more verses then call it day. Start the next day by reciting the verses you have already memorized, and then add a few more. Do day by day until you have the whole thing memorized. Some people find memorizing easy and will need less time, for others it may take longer. But, however long it takes the goal is to have this psalm with you at any time when you need or want something to help you pray.

Singing the Psalms

“The one who sings, prays twice”
- saying attributed to St. Augustine

Another long-established way to pray with the Psalms is to sing them. The Psalms were sung for worship in the worship of God’s Temple in Jerusalem. Christians throughout the history of the Church have sung them as well. The 16th Century Protestant Reformers put renewed emphasis on singing the Psalms to simple tunes so that anyone could memorize and use them (whether they were literate or not). Presbyterians sang **only** paraphrases of the Psalms set to metre from the early 16th Century until the second half of the 19th Century.

The first 108 hymns in the current Presbyterian *Book of Praise* (1997) are paraphrases of the Psalms. Some are very old, and some are new. We use these from time to time in worship. If you want to try singing them on your own, feel free to borrow a hymnbook. If you don’t read music, you can find the tunes to most of the hymns in the *Book of Praise* here: <http://www.pateys.nf.ca/music/search.htm>, and there’s always [YouTube](#).

Some suggested hymns and songs based on the Psalms (all numbers from the *Book of Praise*):

(Psalm 23) The Lord's my shepherd	#11
(Psalm 27) The Lord’s my light	#15
(Psalm 42) As pants the hart	#26
(Psalm 42) As the deer pants	#27
(Psalm 46) Be still and know that I am God	#64
(Psalm 67) God of mercy, God of grace	#39
(Psalm 84) How lovely, Lord, how lovely	#53
(Psalm 84) Better is one day	Matt Redman
(Psalm 91) On Eagle’s Wings	#57
(Psalm 98) Joy to the world	#153
(Psalm 100) All people that on earth do dwell	#65
(Psalm 103) Praise my soul, the King of heaven	#407
(Psalm 103) 10,000 Reasons (Bless the Lord)	Matt Redman
(Psalm 118) This is the day	#78
(Psalm 145) O Lord, thou art my God and King	#103