

## PSALMS

### An Introduction

**Introduction.** To open the Book of the Psalms is to open the door into the worship world of Jewish believers since 1,000 B.C. and Christian believers since the time of Christ. In the centuries before Christ, Jewish believers would sing the psalms as they made their way to Jerusalem for their annual religious festivals. Jesus and some of his disciples sang some of the same hymns as they left the upper room after their last supper together. Early Christians sang “psalms, hymns and spiritual songs” (Eph 5:19) in prison (Acts 16:25) and in other difficult times. Today in monasteries, convents and religious houses all over the world, monks, priests, religious sisters and brothers gather at certain times of the day and night to pray the psalms. In some parishes, lay men and women gather before morning Mass to pray the psalms, and individuals pray them in the quiet of their homes. “In turbulent times of history, when the foundations are shaking (Ps 11:3) and the world seems on the verge of chaos, many people testify that the psalms enable them to speak to God “out of the depths” in company with the community of faith, visible and invisible, past and present, local and worldwide” (Berhard Anderson). We can say the Psalms have great staying power.

**The word Psalm.** The Book of Psalms, also known as the Psalter, is a collection of one hundred and fifty prayers-poems composed by the Hebrew people over a period of about 600 years, from around 1,000 B.C. to 400 B.C. The title Psalm in Hebrew—“tehillim”—means “praises” and the English title comes from the Greek word “psalms,” meaning a song accompanied by a stringed instrument. The word “praises” captures the context of the Psalter better than any other word. Even in the psalms of sorrow and distress, a note of confidence and trust in God comes through.

**The Psalms express every mood of the human heart.** One of the reasons that people of all races and backgrounds are drawn to the Psalms is because they express every mood in the human heart: joy, despair, discouragement, anger, disappointment, weariness, etc. In the Psalter, we can find a psalm for every season and time. In his book *Out of the Depths*, Bernhard Anderson writes: “*The Psalms speak ‘for’ us by expressing the whole gamut of human responses to God’s reality in our midst and*

*thereby teaching us how to pray with others in the various circumstances of our lives”* (p.1X).

**Who wrote the Psalms?** Traditionally, the Book of Psalms have been attributed to David because he is depicted in the books of Samuel as a musician (1Sam 16:16-23) who composes songs (2Sam 1:17, 2 Sam 22). Also, David’s name appears in the heading of 73 psalms. Thirteen of the Psalms are associated with an event in David’s life. Today it is generally agreed that many of the Psalms attributed to David were written at a much later time. Some Psalms are attributed to others, such as Asaph and the sons of Korah. About fifty of the Psalms are anonymous.

**Types of Psalms.** There are three major groups of Psalms: Songs of Lament, Hymns of Praise, and Songs of Thanksgiving. Then there are several smaller groupings, such as the Royal Psalms and Wisdom Psalms.

#### **Lament Psalms**

The largest group of psalms (almost one-third of the Psalter) is called Lament or Supplication Psalms. They could be an individual’s cry for help or a community’s plea for God’s intervention. In contrast to Psalms of Praise where the focus is God, Lament or Supplication Psalms express the personal needs of the psalmist or those of the nation. The reasons for the lament vary: sickness, sin, old age, unjust accusation or enemies. Most laments do a U-turn in midstream. The complaining changes to thanksgiving or an act of confidence in God. For example, after the psalmist in Psalm 54 tells God of his need, he says: “*Behold, God is my helper; I will praise your name, O Lord, because from all my distress you have rescued me.*”

Sometimes in Psalms of Lament, the psalmist would make an unabashed declaration of his own innocence and his enemy’s wickedness. Another psalmist would express intense hatred for his enemies and ask God to destroy them. In Psalm 137, the psalmist, in exile in Babylon, says at the end of the psalm:

*“Fair Babylon, you destroyer, happy those who pay you back the evil you have done us. Happy those*

who seize your children and smash them against a rock.”(vv 8-9)

Oops! As you can see, there is a no U-turn in this psalm from complaint to thanksgiving. Commenting on this phenomenon in the Lament Psalms, Peter Ellis writes:

*In the final analysis, the apparent boasting and the apparent personal hatred of enemies spring from the psalmist's concern for God's honor. If God does not treat His friends well, His reputation for goodness, power, and fidelity will suffer in the eyes of men. If He does not punish His enemies, His reputation for impartial justice and implacable hatred for evil may be put in question. In either case, His honor is at stake in the eyes of the psalmist. It is the psalmist's concern with God's honor that the student should keep in mind when he reads what might otherwise be interpreted as complete ignorance or forgetfulness of the Old Testament commandment, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself (Lev 19:18)." (The Men and Message of the Old Testament, pp 240-241)*

In her book *The Catholic Companion to the Psalms*, Sr. Mary Kathleen Glavich writes: *"Through the laments, we are able to work through feelings of rage and frustration. We can pray these pleading psalms whenever we're trapped in a crisis or life has dealt us a blow. If our pain is excruciating, it helps to pray a lament boldly with a strong voice, even shouting. Like the Israelites, we should be confident that our good and loving God will hear our petition"* (pp 26-27).

When we read a psalm in which the psalmist is praying for deliverance from persecution, we should reflect on how we ourselves are being persecuted. If we are not being persecuted, we should pray the psalm on behalf of others who are. If we don't do this, the psalms may become senseless and empty.

**Two types of Lament Psalms.** Lament psalms may be communal or individual. *Community lament psalms* consist of prayers in the name of the people asking God to protect them against the threat of war, famine, exile. *Individual lament psalms* are concerned with the plight of the individual seeking deliverance from sickness, death, senility, slander and enemies.

While authors may differ slightly as to which are community and individual laments, the following groupings are generally agreed upon. It is taken from *The Catholic Bible-Personal Study Edition* (p.175).

*Community laments:* 12, 14, 44, 53, 58, 60, 74, 79, 80, 83, 85, 90, 94, 106, 123, 126, 137.

*Individual laments:* 3, 7, 13, 17, 22, 25, 28, 31, 35, 36, 38, 40, 42, 43, 51, 52, 54, 57, 59, 61, 63, 64, 67-71, 77, 86, 88, 102, 109, 120, 130, 140-143.

Seven of the Laments are also called *Penitential Psalms* (6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143). Of these, Psalm 51—David's act of contrition after his sin of adultery—is the best known. In the Penitential Psalms, the psalmist realizes that the problem is not 'out there' but within, in his soul. Conscious of his sin and failure, the psalmist seeks God's mercy.

**Hymns of Praise.** Psalms of Praise is our response to God because of who God is. We are in awe of the One who created our magnificent universe and keeps it in being, the One who created the sun, the moon and the stars, day and night. In addition, Israel praised God for his presence and action in their history. The sentiments expressed in these psalms are joy, veneration, praise, adoration and religious awe as one experiences the mighty presence of God and his creation. Psalms of Praise are subdivided into: (1) "Zion Psalms"— extolling Zion as God's holy mountain and Jerusalem as the city God chose to dwell in; and (2) "Psalms of the Kingship of God." The focus of these psalms is the Lord as the Universal King. Their grouping, as shown below, is also taken from *The Catholic Bible-Personal Study Edition*.

*Hymns of Praise:* 8, 9, 29, 33, 100, 103, 104, 111, 113, 114, 117, 135, 136, 145-150.

*Hymns of the Lord's Kingship:* 47, 93, 96-99.

*The Songs of Zion:* 46, 48, 76, 84, 87, 122.

C.S. Lewis once observed that "the humblest, and at the same time most balanced and capacious minds, praised most, while the cranks, misfits and malcontents praised least." He concluded that "praise 'almost seems to be inner health made audible,' the natural overflow of a heart that delights in a certain object."

**Songs of Thanksgiving.** This group of psalms is closely allied to the Psalms of Lament in that they both give thanks to God for rescuing the psalmist or the community from evil or some bad situation. Also, most lament psalms end with a prayer of thanksgiving. Thanksgiving Psalms are similar to Praise Psalms in that they praise God for his marvelous works. Like Lament Psalms, this group of psalms can be divided into two groups: communal and individual.

*Communal Thanksgiving Psalms:* 115, 125, 129

*Individual Psalms:* 11, 16, 23, 62, 91, 121, 131

*Psalms of General Thanksgiving:* 9, 10, 30, 32, 41, 116, 138

### **Other smaller groups of psalms**

In addition to the above three main groups of psalms, scholars have discovered other smaller groups of psalms.

**Royal Psalms.** Israel looked upon its king as the representative of the whole people before God and as God's special envoy for the people. Various occasions in the king's life form the settings for some of the psalms, e.g., coronation hymns (2, 72), anniversary hymn (132), royal wedding song (45), petitions on behalf of the warrior-king (20, 144), and prayers of thanksgiving for his success (18, 21). A subgroup of royal psalms is the *messianic* psalms about a future when the Jews no longer had a king, and they prayed the Royal Psalms in expectation of the coming of the King of Kings, the Messiah. Christians pray these psalms, referring in their fullest sense to Jesus. We could pray these psalms for government leaders. The Messianic Psalms are 2, 15, 21, 44, 71 and 109.

**Wisdom Psalms.** These psalms are distinguished by their reflective and didactic character. They call people to listen and learn rather than to pray. Often, they are concerned with the problem of evil and suffering and the justice of God. Examples of Wisdom Psalms are: 1,37,49,73,112,119,127 and 128.

**Historical Psalms.** These psalms offer an overview of the wonderful saving deeds God has accomplished for Israel, especially in bringing them out of Egypt and into the Promised Land. Some

salvation history psalms are 78, 105, 106, 135 and 136.

**Psalms of confidence and trust in God.** These express the psalmist's confidence in our good and loving God to care for him. The best known of these psalms is Psalm 23. Others are 4, 11, 16, 46, 62, 63, 90, 91, 115, 121, 125 and 131.

### **Theology of the Psalms**

A theology of the psalms asks: What do the psalms tell us what Israel believed about? In his book, *Reading the Old Testament*, Lawrence Boadt names the following seven of the characteristic or qualities of God found in the Psalms.

- *God is holy.* He is addressed as the "Holy One of Israel" in Psalms 72:22, 78:41 and 89:19. This signifies that God is not one of us, but apart from and above human life.
- *God is greater than all other gods.* "Who is like the Lord our God enthroned on high?" (113:5-6). "There is no God like you among all the gods, O Lord, nor any deeds like yours" (86:8).
- *God is eternal.* "Before the mountains were created, you had formed the earth and its surface, from eternity to eternity you are God" (90:2).
- *God is a rock and fortress to defend us.* Psalm 18 begins with these words: "O Lord, my rock, my fortress, my savior, my God, my rock, my savior."
- *God is a redeemer.* In Psalm 31, the psalmist begs God to come and rescue him. "Incline your ear to me and rescue me quickly."
- *God is compassionate and merciful.* "His mercy endures forever" is added after each verse in Psalm 136.
- *God is just and upright.* "The word of the Lord is upright, all his works show his faithfulness, he loves righteousness and justice" (33:4-5).

**Psalms as poetry.** The psalms are inspired prayer-poems that bring us into contact with God. The dominant characteristic of Hebrew poetry is its *parallelism* which can be found in different forms throughout the psalms. Most typical is synonymous parallelism, where both parts of the verse say essentially the same thing. For example, Psalm 119:1 says:

*“Happy are those whose way is blameless, who walk by the teaching of the Lord.”*

Sometimes the parallelism is one of *contrast*. For example, Psalm 1:6 says:

*“The Lord looks over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.”*

Another poetic characteristic of the Psalter is the use of metaphor and figurative language. For example, Psalm 65:

*“Save me, O Lord, O Lord, for the waters have come up to my neck.  
I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold;  
I have come into deep waters and the flood sweeps over me.”*

### Miscellaneous points

- *Some psalms are repeated*, e.g., Psalms 14 and 53 are identical. Psalm 40:13-17 is the entire Psalm 70. Psalm 108 is a combination of Psalm 57:7-11 and Psalm 60:5-12.
- *The numbering* of the psalms can differ from one Bible to another. How come? The Hebrew Scriptures are often one digit ahead of the Greek and Latin Bibles, which join Psalms 9 and 10 as well as 114 and 115 but divide 116 and 147 into two parts. Newer versions of the Bible are based on the Hebrew Scriptures. So in Catholic Bibles you will notice the heading Psalms 9-10. In Protestant Bibles these two psalms are separated.
- The numbering of the verses also *differs* in some of the psalms. The reason is that some bibles such as *The New American Bible* identify the psalms introductory information as verse 1, while others start off with the psalm itself.
- What does *Selah* in the margin of some psalms mean? Though this word appears 71 times in 39 psalms, scholars are not sure what it means. Some think that it is a direction to the musician or cantor.
- There are psalms in other parts of the Old and New Testament. For example, Miriam’s Ex 15, David’s song of lament after Saul and Jonathan died (2Sam 1:19-27), Mary’s magnificat (Lk 1:47-55).

**Five books.** The Psalter is subdivided into five sections or books of unequal length, each containing a medley of themes. Many scholars believe the division is modeled on the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. Each section or book ends with a doxology. The five books and their doxologies are:

**Psalms 1-41: Doxology verse 41:14**

**Psalms 42-72: Doxology verse 72:18**

**Psalms 73-89: Doxology verse 89:53**

**Psalms 90-106: Doxology verse 106:48**

**Psalms 107-150: Whole psalm is regarded as a doxology**

### Concluding note

The Book of Psalms summarizes in prayer and song the spirit and substance of the Old Testament. This is one reason that the first reading in daily and Sunday liturgies is followed by a psalm which often echoes the content of the first reading. At Mass the psalm read or sung is called a Responsorial Psalm because it acts as a prayerful response to the reading.

### Resources

- The Catholic Companion to the Psalms – Sr. Mary Kathleen Glavich
- Scripture 101 – An Introduction to Reading the Bible – William Parker, C.S.S.R.
- The Men and Message of the Old Testament – Peter Ellis C.S.S.R.