

PSALMS 1-41

Book One

77

COMMENTARY

[As I begin this commentary on the Book of Psalms, I refer the reader to the extensive and very helpful footnotes found in *The New American Bible*.]

Psalm 1: The two ways

The opening psalm of the Psalter is classified as a *wisdom* psalm. It is not a prayer addressed to God, but rather a statement about human existence, on how we want to live our lives. Placed before the reader are two ways, two fundamental options, on how to live one's life.

The psalmist says: Happy is the one who chooses to follow the way of the Lord. He will bear much fruit. Jesus may have had this psalm in mind when he said: "*A tree is known by its fruits*" (Mt 12:33). On the other hand, there are those who choose to ignore God's word, God's ways, and God's will. The way of the just leads to happiness and fulfillment. Everything else is an illusion and has no more substance than chaff that is so easily blown away by the wind.

Psalm 1 reminds us of other Scripture passages, e.g., Moses' speech to the Israelites before they enter the Promised Land: "*I set before you today life and death*" (Deut 30:15-20); Joshua's speech to the Israelites at Schechem challenging the assembly to decide whom they will serve (Josh 24); Jesus' Sermon on the Mount about those who build their houses on rock and on sand (Mt. 7:24-27).

Pause: What blocks us and what helps us to make a choice for Jesus and his ways?

Psalm 2: The king as God's agent

This is both a *royal* and *messianic* psalm. It may have been created to celebrate the coronation of a king and used again on the anniversary of the king. During his reign, the king is regarded as God's agent and, in a sense, his "son." Attempts to overcome the king by enemies are seen as laughable in heaven (v.4). In verses 10-11, the unruly kings of the world are warned to revere God's king.

After the exile, when Judah had no earthly king, this psalm was prayed with an ideal king in mind—a messiah king. In the early church, Christians saw in this psalm the figure of Christ.

Pause: In recent times, what government leader has been a godly leader for his people?

Psalm 3: A psalm of lament and confidence

This is the prayer of a person who feels very much cornered by the negative circumstances of his life. In addition, his enemies scoff at him: "God will not save him,"— words spoken by the soldiers during the crucifixion of Jesus. "*Will God save him now? Let him come down from the cross*" (Mt 27:41-43).

Throughout the psalm, we notice the psalmist's quiet but sure confidence in God. He proclaims that the Lord is his shield. Whenever he cries out to the Lord he is answered. The psalm ends with a sense of peace. "*Safety comes from the Lord*" (v.9).

We notice for the first time the use of the word *Selah*, not once but three times. The word may be a musical direction when the psalm is sung within an assembly. *Selah* may have meant: "Pause here and make a loud noise with the cymbals and other instruments."

Psalm 3 would be a great psalm to pray when storm clouds block out the sun and everything turns dark. This is a psalm Jesus could have used in Gethsemane, or Paul in his prison cell.

Pause: What helps you to cope during the dark periods of life?

Psalm 4: A psalm of confidence

This psalm is an individual cry for help, occasioned by stress due to a falsehood. The honor of the psalmist has been damaged by a lie. "*How long will people mock my honor...and chase after lies?*" (v.3). He prays to the God whose help was experienced in the past. Then he proceeds to lecture the wicked that they, not he, are in danger. In verse 8, the psalmist says that his relationship with God is way better than material abundance. Verse 9 has inspired many to use

this psalm as an evening prayer because of its beautiful verse: *“In peace, I shall lie down and sleep, for you alone, Lord, make me secure.”*

Psalm 5: A plea at dawn

This psalm has been used for centuries as a morning hymn especially on entering the Temple of the Lord. We may be struck by the remarkable intimacy and openness between God and the one praying. Commenting on this psalm, Pascal Botz, O.S.B., writes: *“We have here the personal prayer of a just man, in close friendship with God, contrasting his right faith with the faithlessness of people that cause him great suffering. To protest his love for God means taking a stand against evil. He hates the company of evildoers and wants to be on God’s side. If he is being falsely accused of idolatry, one can understand why he calls on God to vindicate him.”*

Psalm 6: Prayer of one in deep distress

This is the first of the so-called seven *Penitential Psalms*(6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130 and 140), a designation that began in the seventh century A.D. for psalms suitable to express repentance.

The psalmist is heavily burdened physically and spiritually. *“In utter terror is my soul.”* Perhaps he has sinned and is frightened by the wrath of God. He prays for deliverance day and night. Finally, God hears his prayer (v.9). So often in the Gospel, Jesus’ heart is ‘moved with pity’ for those who are in agony in body and spirit or who are harassed by others.

Pause: Have you ever cried out to God with the heartfelt emotions of the one praying in Psalm 6?

Psalm 7: Fleeing to God’s presence in a time of danger

The heading links the psalm historically to Saul’s attempts to kill David. In a more general way, it is the prayer of an accused man who flees to God for help. He swears that he is innocent of any crime. In verses 7-14, the psalmist calls on the God of justice to come to his aid and put down his enemies who plot evil against him. The psalm ends with the innocent psalmist praising the God of justice.

Pause: When unjustly treated, how do you respond?

Psalm 8: Extolling the majesty of God and the dignity of the human person

Psalm 8 is the first hymn of praise in the Psalter. On July 20, 1969, astronauts Armstrong and Aldrin placed on the moon a capsule containing a copy of Psalm 8: *“While marveling at the limitless grandeur of God (2-3), the psalmist is struck by the smallness of human being in creation (4-5) and then by the royal dignity and power that God has bestowed upon them (6-10)”*(NAB, p.607).

“When I behold the work of your hands...” It’s as if the psalmist is out walking one night and is overcome with a sense of God’s majesty and his creation.

“What are humans...?” In comparison to the majesty of God’s creation, humans seem very insignificant, yet God has made them the lord of creation.

Pause: To what extent do you take time to contemplate the awesome majesty of God’s creation?

Psalms 9and10: Thanksgiving for victory; Prayer for justice

In the Hebrew Bible, these two psalms are separated, but scholars believe that they form one psalm and are incorporated into one psalm in the Greek and Latin Tradition. Psalm 9 contains verses 1-21, and the rest is found in Psalm 10. They deal with four themes: Thanksgiving for victory over one’s enemies (9:1-7); God’s sovereign reign over the nations (9:8-21); a long reflection on why God allows the wicked to prosper (10:1-15); and the concluding verses on God’s kingship and how he listens to the cry of the poor and wins justice for the downtrodden (10:16-18).

Psalm 11: In the Lord, I take refuge

In a time of great danger, the psalmist is counseled by his friends to flee to the mountains (the traditional hideout for people in danger). The psalmist chooses not to flee to the mountains, but to seek God’s presence in his holy temple. God is his help in times of difficulty.

Pause: In times of difficulty, do you tend to stay and fight--or take flight? In other words, how do you deal with confrontation?

Psalm 12: Prayer of a man in the midst of violence and oppression

This is a lament psalm asking for the Lord's saving help in a time when wickedness is dominant in society. The faithful or truth-speakers have vanished; liars and smooth-talkers prevail. The psalmist prays that the wicked be brought to justice.

Psalm 13: How long, O Lord, how long?

This is the prayer of a person experiencing 'the dark night of the soul.' He prays to a God who seems deaf and absent. The NAB interprets the psalm as the prayer of a man who is seriously ill and who prays for healing lest his enemies interpret his death as divine judgment (v.5). The psalm ends with a beautiful act of trust in God who always provides abundantly.

Pause: Have you ever been seriously ill? If so, what was most difficult about the experience? What helped you most to cope with this difficult time?

Psalm 14: A lament over widespread corruption

This lament is duplicated in Psalm 53. The psalmist imagines a world consisting of two types of people: 1) the "fool" who has no regard for God, and 2) the "company of the just." It seems that the psalmist is moved to write this prayer-poem at a time when evil is so widespread that there is no one left to take care of the poor. He expresses a firm hope that God will come forth from the temple to punish the wicked and uphold the faithful.

Psalm 15: Discerning who may be admitted into the Lord's presence in the temple

The temple is not like a church that can be entered at any time. Only those sincerely seeking to follow God and his ways can go in. Several stipulations for entrance are named, many of them having to do with right relationships with one's neighbor.

Psalm 16: Prayer of great trust in God

The psalmist may have been a convert from the Canaanite religion. Now that he has found the true God, he renounces all allegiance to his ancestor's gods. He develops a very intimate and peace-filled relationship with God. "I keep the Lord always

before me.... Therefore my heart is glad...my body dwells secure."

Psalm 17: Prayer of one falsely accused

This is a wonderful prayer of lament on behalf of those who are falsely accused. It begins with a plea for justice and deliverance (vv 1-2), and continues with a statement about one's innocence (vv 3-5). This does not mean he is sinless, but rather innocent of the crime his accusers are bringing against him. "Keep me as the apple of your eyes, hide me in the shadow of your wings" (v.8) is a beautiful prayer of trust in God. Verses 10-14 are an extended metaphor about the psalmist's enemies whom he hopes God will destroy.

Psalm 18: A royal psalm of thanksgiving

This royal thanksgiving psalm for a military victory is duplicated in 2Sam 22. Concerning this psalm, the *New American Bible* reads: "Thanksgiving psalms are in essence reports of divine rescue. The psalm has two parallel reports of rescue, the first told from a heavenly perspective (5-20), and the second from an earthly perspective (36-46). The first report adapts old mythic language of a cosmic battle between sea and rainstorm in order to depict God's rescue of the Israelite king from his enemies. Each report has a short hymnic introduction (2-4, 32-35) and conclusion (21-31, 47-51)" (p.612).

Psalm 19: The heavens proclaim the glory of God

"This is a didactic hymn extolling the glory of God manifested physically in the heavens and intellectually in the law." (Men and Message of the Old Testament, p.565)

The voiceless heavens sing a song without words in praise of God and his creation. Just as we may praise the work of an artist, the psalmist is filled with a sense of praise and wonder at God. Verses 8-12 is a beautiful reflection on God's word in the Torah or law. Such teaching refreshes the soul. Verses 13-15 are beautiful words all of us would do well to pray often.

Psalm 20: Prayer for a king before he goes into battle

"The practice of prayer for rulers, presidents, and governors is an ancient and enduring tradition. These prayers express a deep awareness of a people that their destiny is bound up with the success of the one who has been invested with power for the sake of

the whole” (James Mays). In the psalm, the people pray for the king before battle. They ask for divine help (2-6) and express confidence that such help will be given (7-10).

Psalm 21: A royal psalm

The first part of this royal psalm is a prayer of thanksgiving to our heavenly king for the way he has blessed his earthly representative (2-8). In the second part of the psalm is a promise that the king will triumph over his enemies.

Psalm 22: My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?

This psalm is very important because we find its opening words on the lips of the crucified Jesus (Mk 15:34, Mt 27:46). Several other verses are quoted or alluded to in the accounts of Jesus’ passion. Commenting on the opening verse of this psalm, James Mays writes: *“In praying his anguished cry to God on the cross, Jesus joins the multitudinous company of the afflicted and becomes one with them in their suffering. In praying as they do, he expounds his total identification with them. He gives all his followers who are afflicted permission and encouragement to pray for help. He shows that faith includes holding the worst of life up to God. “In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear(Heb. 5:7)” (Interpretation Series p.106).*

This powerful lament ends with a long prayer of praise. The first complaint (vv 2-12) contains two beautiful expressions of trust (vv 4-6, 10-11). The second (vv 13-23) culminates in a prayer of petition (vv 20-22). Then follows a usually long prayer of praise (vv 23-32). The psalmist appears to have had an intense experience of the God who saves and delivers us from trouble. Even though Matthew and Mark’s gospels have Jesus quoting only the first line of Psalm 22, some scholars believe he may have prayed the *whole* psalm which ends praising God.

Pause: Have you ever had the sense that God had abandoned you?

Psalm 23: The Lord is my Shepherd

This is probably the best known and most loved psalm in the Psalter. It is a prayer of serene trust in God.

Verses 1-4. God is imaged as the psalmist’s Good Shepherd who knows how to provide his flock with good pastures and water to restore their strength. God, our Shepherd, is kind, loving and watchful. *Dark valley:* in times of drought, the shepherd knows how to provide for his sheep. So does God care and provide for us in times of pain and darkness.

Verses 5-6. Suddenly, the image of God as Good Shepherd switches to God as host at a banquet table. At banquets in ancient Palestine, the heads of guests are anointed with oil. With God as his host, the psalmist anticipates the continuance of divine goodness and kindness all the days of his life.

Pause: In your opinion, why is this psalm so well loved by everyone?

Psalm 24: The King of Glory

This psalm may have its origin as a hymn in honor of God the warrior who enters the temple when the Ark of the Covenant is brought into the temple (see 2Sam 6:12-20). In the early church, it is used to refer to Jesus who comes to us in the name of God. The psalm opens praising God the Creator who is present in his handiwork. Then it moves into God’s presence on the holy mountain. Who dares to ascend to his presence? Only the person of faith, the one with clean heart. Then God knocks at the city gates. His carriers (of the Ark) demand entry. A chorus from within asks who is calling. In verse 9, the great welcome is offered to our warrior God who is the leader of heaven and earth.

Psalm 25: Teach me your ways, O Lord

This is a prayer of confidence by one who is carrying both stress and guilt for his sins. The psalmist mixes ardent pleas (vv 1-2, 16-22) with expressions of confidence in God who forgives and guides us in his ways. The psalm opens with a beautiful act of trust in God: *“I lift up my soul to the God in whom I trust.”* Then there is a plea to God to make known his ways. In verses 7, 11, 16-18, the psalmist asks God to remember his sins no more and to relieve him of his inner troubles.

Psalm 26: Prayer of an innocent person

At first, this psalm may sound like the prayer of the Pharisee in Luke 18:11-14, and it seems to contradict Paul's statement that "all have sinned" (Roms 3:23). Scholars point out that the psalmist here would not deny his general sinfulness and need for redemption. But when accused of specific crimes in a court of law, he pleads his innocence.

Psalm 27: The Lord is my light and my salvation

In this well known psalm, often used at vigils for the deceased, the mood of the psalmist swings from one of great confidence in God's saving protection (vv 1-8) to one of anxiety (vv 9-12) and back to confidence.

Psalm 28: A lament that ends well

There are 37 psalms that are called individual prayers of lament. Some others are collective prayers of lament. Psalm 28 is an individual prayer of lament. In it, the psalmist prays to God imaged as a rock. Perhaps he is very ill and fears death. "If you do not answer my prayer, I will go down into the pit." The pit is another name for Sheol, the realm of death where neither God's word nor human praise is heard. To experience the silence of God is a foretaste of death. In verses 3-5, the psalmist prays that the wicked get their comeuppance from God. Verses 6-7 is a beautiful expression of thanksgiving to God who has seemingly heard the psalmist prayer.

Pause: What do you fear most about dying or death?

Psalm 29: Hymn of praise to God, King of the Universe

Sometimes this psalm is called the "Song of the Seven Thunders" for it mentions "the voice of the Lord" seven times. It begins by calling on the angels in heaven to praise God. Verses 3-9 is a description of a great storm which represents God's voice. The hymn closes with an image of God in heaven blessing his people on earth.

Psalm 30: You have turned my mourning into dancing

This is a thanksgiving psalm for deliverance from a near fatal illness. The psalmist is so delighted with God's answer to his prayer that he exhorts his faith

community to place their trust in God (vv 5-6). Then there is a flashback to the time before he was rescued, when he was panicky and bargaining with God. (vv 7-11). The psalm ends with a shout of exultation: "My whole being gives you praise!"

Pause: Can you remember a time when you or a family member was in grave danger and God rescued you?

Psalm 31: Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit

A psalm of lament (vv 2-19) with a strong emphasis on trust (vv 4, 5, 15-16) ends with anticipatory thanksgiving (vv 20-25). The lament is stated in general terms. The psalmist feels overwhelmed by evil people but trusts in the 'faithful God' (v.6).

The most famous line in the psalm is of course, "Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit"—Jesus' words as he breathed his last, and also of Stephen in Acts 7 as he was dying.

Psalm 32: The second of the seven penitential psalms

This psalm opens with the psalmist expressing a deep sense of gratitude for God's mercy. "At one time the psalmist was stubborn and closed, a victory of sins' power (3-4), and then became open to the forgiving God (5-7). Sin here, as often in the Bible, is not only the personal act of rebellion against God but also the consequences of that act – frustration and waning of vitality. Having been rescued, the psalmist can teach others the joys of justice and the folly of sin (8-11)" (NAB, p.622).

Psalm 33: Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous

In this prayer-poem, the psalmist proclaims the Lord as the one in whom the righteous may place their trust and hope. "A hymn of praise in which the just are invited to chant the glories of God (1-3), because he is ever faithful to his promises (4), the all-powerful Creator (6), and the wise and mighty Ruler of the world (8-12) who sees and knows all things (13-15) and who alone is the source of victory and salvation (16-19). The hymn concludes with an expression of confidence in God's goodness (20-22)"(NAB, p.622).

Psalm 34: A thanksgiving psalm

This is a thanksgiving psalm describing the rewards God bestows on those who fear him. The psalmist gives thanks to God and invites the faithful to join him (vv 2-4). A description of how God heard his prayer and saved him in a time of trouble (vv 5-11). Wisdom's exhortation to her children to live, and reap the rewards of a good life (vv 12-23).

Psalm 35: Prayer for help against unjust enemies

"Calling upon God to defend him(1-6), the psalmist describes the wickedness (7-12) and ingratitude (13-16) of his enemies, and then reiterates his plea for divine assistance (17-28)" (NAB, p.624)

Pause: How do you cope with people who have treated you unjustly?

Psalm 36: Human wickedness and Divine Providence

"This lament is the prayer of one who feels threatened by 'evildoers,' people who attack the just. The psalmist depicts the wicked in all their arrogance and moral obtuseness (vv 2-5), and then comes before the just and merciful God, who punishes such evildoers and draws near in tenderness to the beleaguered just (vv 6-10). Verses 8-10 show the closeness of the saving Lord in the temple service"(Collegeville Bible Commentary, p.762).

Psalm 37: Why do the just suffer and the evil prosper

This psalm responds to Job's problem: Why do the wicked prosper and the good suffer? According to the psalmist, the situation is only temporary. God will reverse things, rewarding the good and punishing the wicked here on earth. What stands out in this psalm is *not* the psalmist solution or answer to the problem of evil, but his great faith and heroic patience in the face of so great a question. He is convinced of the beatitude: *"Blessed are the meek, for they shall possess the land"*(Matt 5:4).

Pause: How do you make sense of the age-old question why God often allows good people to suffer horrific things and allow the wicked to get off scot-free?

Psalm 38: The second of seven penitential psalms

Concerning this psalm, *The Collegeville Commentary* states: *"In this psalm of lament, one of the Penitential Psalms, the psalmist is afflicted with deadly sickness, commonly a sign of divine disfavor. People believed that actions brought consequences of themselves: health, reputation, and prosperity came from good actions; illness, loss of face and poverty followed from evil actions. The psalmist is gravely ill (vv 4, 6-9) and recognizes that his own actions are the cause (vv 4-5,19) of physical and mental suffering and ostracism. There is no one to turn to for help; only the Lord can destroy the cause-and-effect chain of past folly and present misery.*

Psalm 39: Psalm of lament by a mortally ill person

"The lament of a mortally ill person who at first had resolved to remain silently submissive (2-4). But the grief was too much and now the psalmist laments the brevity and vanity of life (5-7), yet remaining hopeful (8-10). The psalmist continues to express both acceptance of the illness and hope for healing in 11-14"(NAB, p.628).

Psalm 40: To do your will is my delight

A prayer of thanksgiving (vv 2-13) is combined with a prayer of lament (vv 14-18), verses that also appear in Psalm 70. The psalmist describes God's rescue in spatial terms, as the pulling out of someone trapped in a pit of destruction. Even in adversity, the psalmist continues to hope in God.

Pause: What helps you to keep faith in God in tough times?

Psalm 41: When feeling betrayed by people

This psalm begins with a blessing for those who have regard for the poor. Then the psalmist describes the emotional pain he experiences when people show no compassion for him in his physical pain. The psalm ends with a prayer of thanksgiving to the Lord who rescues him.