

How to Pray *The* PSALMS



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HOW TO PRAY THE PSALMS

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INTRODUCTION

Augustine was thirty-two years old and for the past years had suffered greatly. His body was healthy, yet he was sick.

He was brilliant. One of the greatest minds of his day.

He was successful. A professor with a reputation.

Yet he was wretched. His life was a painful struggle with himself. Lust gnawed at his will power, for he was chained to a past of constant surrender.

He was a victim of his own great intelligence. The truth and beauty of the Catholic Church beckoned to him.

Yet his whole sick being resisted the call. He continued resisting as long as he could, but in the end he succumbed and was baptized.

His early days in the Church were filled with calm and consolation. And it was in the Psalms that he found this peace. It was their beauty that drew him. It was their simplicity that awed him. In his own words:

I wept at the beauty of your hymns and canticles, and was powerfully moved at the sweet sound of your

Church's singing. Those sounds flowed into my ears, and the truth streamed into my heart; so that my feeling of devotion overflowed, and the tears ran from my eyes, and I was happy in them.

If you care to read the whole warm account of Saint Augustine's conversion just pick up his *Confessions*. I have selected this little narrative as an introduction to this pamphlet on the Psalms, because it dramatically illustrates how beautiful and powerful the Psalms can be.

Believe me when I say that they certainly are God's own prayer book for men.

CHRIST LOVED THE PSALMS

It was Thursday evening around seven o'clock. They were in a banquet hall in the Orient, at Palestine in Jerusalem. Christ and His apostles, that is.

They were singing a very old and well-known song, a song of thanksgiving. It was most probably the "Hallel," a term for a group of Psalms (113 to 118) which were chanted in whole or in part at a number of Jewish feasts.

This particular feast was the Pasch. And this particular evening Christ

Perhaps the whole Psalm was the subject of His meditation in the hour of agony. It might well have been, since it is charged with prophetic details of the Passion and its glorious fruits.

Either way it makes no difference. Christ prayed the Psalms because He knew them well and loved them more.

APOSTLES AND THE PSALMS

And Christ communicated His love of the Psalms to His apostles. They were Hebrew, too, part of the same culture. For them, too, it was a natural thing to sing and pray the Psalms.

And so we find Paul and his companion, Silas, at Philippi in Macedonia. They had just been publicly whipped with rods. They are in jail, their feet in stocks. It is midnight and "Paul and Silas were praying, praising God. They that were in prison heard them" (Acts 16,25).

In pain and in joy they prayed in the language they knew the best, in the language of the Psalms. And the hymns they sang were certainly selections from Psalms 112, 133, or 116.

It is true that St. Paul had experienced the beauty of the Psalms. He knew their wealth and warmth, their

changed it into Holy Thursday.

Of course it is not the least bit strange that Christ sang Psalms. Christ was a Hebrew, born into a culture rich with religion and song. He was part of that culture. He lived it.

And as a Hebrew, Christ sang the Psalms and loved them.

The best example I can offer to prove this point is Christ Himself as He hung on the cross. "My God, my God, O, why do you abandon me?", He cried.¹ These words are a quotation from Psalm 21, the first and the greatest of the "Passion Psalms," containing a prophetic history of the Passion.

For Christ, these words were neither an appeal, nor a complaint, nor a cry of desperation.

They were a prayer, an overflow of a suffering heart that speaks in the language it knows and loves best. Christ was meditating aloud upon a Psalm.

¹ All quotations from the Psalms in this pamphlet are taken from *The Psalms in Rhythmic Prose* by James A. Kleist, S.J. and Thomas J. Lynam, S.J. The Bruce Publishing Company, Milwaukee, 1954. The publishers have granted permission for this use.

ability to express any sentiment of the human heart.

So it is only natural for him, when he writes to the Ephesians, exhorting them to avoid frivolity and lust, to urge them to channel their happiness into the Psalms: "Speaking to yourselves in Psalms and hymns and spiritual canticles, singing and making melody in your hearts" (Eph. 5,19).

He also writes to the Colossians. He tells them to live in charity with one another in the teaching of Christ, and to exhort one another, "in Psalms, hymns, spiritual canticles, singing in grace in your hearts to God" (Col. 3,16).

St. James writes in the same vein: "Is someone sad? Let him pray. Is he cheerful in mind? Let him sing." (St. James, 5,13).

What the apostles mean is: give expression to your natural feelings of happiness or sadness, of elation or dejection through the Psalms. They want to tell us that in the Psalms we will find the sentiments we wish to express, just as they themselves found them many centuries ago.

No one could express this idea bet-

ter than St. Augustine whose story I told in the Introduction to this pamphlet.

If the Psalm prays, do you, too, pray; if it laments, so do you too; if it renders thanks, so do you also rejoice with it; if it hopes, so you too; if it speaks in accents of fear, do you also tremble with it; for all that is written therein is meant to be a mirror for us.

POPULARITY

Enthusiasm for the Psalms did not die with the apostles.

It quietly grew.

St. Jerome, who lived from the fourth into the fifth century, describes the popularity of the Psalms in a letter from the Holy Land: "Wherever you turn, the laborer at the plough sings 'alleluia,' the toiling reaper beguiles his work with Psalms; the vine-dresser as he prunes the vine . . . sings something of David's. These are the songs of this province; these, to use the common phrase, are its love ditties; these the shepherd whistles; these are the laborer's implements."

St. Jerome is repeating what Paul and James had already said: the Psalms

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in which they hoped to achieve greater holiness.

And thus monasteries and convents were born.

These early monks and nuns chanted the Psalms for the major portion of their holy exercises. In fact, this sacred duty took precedence over every other kind of occupation.

Naturally, such a use of the Psalms could never be left to chance. Thus there arose a need for organization and a definite plan. And it was out of this directed use of the Psalms that the Divine Office was tailored.

The office became, and still is, the official and daily prayer of the Church.

During the stage of its development, certain Psalms were assigned to definite hours of the day and night, an assignment which later came to be called the "canonical hours."

Through this distribution of the Psalms, the whole Psalter (that is, all 150 Psalms) was chanted each week.

Eventually the recitation of the Divine Office grew into a daily obligation for all priests, whether they lived in a community or not.

And so it is that throughout the

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are inspired poems that make beautiful prayers suited to our human feelings.

They are prayers. They are poems. They are songs. They are beautiful.

I don't have to tell you that we Americans are fast losing the art of expressing ourselves through song. Rather, we are becoming professional listeners of juke box blues and disk jockey buggies. There are exceptions, of course. For example, at my university there are a number of Negro youths employed as maintenance men whom I often hear singing at their work. And their songs are "spirituals." Like the workers of Jerome's day, they make songs of their prayers.

Now, I'm not urging you to pick up the Psalter and a harp and to put melody to the Psalms. But I am advocating that you pick them up and pray them.

DIVINE OFFICE AND THE PSALMS

During the early centuries of the Church, the use of the Psalms was regulated by individual devotion and local custom.

However, in the early part of the fourth century men and women banded together to form religious communities

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world today, the Psalms daily reach heaven through the lips of the Catholic priesthood. Such a spiritual bond of unity does this recitation form among priests that Irving Babbit, in one of his essays, calls it the only true Brotherhood in the world today — a brotherhood that chains priest to priest through the links of the Psalms.

But I am ahead of myself.

UNINTERRUPTED PRAYER

In some monasteries, the Rule demands that the monks arise in the middle of the night and chant the morning office called *Matins* and *Lauds*, after which they retire for another period of sleep. Then in the morning, on their second arising, they resume the chant with the hour of *Prime*.

Many non-Catholics cannot understand this practice. It seems to them something of an eccentricity for people to rise in the middle of the night for prayer. Even some Catholics are puzzled. Should not the waking hours suffice for prayer?

And yet this is an entirely reasonable thing.

God is our Creator. He is it Who,

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each moment, keeps us from actually disappearing into nothing.

While we sleep He is working in and around us.

Surely nothing is more fitting than that some of us should praise and thank Him all around the clock. And this "uninterrupted praise," as the Church calls it, is the privilege of those men and women who interrupt their sleep to chant the office.

Of them St. John Chrysostom wrote in the fourth century: "All other men are at night over-powered by natural sleep; David (the Psalms) alone is active; and congregating the servants of God into Seraphic bands, turns earth into heaven, and converts men into angels."

This thought is a consolation for us. They pray, they sing. And they do it for us, the Church. While we sleep, they represent us with the Psalms on their lips and in their hearts.

Of course I must hasten to add that the early Christians who formed the monasteries and persevered in nightly prayer, began nothing new. Already the ancient Hebrew held a night service in the Temple.

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that if he recovered he would recite the whole Psalter daily in addition to the ordinary chanting of the canonical hours.

And there are also instances in history of men who loved the Psalms so much that they memorized all one hundred and fifty of them. In fact, records show that in many places a candidate had to know the Psalter by heart before he could be ordained. And that, as late as the seventh century.

Nor has the Church today neglected the Psalms. The Mass texts are full of quotations from them. As a matter of fact, the Psalms are definitely enshrined in our Catholic Liturgy.

However, because of circumstances now buried in the difficult pages of history, Catholic laymen know and use the Psalms much less than the Catholic of yesterday.

Surely you have a right to ask, then: if the Psalter is of such value as a prayer book, why did it fall into disuse among the Catholic laity?

The answer to this question can be found in the story of the Reformation of the 16th century.

In this era of religious revolution,

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Psalm 133, "Evensong in the Temple," gives an idea of this service. The Psalm points out that as one group of priests leaves the Temple, at the end of the day service, another group enters for the night hours. Those departing exhort those entering to praise God fervently throughout the night:

1. Come, bless the Lord,
All you who serve the Lord,
who stay in the house of the Lord
at nightly hours.
2. Uplift your hands to the sanctuary
and bless the Lord.
3. May you be blessed from Sion by
the Lord,
the maker of heaven and earth.

DECLINE

Holy people do more than they are obliged. This is but a mark of their holiness. And so when it comes to the Psalms we find that some holy people recited them even more frequently than the Church required.

St. Patrick, we are told, prayed the whole Psalter every day. So, too did St. Maurus, the disciple of St. Benedict. The Venerable Bede recounts how Egbert, a young student at an Irish monastery, stricken with the plague, vowed

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the Bible was definitely overemphasized by the defectors. In fact, they called it the *sole* source of religious values and the *sole* source of salvation.

Of course this idea is only partially correct.

From this false belief it logically followed that every individual should know the Bible as well as possible. And this conclusion was a good one.

And so that people could know the Bible well, the Protestants translated it into readable and literary English or German or whatever it might be.

Since the Psalms were the prayers of the Bible, the Psalter was used more than any other book in the Bible. One might fairly say that it was overused, especially by evangelical Protestants whose parsons and zealots quoted it on every occasion.

Catholics reacted.

Because of the false emphasis placed on the Bible as the *sole* norm of salvation, Catholics veered from the personal use of the Bible and instead stressed the positive, dogmatic teaching of the Church which stemmed from the Bible.

The result is obvious. Catholics knew

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less of the Scriptures than the Protestants. And the laity slowly forgot about the Psalter, the beautiful prayer book of the Church.

Today, after all those hundreds of years, Catholics are returning to and re-discovering the consolation of the Psalms as St. Augustine once did.

A FEW TIPS

It's about time that you, too begin to rediscover the Psalms. And I have a few tips to help you do so.

There is only one way to begin to appreciate the Psalms: READ THEM!

As you browse through the Psalter, one or the other Psalm will attract you. Read it aloud if you can. Almost every line (or verse as we call them) permits within it a natural pause which, as in most English poetry, usually occurs in the middle of the line or close to it. Make these pauses deliberately. They will aid you in understanding a verse.

Speed is fatal to thought. Speed is fatal to prayer. Therefore, read the Psalms SLOWLY.

As you slowly read, your attention will be halted by a word here or a phrase there. When that happens, pause. Sift what you have read. In other

words, read **THOUGHTFULLY**. Thought and time are husband and wife.

Take the example of St. Augustine who, when he read a Psalm, spoke *with* himself and *to* himself *before* God out of the innermost feelings of his soul.

It is at such quiet, prayerful moments that God's grace might touch your soul. He might help you to understand what you are reading most clearly. Through the Psalm, He might offer a solution to a problem that is needling you. He might inspire you to do something more for Him: give up some bad habit, perform some needed virtue.

And certainly He will draw you closer to Himself, the only lasting reality. He will soak you with His presence.

Now in addition to reading the Psalm slowly and meditatively, you will find it very profitable to read it over and over again. REPEAT it.

No one can or will exhaust the full meaning of a Psalm by an occasional reading.

Inexhaustibleness, to use a long word, is the characteristic of any work of art.

An art lover does not say of a Ra-

phael masterpiece: "Oh that! Why should I look at it? I saw it once before." Rather he returns to the canvas time and again, at each pause drawing new experience from the color, shade, sweep of line and depth of portrayal.

What music lover tires of a Tchaikovsky Concerto? Each session with it deepens the understanding of it, appreciation for it and pleasure with it. One simply must return again and again.

And this applies to the Psalms, too.

Add to this, that a love and appreciation for anything artistic can only come through EFFORT. The reading of the Psalms demands effort, too, for they are artistic masterpieces of inspired prayer.

You must discover for yourself the best time to read, and the best place. Your mind must be clear so that your heart can be open.

These, then, are the tips to develop a love and appreciation for the Psalms:

1. Read them.
2. Read them slowly.
3. Read them thoughtfully.
4. Read them often.
5. Read them with effort.

AN EXAMPLE

Let me give you an example of how beautiful, artistic and consoling a Psalm can be. The famous twenty-second Psalm, "The Lord is My Shepherd," will be my subject.

Let's begin with a little background.

In this country we know very little of shepherding, unless we live in the pasture lands of Nevada or Wyoming. But even here that close relation between shepherd and sheep such as once flourished in the lands of the Eastern Mediterranean is missing.

And it is precisely in the light of this close relationship that the Old Testament often speaks of God as the Good Shepherd and Israel as the flock. The Hebrew understood this figure well for his country, unlike our own, was a pastoral land. One of its very early kings, David, was a shepherd-king.

The whole theme of shepherd and flock is built upon the tender devotion of the oriental shepherd to his flock. He knew each sheep in the flock by name, almost as a person.

He cared for each almost with devotion.

By day he grazed them; by night he guarded them.

Were one injured, he doctored it.

Did one stray, he sought it.

Now in Psalm twenty-two we find two figures. The first one depicts God as such a Good Shepherd Who tends and loves, guides and cares. The second part of the song shows God as the rich host who welcomes his guests at his banquet, anoints them with oil (an oriental gesture of hospitality) and fills their cup to overflowing (that is, takes good care of them).

The song speaks of calmness and serenity.

It inspires perfect faith and a profound sense of security. And these are all movements we fast-moving people of today want to and need to experience.

Take a moment out to find this peace and security in the Psalm, keeping in mind the background that I just gave you.

Remember now: read slowly and thoughtfully.

Part One

1. The Lord is my shepherd and nothing do I want;
2. He bids me to repose in verdant pastures; to springs where I may rest he leads me on,
3. and there refreshes me.

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drift away or die, but on You I can always rely.

"Nothing do I want" ... You have given me all that I have. Life came from Your hand. So also my body, my mind and my freedom. You have given me a share in Your own life through grace. The pain, mental and physical, I experience in this life, You permit because You love me. They come from Your hand for my own good. This I believe, for I know that You take care of me as You see fit.

"He leads me to repose in verdant pastures" ... You offer me moments of peace and calm that neither my plans nor successes have given me. This offer You extend to me, if I talk to You in prayer.

In the quiet of prayer, repose will come.

"To springs where I may rest he leads me on and there refreshes me" ... On a hot, perspiring day a glass of cold beer or iced-water is indeed refreshing. It hits the spot. It offers a moment of surcease from work, a temporary encouragement, a source of strength.

You refresh me, too. The sacraments and the Mass are Your cold springs.

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He leads me onward over safe, straight paths to manifest His holy name.

4. And should I cross a gloomy vale, no evil shall I fear, because you are with me.
Your crook and staff they comfort me.

Part Two

5. You spread for me a feast for all my foes to see; and you anoint my head with oil; my cup is full up to the brim.
6. Kindness and grace will wait on me through all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever and ever more.

DERIVING THE MOST

Now that you have read the Psalm slowly and thoughtfully, let me help you derive the most from it. I will present a little commentary. The method that I will use, you can easily apply to any Psalm that you like.

"The Lord is my shepherd" ... Why should I fear of worry? The past is forgotten. The future is bright because You, the Good Shepherd, will always be with me, Your sheep. Human friends

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At their waters I am cooled momentarily from the noon heat of life and am strengthened against my return to my struggles.

Without these refreshments, I grow weak and discouraged. I falter.

"He leads me onward over safe, straight paths" ... As a shepherd, You lead me. By Your life on earth You have shown me the way, given me a pattern to follow. All I must do is trail after You. Yet You do not force me to follow, because I am free.

By myself I will wander into the bitter pastures of sin. At Your side I will reach the green pastures of peace. I cannot go wrong at Your side because Your ways are safe and straight.

"And should I cross a gloomy vale, no evil shall I fear, because You are with me" ... You have never promised that my life at Your side would be easy, that there would never be those hours, or these days, or that pain and that tedium, or this fear and this sadness.

I must merit my eternal happiness. I must suffer for my sins.

But this I know: through it all, You are with me. There is no reason to fear, only to trust blindly.

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"You spread a feast for me" . . . Now I see You as a generous host and friend. You have provided for all my spiritual needs at the Holy Table, where the Cup of Your graces and favors is inexhaustible—the Mass.

In fact, even the prosperity I might possess comes from Your hand.

"And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever and ever more" . . . I have Your promise that if I do my best in Your house, the Church, day by day, later in eternity I shall dwell with You not for days, but always.

CONCLUSION

You see, now, there is no reason why you cannot find such wealth in each Psalm.

They all make ideal prayers because they are inspired by God.

They are works of poetic artistry.

Christ loved them, the apostles did, too.

The early Church treasured them.

They are a part of our Liturgy today. In the Mass, in the Divine Office, in our sacramental ceremonies.

And they are for you to read and love.

To study them is to treasure them.