

Praying with the Psalms

The Book of Psalms is unlike any other book in the Bible. It is not a collection of narratives, laws, prophecies, or wise sayings, although it contains examples of all those genres and more. The Psalms are a collection of 150 hymns and inspired songs. The psalms are *prayers* in the form of sacred Hebrew poetry. Although the entire collection was traditionally attributed to King David, the Psalms were more likely composed by multiple authors, living in varied circumstances and different eras. Some may have even originated as pagan hymns, which were modified to praise Yahweh, the God of Israel.

The Psalmists bare their souls for us, just as we bare our souls to God when we pray. Hence, the words of the psalms will often resonate with us at an *emotional* level, which feels quite different from our reactions to most biblical readings. The psalms tend to move us toward *contemplation*, rather than toward *meditation* on ideas and concepts. The psalms were intended not for *study*, but for *prayer* and *worship* (i.e., personal prayer and communal prayer).

At Mass, after the first reading, the assembly always hears a few verses of a psalm and sings a refrain taken from that psalm. We call it a “responsorial psalm,” because the assembly responds to the cantor, singing the refrain after each set of verses. However, the psalm is responsorial in another sense, for it is always selected to match images or themes found in the first reading. Hence, the psalm “responds” to the reading, enabling us to engage those images or themes in a different way. First, we *hear* the reading, and then we prayerfully *lift our own voices* in response. Those two ways of encountering the Scriptures mutually enhance each other, deepening our experience of God’s Word.

Studying the Book of Psalms is a difficult task, because the psalms are not ordered in any discernible sequence. They’re not in chronological order, for example, nor are they grouped according to themes. Various scholars have attempted to classify all 150 psalms into different types, based on their content. But I doubt that you will find any two scholarly books on the Psalms that agree completely on what the appropriate categories are and which psalms fit into each one. Nevertheless, even a rough sorting into categories can be helpful for someone who wants to find a particular type of psalm for their personal prayer or for a communal prayer service.

Below are two attempts to sort the psalms by categories. They come from *A Retreat with the Psalms*, by Fr. John Endres, SJ and Sr. Elizabeth Liebert, SNJM, and *Psalms for All Seasons*, by John Craghan.

Endres & Liebert:

- Praise (individual & communal)
- Thanksgiving (individual & communal)
- Songs of Trust and Confidence
- Wisdom Psalms
- Royal Psalms
- Laments
- Penitential Psalms
- Songs of Zion (Jerusalem)
- Liturgical (covenant) Psalms
- Torah Psalms

Craghan:

- Psalms of Descriptive Praise
- Psalms of Declarative Praise
- Psalms of Trust or Confidence
- Wisdom Psalms
- Royal Psalms
- Laments

The following is a list of psalms in each of Endres and Liebert's categories. I've made a few modifications to their original list.

Note: Just as the categories themselves are quite subjective, the classification of each psalm into one or more categories is also highly subjective.

(An * indicates that the psalm appears in more than one category.)

Laments:

Of an individual: 3, 4, 5, 6*, 7, 9*, 10, 13, 14, 17, 22, 25, 26, 27*, 28, 31, 35, 38*, 39, 40*, 41*, 42, 43, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 59, 61*, 64, 69, 70, 71, 86, 88, 102*, 109, 120, 130*, 139*, 140, 141, 142, 143*

Of the community: 12, 44, 58, 60, 74, 77, 78*, 79, 80, 83, 85, 89*, 90, 94, 123, 126, 137

Penitential Psalms:

6*, 32*, 38*, 51, 102*, 130*, 143*

Praise:

8, 19*, 24*, 29, 33, 47, 66*, 76*, 92*, 93*, 95-100*, 103, 104, 111, 113, 114, 115*, 117, 135*, 136*, 145-150

Thanksgiving:

Of an individual: 9*, 18*, 30, 32*, 34*, 40*, 41*, 92*, 116, 138

Of the community: 65, 66*, 67, 75, 78*, 107, 118, 124, 129

Wisdom Psalms:

1*, 34*, 36, 37, 49, 73, 76*, 112, 119*, 127, 128, 133, 139*

Songs of Trust and Confidence:

11, 16, 23, 27*, 62, 63, 91, 108, 115*, 121, 125, 131

Royal Psalms:

2, 18*, 20, 21, 45, 61*, 72, 89*, 101, 110, 144

Songs of Zion (Jerusalem):

46, 48, 76, 84, 87, 122

Liturgical Psalms (associated with covenant):

15, 24*, 50, 68, 81, 82, 132, 134

Torah Psalms (praise of God's Law):

1*, 19*, 119*

Some observations about this classification of the psalms:

- About half of the psalms do not fit neatly into only one category. Some could fit into three or four categories.
- More than 1/3 of the psalms are classified as laments. The second most common type is the psalms of praise, which sit at the opposite extreme of the emotional spectrum.

We're going to examine some of these different types of psalms and see how we can pray with them. For each type, we will take one example and do a sort of *lectio divina* with it. First, we'll simply listen to the psalm and *experience* it, without analyzing it just yet. Then I'll explain the features that are characteristic of that psalm type, perhaps looking at other examples, too. Next, we'll examine our psalm in more detail, paying particular attention to the image of God that the Psalmist presents to us and the kinds of circumstances which may have given rise to this sort of prayer. Then I'll suggest some specific ways that we can pray with that particular type of psalm, allowing the Psalmist's words to become an expression of our own faith.

Psalms of Lament (individual and communal)

Individual lament

Example: Psalm 6

The psalms of lament tend to be long, complex compositions, with multiple parts. That's why laments appear frequently in the Liturgy of the Hours, but rarely at Mass. If you read the entire psalm, as often happens in the Liturgy of the Hours, you can grasp the full message. But very few psalms of lament can be summarized by selecting only 6-10 verses and a refrain. Hence, most of them are not very suitable for use as a responsorial psalm.

Psalms of lament usually express both profound sadness and steadfast hope. They often begin by expressing such terrible anguish and suffering that we might term it "despair." But they almost always take a turn to the positive at some point and end on a high note.

Looking at Psalm 6, note the anguish in verses 7 and 8, the turn from bleak to hopeful in verse 9, and the confidence expressed in verses 10 and 11. This is the typical pattern of the laments: “My situation is terrible, I am in dire straits, yet I trust that the Lord hears my cries for help.”

The Passion narratives show us two examples of Jesus praying spontaneously in the words of a psalm of lament as he dies on the cross. In Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34, Jesus appears to cry out in despair in the words of Psalm 22: “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” In Luke 23:46, Jesus appears to be at peace as he quotes Psalm 31: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” These look like contradictory accounts of Jesus’ state of mind at the hour of his death. However, more extended quotes from these psalms show that both of them express the combination of sorrow and hope that are so characteristic of the psalms of lament.

- Psalm 22:2-6

² My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?

Why so far from my call for help,
from my cries of anguish?

³ My God, I call by day, but you do not answer;
by night, but I have no relief.

⁴ Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One;
you are the glory of Israel.

⁵ In you our fathers trusted;
they trusted and you rescued them.

⁶ To you they cried out and they escaped;
in you they trusted and were not disappointed.

- Psalm 31:2-6

² In you, Lord, I take refuge;
let me never be put to shame.

In your righteousness deliver me;

³ incline your ear to me;
make haste to rescue me!

Be my rock of refuge,
a stronghold to save me.

⁴ For you are my rock and my fortress;
for your name’s sake lead me and guide me.

⁵ Free me from the net they have set for me,
for you are my refuge.

⁶ Into your hands I commend my spirit;
you will redeem me, Lord, God of truth.

Returning to Psalm 6, the image of God presented here is quite typical of the psalms of lament:

- The Lord is a disciplinarian, who gets angry with sinners and punishes them.
- The Lord is also a healer. He even heals the injuries that he inflicts as punishment, for the purpose of the punishment is to move sinners to repentance.

- The Lord rescues those who are terrified and helpless, but he often appears to delay, leaving the Psalmist to ask, “How long, Lord?”
- The Lord is merciful and compassionate. He is moved by the sound of weeping and supplication.
- The Lord has the power to turn around even a seemingly hopeless situation. He can cast down the mighty and lift up the lowly. He can redeem the lost and forsaken.

Communal lament

Example: Psalm 85

The image of God is roughly the same as in Psalm 6. Many of the same elements are present in this psalm, but in a different order. Psalm 85 begins by recalling God’s mercy toward the Psalmist’s ancestors. Then comes the lament. Why does God remain angry with us? Why does he not show us mercy? How long must we wait? Finally, the Psalmist expresses confidence that the Lord will answer his plea for help. The Lord will surely provide peace, justice and prosperity for his people.

Praying with the psalms of lament:

There are at least a couple of different ways to pray with psalms of lament, depending on how well we can identify with the sorrow and angst of the Psalmist.

1. We can consider how we lament the hardships and suffering that we encounter in our own lives. Can we relate to the hurt, the guilt, the frustration, and the sorrow expressed by the Psalmist? If so, then perhaps we can also relate to the hope that he expresses. Perhaps we can find that same faith within our own hearts and turn to the Lord with confidence, using the Psalmist’s words for inspiration.
2. If we find it difficult to relate to the Psalmist’s experience, then we can think of people in our world who are suffering as the Psalmist was suffering. Think of people who are dying of famine, people living in refugee camps or in war zones, people trapped in poverty, people who have lost everything in a natural disaster, people traveling hundreds of miles on foot to reach our southern border, only to be turned away. The psalms of lament can help us to empathize with them in their sorrow and fear, even though our lives are much more secure and comfortable. And, as the Psalmist expresses his faith in a God of refuge and redemption, we can pray in the words of the Psalmist on behalf of our suffering brothers and sisters.

Penitential Psalms

Example: Psalm 51

The sorrow that this Psalmist expresses is clearly that of repentance. He admits his guilt to the Lord and asks for mercy.

Many penitential psalms are also laments, in which the Psalmist complains about what other people are doing to harm or oppress him. What makes them penitential is that the Psalmist

does not profess his innocence. He asks for mercy and protection, while admitting that he deserves neither.

Praying with the penitential psalms:

These psalms are meant to be prayed with a humble and contrite heart. It's probably best to pray with them after first doing a good examination of conscience. Then, we can pick up any penitential psalm and turn back to the Lord with the Psalmist. We can let his eloquent expression of repentance tug at our conscience even more and evoke our own feelings of repentance.

Psalms of Praise

Example: Psalm 146

The psalms of praise are those which praise God for his majesty, his grandeur, his virtues, and his astonishing works throughout history. They praise God for *who He is*, not for what he has done in response to the Psalmist's prayers.

The psalms of praise usually follow a simple threefold pattern:

1. the call to praise God,
2. the reasons why it is right to give God praise,
3. a renewed call for praise, sometimes ending with "Halleluja" ("Praise Yahweh").

Psalm 146 fits this pattern, beginning with a characteristic call to praise, which the Psalmist directs to himself (his soul), and concluding with another brief but exuberant call to praise. In between, the Psalmist contrasts God's omnipotence with the impotence of earthly princes and then gives a long list of things for which God deserves our praise. They include:

- making the heavens, the earth, and the sea, as well as all that is in them
- keeping faith forever
- securing justice for the oppressed
- giving bread to the hungry
- setting prisoners free
- giving sight to the blind
- raising up those that are bowed down
- loving the righteous
- protecting the resident alien
- coming to the aid of orphans and widows
- thwarting the way of the wicked

Example: Psalm 117

The shortest of all the psalms, and a very concise example of a psalm of praise.

Praying with the psalms of praise:

We can think of some occasions when we felt our spirit lifted, and praise of God seemed to come upon us spontaneously. Some possible examples:

- When we were awestruck by the beauty of nature
- When we entered a sacred place and were moved by the aura of sanctity that seemed to envelop us there
- When we pondered one of the mysteries of our faith, like the Incarnation of Christ or his Resurrection from the dead, and felt moved to stunned contemplation
- When we were delighted by the laughter of a child

Recalling one of those experiences can put us in the right mood to hear the Psalmist's praise of God as an expression of our own praise.

Psalms of Thanksgiving

Thanksgiving of an individual

Example: Psalm 116

The psalms of thanksgiving also praise God, but the primary reason why the Psalmist is singing God's praises is because of a favor that the Lord has granted to him or to his community, usually in response to a desperate plea for help. Quite often, the Psalmist does not specify what favor was received. In this case, the Psalmist obviously felt close to death at some point and credits the Lord with saving him.

In verses 12-14, the Psalmist indicates how he intends to show his gratitude to the Lord. (I used these verses on my ordination card.)

Thanksgiving of a community

Example: Psalm 124

Most of the communal thanksgiving psalms retell the story of the Exodus, giving thanks to God for rescuing the Psalmist's ancestors from slavery in Egypt and/or for overcoming all of their enemies in the Promised Land. Psalm 124 is the shortest of these psalms, for it does not go into any detail, but only expresses in general terms why the people of Israel are so deeply grateful to God. As with most thanksgiving psalms of individuals, the Psalmist makes clear that they never would have survived this ordeal without the Lord's help.

Praying with the psalms of thanksgiving

The focus of all of these psalms is God's intervention when it was desperately needed, especially in response to a plea for help. Praying with them can bring back memories of such a time in our own lives. We might recall a particular moment when we called out to God in desperation and appeared to receive a clear response. As we hear the Psalmist express his gratitude to God, we can join our thanks to his.

Wisdom Psalms

Example: Psalm 1

The wisdom psalms extol the virtues of fidelity, humility and generosity, among others, and they vehemently denounce the wicked and the arrogant. Many of them phrase their teachings in the form of beatitudes: “Blessed the man who acts justly; not so the man who does evil.” Many express frustration that corrupt and immoral people achieve success and accumulate great power, while good and honest people can’t seem to get ahead. These psalmists ask the question, “Do nice guys really finish last?” The Psalmist always reaches the conclusion that the just and the wicked will get what they deserve in the end. The God of justice will surely bless the righteous and destroy the wicked.

Praying with the wisdom psalms

These psalms can be very frustrating and irritating if we focus on the evildoers who are being condemned, rather than on the just who are being extolled and reassured. If we focus on the negative, we can get stuck in the negative emotions that the Psalmist expresses. But, if we focus on the rewards promised to the just, then we can feel the Psalmist’s hope and share in his faith.

Psalms of Trust and Confidence

Example: Psalm 121

The psalms of trust and confidence contain some of the most beautiful imagery in the whole Bible. These psalmists employ a wide variety of images to express their (and our) relationship with God.

Psalm 121: God is a guardian.

Psalm 62: God is my rock, my stronghold, and my salvation.

Psalm 131: God is like a mother holding her child in her loving arms.

Psalm 11: God is a just and vigilant king, who punishes the wicked and rewards the just.

Psalm 23: God is a shepherd.

Praying with the psalms of trust and confidence:

These psalms are intended to engage our imagination. So, that is probably the best way to pray with them. We can imagine God as the Psalmist portrays him, and imagine ourselves as the Psalmist portrays himself. In effect, we can put ourselves into the psalm and experience our relationship with God as the Psalmist metaphorically describes his own relationship with God. Then we can feel his trust and confidence wash over us and fill us with peace.

Conclusion

This evening, we have explored many different types of psalms. Each type has offered us a different way of seeing God and a different way to raise our minds and hearts to God in prayer. We have seen how the psalmists can be effective guides and companions for prayer. Whatever mood we're in, there's probably a psalm that expresses our thoughts and feelings better than we could articulate them ourselves. Whether we are sorrowful, penitential, joyous, thankful, reflective, peaceful, or any combination thereof, the psalms can speak to our hearts and *give us the words to speak to God from our hearts.*

Let us conclude our time together this evening by recalling the last verse of the final psalm, Psalm 150:6.

⁶Let everything that has breath
give praise to the Lord!
Hallelujah!