

Formed by the Psalms

Habits of Faith

The psalms of ancient Israel have sustained the people of God for more than 3,000 years. In memorable poetic style, ancient Israel's psalmists speak, yell, murmur, sob, curse, thank, praise, sing, and pray their lives as worshipers gathered before God. The psalms arose as prayer-songs from ancient Israel's daily reality. Yet, when repeated over centuries in community, the ancient words of the Psalter (the book of Psalms) give fresh perspective and evoke new ways for contemporary readers to conceptualize ourselves and our world. These prayers and hymns both reflect and direct our theology; through them we perceive and reconceptualize the world we encounter.

We inhabit and transmit Israel's faith when we (re)discover, repeat, and reappropriate the controlling images, motifs, and metaphors of the psalms for our lives in our time. The Psalter's language becomes our language, its values our values, its vision our vision. As we situate and describe our lives through Israel's prayers — so that their dynamics enliven our desires, thoughts, and actions — we undertake a time-tested liturgy of spiritual formation.

Learning how to inhabit the psalms is neither quick nor easy. Fortunately, the Psalter's editors describe the spiritual formation of the righteous person in Ps 1.2: "The teaching of the Lord is his delight, and he recites that teaching day and night." Vocally reciting from the Psalter once a day allows its words liturgically to teach, train, correct, and equip us as the community of the righteous. In fifteen minutes a day, we can speak the Psalter just over twice a month, 28 times a year. Also, many daily Bible reading plans cycle through the psalms several times annually. For variety, we can read every thirtieth psalm according to the number of the day. On the 4th of the month, read Pss 4, 34, 64, 94 and 124; on the 18th, read Pss 18, 48, 78, 108 and 138. Save Psalm 119 for the 31st.

In the history of fixed-hour prayer (aka the "Liturgy of the Hours" or "the Divine Office"), the norm is to pray the whole Psalter in a one-, two-, or four-week cycle. These cycles distribute psalms across morning, evening, and mid-day devotions. The Paraclete Psalter is preferable for its completeness, simplicity, and focus on the psalms; its four-week cycle has early morning, midday, early evening, and bedtime devotions.

The Psalter is an immensely valuable resource. When we read it liturgically, we learn to desire, think, value, and walk the path of those who came before us. The Psalter summons us to form the habit of reciting it "day and night" (Ps 1.2). In this way, we stand in the assembly of the righteous (Ps 1.5). In this way, we tell God's wonderful deeds (Ps 75.1). In this way, we praise the Lord (Ps 150.6).

Reading the Psalms

1. Determine to read through the Psalms once a month. Use The Paraclete Psalter or the morning and evening schedule in the Book of Common Prayer.

2. Before you read, pray, "Lord, open my eyes to see, my ears to hear, my heart to feel, my mind to imagine, and my hands to act on what this psalm opens to me."

3. Imaginatively place yourself in the psalmist's situation and read the psalm slowly all the way through. Let your mind see the images of the psalm and your heart sense its emotions.

4. Read the psalm again. Choose 2 or 3 questions below to ponder for a minute or two.

- ♦ What is the psalmist's situation? What words lead you to that conclusion?
- ♦ Describe the mood of the Psalm.
- ♦ What stands out to you most?
- ♦ What grabs your attention?
- ♦ Why might God make this stand out to you?
- ♦ Pause and ask: What invitation is here for you now?
- ♦ If you sense an invitation, do not ignore it! Decide to act on it in the next few days.
- ♦ If the action to take is unclear, sit quietly and ask God to clarify.

5. When you sense you are done, express thanks to God.

6. End with silence. Simply abide in God's presence.