

**GRACE EPISCOPAL CHURCH**  
Sheboygan, Wisconsin

**Adult Education**

*The Psalms: Prayer Book of the Bible*

*The psalm numbering and versification system used throughout this study is that found in The Book of Common Prayer (1979).*

1. The Psalter of 150 psalms is composed of five “books” (the first ends with Ps. 41), with each book ending with an appended doxology which is not part of the psalm to which it is attached (*see, e.g., Ps. 41.13*).
  - a. In Hebrew the Psalter is referred to as *tēhillîm* (tay-hee-leem), which means “hymns”.
2. The entire Psalter is completed in Pss. 146-150, as an extended doxology, with each psalm there beginning with *hallēlû yāh* (“hallelujah,” or “praise the Lord”).
  - a. Some psalms have headings. *E.g., Ps. 3* is superscribed “A Psalm of David, when he fled from Absalom his son.”
    - i. Headings can be technical (musical terms and instructions for performance), personal names with which the psalm is associated, or historical. The example given for Ps. 3 combines the latter two heading types.
  - b. Psalms can take different forms:
    - i. Hymns of praise.
    - ii. Laments, which are comprised of: (a) the invocation of God’s Name; (b) a description of present need; (c) a prayer for help and deliverance; (d) reasons for God to help; (e) a vow to offer praise and sacrifice; and (f) grateful praise.
      1. Laments may be individual or communal.
    - iii. “Royal” psalms: In these the king is the speaker or the focus of attention.
    - iv. “Wisdom” psalms: These include instruction on the right/holy way of living.
      1. The Psalter as a whole is generally classified as Wisdom Literature.
    - v. Liturgical psalms: Those used in public prayer, such as entrance to the Temple.
    - vi. Historical psalms: Psalms which recite God’s saving action.

In his short book, *The Psalms: Prayer Book of the Bible*, Bl. Dietrich Bonhoeffer<sup>1</sup> writes,

The Holy Scripture is the Word of God to us. But prayers are the words of men. How do prayers then get into the Bible? Let us make no mistake about it, the Bible is the Word of God even in the Psalms. Then are these prayers to God also God’s own word? That seems rather difficult to understand. We grasp it only when we remember that **we can learn true prayer only from Jesus Christ**, from the word of the Son of God, who lives with us men, to God the Father, who lives in eternity.

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<sup>1</sup> 1906–1945; feast 9 April.

Jesus Christ has brought every need, every joy, every gratitude, every hope of men before God. In his mouth the word of man becomes the Word of God, and if we pray his prayer with him, the Word of God becomes once again the word of man. All prayers of the Bible are such prayers which we pray together with Jesus Christ, in which he accompanies us, and through which he brings us into the presence of God. Otherwise there are no true prayers, for only in and with Jesus Christ can we truly pray.

If we want to read and to pray the prayers of the Bible and especially the Psalms, therefore, **we must not ask first what they have to do with us, but what they have to do with Jesus Christ.** We must ask how we can understand the Psalms as God's Word, and then we shall be able to pray them. It does not depend, therefore, on whether the Psalms express adequately that which we feel at a given moment in our heart. If we are to pray aright, perhaps it is quite necessary that we pray contrary to our own heart. Not what we want to pray is important, but what God wants us to pray. If we were dependent entirely on ourselves, we would probably pray only the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer. But God wants it otherwise. The richness of the Word of God ought to determine our prayer, not the poverty of our heart.

Let's look at a particular case, the relationship between Jesus' last words on the cross and Psalm 22.

Psalm 22:

Compare

- |    |   |   |
|----|---|---|
| 1  | My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? *<br>and are so far from my cry<br>and from the words of my distress? | Mtt. 27.6-9; Mk. 15.34                    |
| 2  | O my God, I cry in the daytime, but you do not answer; *<br>by night as well, but I find no rest.               |   |
| 3  | Yet you are the Holy One, *<br>enthroned upon the praises of Israel.  |   |
| 4  | Our forefathers put their trust in you; *<br>they trusted, and you delivered them.                              |   |
| 5  | They cried out to you and were delivered; *<br>they trusted in you and were not put to shame.                   |   |
| 6  | But as for me, I am a worm and no man, *<br>scorned by all and despised by the people.                          |   |
| 7  | All who see me laugh me to scorn; *<br>they curl their lips and wag their heads, saying,                        | Mtt. 27.39ff; Mk. 15.29ff;<br>Lk. 23.35ff |
| 8  | “He trusted in the Lord; let him deliver him; *<br>let him rescue him, if he delights in him.”                  |   |
| 9  | Yet you are he who took me out of the womb, *<br>and kept me safe upon my mother's breast.                      |   |
| 10 | I have been entrusted to you ever since I was born; *<br>you were my God when I was still in my mother's womb.  |   |

- 11 Be not far from me, for trouble is near, \*  
and there is none to help.
- 12 Many young bulls encircle me; \*  
strong bulls of Bashan surround me.
- 13 They open wide their jaws at me, \*  
like a ravener and a roaring lion.
- 14 I am poured out like water;  
all my bones are out of joint; \*  
my heart within my breast is melting wax. Mtt. 27.35ff; Mk. 15.24ff;  
Lk. Lk. 23.33; Jn. 19.18
- 15 My mouth is dried out like a pot-sherd;  
my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; \*  
and you have laid me in the dust of the grave. Jn. 19.28, "I thirst."
- 16 Packs of dogs close me in,  
and gangs of evildoers circle around me; \*  
they pierce my hands and my feet;  
I can count all my bones.
- 17 They stare and gloat over me; \*  
they divide my garments among them;  
they cast lots for my clothing. Mtt. 27.35; Mk. 15.24;  
Lk. 23.34; Jn. 19.23-24
- 18 Be not far away, O Lord; \*  
you are my strength; hasten to help me.
- 19 Save me from the sword, \*  
my life from the power of the dog.
- 20 Save me from the lion's mouth, \*  
my wretched body from the horns of wild bulls.
- 21 I will declare your Name to my brethren; \*  
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you. Cleansing the Temple.  
Last Supper.
- 22 Praise the Lord, you that fear him; \*  
stand in awe of him, O offspring of Israel;  
all you of Jacob's line, give glory. Resurrection appearances.

Notice that there are two possible interpretations that we may make of these parallels between Psalm 22 and the accounts of the passion of Jesus Christ. We can conclude that Jesus began to recite Ps. 22, and died before He reached the words of triumph at the end—that He expected His hearers to draw the line to verse 22, as a recitation of praise and as a revelation of His identity. But this presupposes that the omnipotent Jesus Christ could not “time” His death! The other interpretation (the one consistently witnessed to in the history of the Church) is that Jesus spoke words of despair (verse 1) because He *experienced despair*—that there is no experience of being human which Jesus did not know, including the descent into Hell. He knew all of the human experience in order that He might redeem it.

The second interpretation of Psalm 22 points to the reality that when we pray the psalms we participate in the intercession which Jesus makes for us. Who among us has not experienced loss, mocking, despair? And yet who cannot express ultimate trust in God's nearness and redemption?

Next week we will continue to work through the types of psalms we encounter, through how we experience praying with Jesus in how we pray the psalms, and how we can engage in habits of this prayer.

In what accents I addressed Thee, my God, when I read the Psalms of David, those faithful songs, the language of devotion which banishes the spirit of pride. ... How I addressed Thee in those Psalms! how my love for Thee was kindled by them! how I burned to recite them, were it possible, throughout the world, as an antidote for the pride of humanity ...

—St. Augustine of Hippo  
*Confessions*, ix, 4.

You may rightly call the Psalter a Bible in miniature, in which all things which are set forth more at length in the rest of the Scriptures are collected into a beautiful manual of wonderful and attractive brevity.

—Martin Luther  
*Works* (1553.ed.), iii, 356.

The choice and flower of all things profitable in other books, the Psalms do both more briefly contain and more movingly express, by reason of that poetical form wherewith they are written.

—Richard Hooker  
*Ecclesiastical Polity*, V, xxxvii, 2.

When we pray the psalms with Jesus Christ, we participate in the oneness of the Church militant and the Church triumphant, the communion of the saints. Our hearts are opened and our affections enlarged. Our thoughts are drawn heavenward with our words.

