

Praying the Psalms
with the Holy Fathers



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Compiled by Peter Celano



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Praying the Psalms with the Holy Fathers

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INTRODUCTION

OVER THE LAST TWO THOUSAND YEARS, the best guides to the beauty and spirituality of the book of Psalms have been the Holy Fathers. Popes, past and present, have delivered homilies full of quotations from the Psalms, written special messages to the faithful explaining the meaning of various psalms, and most important, have made praying the psalms a part of their own spiritual lives and practices.

The book of Psalms is the greatest spiritual poetry in the history of literature. You may be familiar with the words of certain psalms from your own prayer life, or from the liturgy of the Mass, when we pray at least a portion of a psalm each week. Holy Fathers have prayed these beautiful, universal words for millennia. Like King David himself (the author of nearly half of the psalms), who cared for sheep before his unlikely battle with the giant Goliath, the Holy Fathers can shepherd us through the wisdom of these graceful texts.

Two thousand years ago, St. Peter would have prayed the Psalms in Hebrew, the language in which they were originally written. Jesus and the disciples also prayed them in Hebrew in the first century AD.

Pope Gregory the Great prayed the psalms in the Latin of the Middle Ages. For centuries, various popes insisted that the Psalms, like all of Holy Scripture, should not be translated from the Latin. Pope Innocent III, for instance, forbade their translation into French in 1199, believing that vernacular copies of the Bible could be easily misunderstood by the people. But times changed, and today the Psalms are sung, prayed, spoken, heard, felt (there are many excellent Braille editions), and read in many languages all over the world.

Pope John Paul II grew up praying the Psalms in his native Polish. In fact, Pope John Paul "the Great" was a great lover of these prayer poems, having given a long series of Wednesday audiences dedicated to explaining the prayers of the Divine Office for morning and evening. He died before he was able to finish these audiences devoted exclusively to exploring and explaining the Psalms.

Our current Pope, Benedict XVI, grew up praying these powerful words in both German and the Latin of the church.

Of course many a pope has also prayed them in Italian!



The book of Psalms is a collection of 150 poem-prayers that were originally written as religious songs. Some of them are even handed down to us with suggestions for instrumental accompaniment. For instance, take a look at Psalm 54 in your own Bible. Before the first verse, you probably see something like this:

For the choirmaster On stringed instruments.

You will notice similar instructions before other psalms. You will also notice superscriptions such as the one before Psalm 22:

*For the choirmaster To "the Doe of the Dawn"
Psalm of David*

There are various theories of where these instructions originated. One was perhaps an ancient reference to a deer that David had encountered while he was out in the fields, and it had inspired him in the writing of those verses. We don't know for sure. The Psalms are full of mystery as well as music.

In the oldest manuscripts seventy-three of these prayer songs are attributed to David. Tradition has it that David was often writing (and singing) words that were based on earlier (but no longer extant) songs of figures such as Adam and Moses. Wouldn't it be intriguing if David was repeating some of what had been passed down by oral tradition for centuries? In any case, these verses are truly ancient in origin, predating all of the writings in the New Testament. Some of them were surely sung in the First Temple—the one built by King Solomon, David's son—from about 800 to 750 BC.

In any language, time, or place, the poetry of the Psalms sings to our souls. One of the most familiar and beloved passages of them all, Psalm 23:1–3, reads like this in one familiar English translation:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

In any language, the words of the psalmist speak to our hearts and deepest desires.

Taken together, the psalms represent many things to our spiritual lives:

- ☞ They speak to God from the depths of human experience and emotion.
- ☞ They tell of the desires, fears, and loves of the Jewish people—in ways that are universal of the desires, fears, and loves of all people everywhere.
- ☞ They express hope for the Messiah that was to come, and will come again.
- ☞ They understand the silence we often feel in the presence of God.
- ☞ And they show, too, the human desire to speak—sometimes, even shout or weep—in God's holy presence.

The book of Psalms was as popular two thousand years ago as it is now. The writers of the New Testament Scriptures knew this Hebrew poetry. There are various places in the New Testament where specific psalms are mentioned. We also know that Jesus was steeped in the Psalms. For instance, on one occasion, while talking with the Pharisees, Jesus refers to David's words in the Psalms in order to explain to the Pharisees the meaning and identity of the Messiah

(see Matthew 22:41–46). Jesus prayed psalms in the temple, talked about them in the temple, and prayed them at home. The Psalms were a part of his religious formation, as they were for every Jewish child.

Praying the Psalms with the Holy Fathers offers you an opportunity to discover this portion of Scripture for yourself, perhaps for the first time. It also gives you the opportunity to learn from these songs that have fed the souls of our Hebrew forebears, of our Lord, and of all Christians since the time of the first disciples.



The personalities of the popes vary greatly. Each pope has his own way of communicating, and each his unique messages for the essential life of the church in his day. This collection follows in the tradition of two books previously published by Paraclete Press: *Christmas with the Holy Fathers* (2008) and *Lent and Easter with the Holy Fathers* (2010). As was the case in those books, this one also includes messages from Holy Fathers going back in history as far as Pope St. Leo the Great (AD 440–61). This collection would be weak if it did not include the reflections of Pope Leo. Pope Benedict XVI said, at one of his weekly Wednesday audiences, that Pope Leo “was one of the

greatest incumbents of the See of Rome, the authority and prestige of which he strengthened. He is also the earliest pope whose sermons have come down to us, sermons he would address to the people who gathered around him during celebrations."

But while this collection of reflections includes Holy Fathers as ancient as Pope St. Leo the Great, it also includes Holy Fathers as recent as Pope Benedict XVI and his immediate predecessor, Pope John Paul II (1978–2005). In his very first papal message from the loggia of St. Peter's Basilica, Benedict XVI referred to John Paul II as "the great" and since that time, Christians all over the world have been calling him Pope John Paul the Great, waiting for the day to come soon when they might add "saint" before his name.

The words that follow are for all Christians everywhere—in fact, all people who desire to know the will of God for their lives today. The messages of the popes are vital for the people of God—not just for Roman Catholics. In every era, the Holy Father speaks to the world, and the world listens to what he has to say.

Before we read the words of the Holy Fathers about specific psalms, let us conclude this introduction with the words of Pope St. Pius X on his own experience with the Psalms.

*The Psalms Have Always Been
the Spirit of the Church*

 POPE ST. PIUS X 

(1903–1914)

From *Divino Afflatu*

*It is good to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praises to your
name, O Most High.*

PSALM 92:1

THE COLLECTION OF PSALMS found in Scripture, composed as it was under divine inspiration, has, from the very beginnings of the Church, shown a wonderful power of fostering devotion among Christians as they offer to God a continuous sacrifice of praise, the harvest of lips blessing his name.

The Psalms seem to me to be like a mirror, in which the person using them can see himself, and the stirrings of his own heart; he can recite them against the background of his own emotions. Augustine says in his *Confessions*: “How I wept when I heard your hymns and canticles, being deeply moved by the sweet singing of your Church. Those voices flowed into my ears, truth filtered into my heart, and from

my heart surged waves of devotion. Tears ran down, and I was happy in my tears."

Who can fail to be moved by those many passages in the psalms which set forth so profoundly the infinite majesty of God, his omnipotence, his justice and goodness and clemency, too deep for words, and all the other infinite qualities of his that deserve our praise? Who could fail to be roused to the same emotions by the prayers of thanksgiving to God for blessings received, by the petitions, so humble and confident, for blessings still awaited, by the cries of a soul in sorrow for sin committed? Who would not be fired with love as he looks on the likeness of Christ, the redeemer, here so lovingly foretold? His was the voice Augustine heard in every psalm, the voice of praise, of suffering, of joyful expectation, of present distress.

PART I
MAJOR THEMES

Foretelling the Coming of Christ

INTRODUCTION

THE COMING OF CHRIST was foretold by the Hebrew prophets over and over again in what Christians call the Old Testament. As one example, this statement from the eleventh chapter of the book of Isaiah was later repeated in the first verse of the first Gospel of the New Testament. In both passages the message is clear: the Messiah will come from the root of Jesse's (David's) family tree.

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. . . . On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious. (Isaiah 11:1, 10)

An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham. . . . So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations. (Matthew. 1:1, 17)

Jesse was the father of King David, and there is direct genealogical line from David to Jesus, as Matthew explains in chapter one of his Gospel. The first Christians understood this connection between David and Jesus intimately; they often spoke of it.

For example, in Acts four, the disciples Peter and John were imprisoned because they had been preaching about the risen Christ. When they were released, Peter and John

raised their voices together to God and said: "Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth, the sea, and everything in them, it is you who said by the Holy Spirit through our ancestor David, your servant: 'Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples imagine vain things? The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers have gathered together against the Lord and against his Messiah.' For in this city, in fact, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed." (vv. 23–27)

This connection from King David to Jesus Christ is one of the reasons Christians have always felt a

close connection to the words of David. Nowhere are David's words (and spirit) better preserved than in the book of Psalms. One interesting tradition among some of the early monastics is that the incarnate Christ was the one who inspired David in the actual writing of the Psalms. This comes from the unusual phrase that begins Psalm 110: "The Lord says to my lord . . ." (v. 1).

In this first section of *Praying the Psalms with the Holy Fathers*, we see David's words expressing the hope and expectation of the Jewish people for the coming of the Messiah. We see psalms that foretell the coming of Christ.