

**Study 9: Sing to the Lord**

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**Introduction.** The Book of Psalms can in some ways be thought of as the Bible in miniature. One scholar observed that if the Old Testament had been lost, most of it could be re-created if only the Book of Psalms were preserved.

The Book of Psalms, a collection of 150 religious poems and songs, is called the *Psalter*, a name taken from the Greek word for harp or lyre, an instrument used to accompany the singers of the psalms during Temple worship. The psalms were written by a number of different authors over a period of time, although the whole collection is dedicated to David because of his fame as a poet and singer of psalms.

The Psalter is really the fruit of centuries of prayer and meditation on the great saving events of God's activity in the history of His people. One way to understand this history is to think of it as a four-act play, with the cast consisting of God, the Hebrew people (both the individual Jew and the nation as a whole), and those who represent enemies of God. Our four-act play is really a thumbnail sketch of the whole Old Testament, the wide panorama of salvation history which forms the context in which the psalms should be read and prayed:

- † **Act One: Election and Covenant.** God chooses a single people to be His People in a most unique way. He pledges them His *fidelity*, while they in turn vow *obedience* to God.
- † **Act Two: The Covenant is Broken.** Here we witness the sad record of national and personal *infidelity* to God, as it unfolds across the pages of Israel's history.
- † **Act Three: God is Angry.** God's faithless children experience *punishments* in the form of natural catastrophes or oppression by God's enemies, who act as God's instruments. God, seeming to abandon His chosen ones, becomes the "hidden God." Man now responds with repentance.
- † **Act Four: God is Faithful.** Now comes the joyous ending, a story of *forgiveness* and the *restoration* of God's people as His children.

Through the Psalms, then, the community and the individual relive this entire sacred drama. This is why, among several reasons, the Church uses the psalms so extensively in its liturgies. Through the psalms the Church reminds us that we are the People of God today and that our lives, too, are a drama of election, infidelity, punishment and restoration. And so, as we study the Psalter we come to understand how each psalm provides insight into this sacred history either by summarizing it or by addressing one of the other of its elements.

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**Reading. Now open your Bible and read the following Psalms:**

- Hymns of Praise: Psalms 8, 29, 122**
  - Petitions (of the nation): Psalms 60, 80, 137**
  - Petitions (of the individual): Psalms 18, 22, 23, 42, 51, 130**
  - Didactic Psalms: Psalms 37, 78, 90, 133, 139**
  - Prophetic Psalms: Psalm 110, 126**
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**Background.** In the event you are not using a New American or Revised Standard Version of the Bible, be aware that many older Catholic Bibles use the Greek numbering system for the Psalms, rather than the Hebrew numbering system which we use here. In the Greek system, Psalm 10 includes both the Hebrew Psalms 10 and 11; therefore from Psalm 11 on, the numbers are off by one.

You should also understand that two outstanding features of Hebrew poetry are the concreteness of images and parallelism in the development of ideas:

- † **Concreteness.** Unlike the Greeks, the Hebrews were not given to forming abstract ideas. As a result they never really developed any sort of true philosophy. To the Jew, a person didn't possess a soul; rather, he contained "God's breath" or "the breath of life." A good man didn't possess or exhibit "goodness"; rather he was deaf to the advice of the wicked, avoided their company, and delighted in God's Law. (See Psalm 1)
- † **Parallelism.** Psalm 2 provides a good example of parallelism in Hebrew poetry. Notice how the idea of the first half of each verse is repeated in the second half using different words:
- Why do the nations protest // and the peoples grumble in vain?  
Kings on earth rise up // and princes plot together against the Lord and his anointed:  
"Let us break their shackles // and cast off their chains!"

**Behind the Words.** The poems of the Psalter fall into four classes: hymns, petitions, didactic (or instructional) psalms, and prophetic psalms.

**Hymns.** The hymns all tend to follow this plan:

1. Part I – **Appeal** to praise the Lord. This appeal is addressed to the just, the nation of Israel, the community of nations, or even the psalmist himself.
2. Part II – **Motives** for praising God. These may be joy or reverent awe in the face of God's activity in nature or human history.
3. Part III – **Conclusion.** A renewed appeal to praise the Lord.

These psalms are usually poetic reflections on themes elaborated in Genesis 1, Isaiah 10, Job 36, and Sir 42. It will be profitable to read these chapters before reading the three hymns we have selected for study.

**Petitions.** The psalms of petition or "asking" psalms make up the largest and most important element of the Psalter.

**Didactic or Instructional Psalms.** The wise men of Israel made extensive use of the psalm-form to teach people the "ways of the Lord." The themes of these psalms might best be termed pensive or reflective.

**Prophetic Psalms.** These psalms bear witness to the Jewish people's awareness that their hopes were not centered solely on contemporary events but rather on God's promises, promises that would be fulfilled in a glorious future.

**Unity of the Two Testaments.** The psalm as a form of prayer was common throughout the history of Israel. We find many examples of psalm-prayers in the Gospels: Mary's *Magnificat* (Lk 1:46-55); Zechariah's *Benedictus* (Lk 1:68-79); and Simeon's *Nunc Dimittis* (Lk 2:29-32). But, as we have already mentioned, since the Psalms are the Old Testament set to prayer, there is hardly a page of the New Testament that does not contain some allusion to or direct quotation from the psalms.

**Psalms in Liturgy.** Since the psalms are the very backbone of the liturgical texts of the Church's public worship, there are almost too many examples to choose from. The sixteen psalms selected for our study are used by the Church on a number of different Sundays and Solemnities throughout the liturgical year as well as in several sacramental liturgies. They also form part of the Church's Liturgy of the Hours, and help us see why the Book of Psalms has been called the *Official Prayerbook* of the Church.

The Church makes the psalms her prayerbook to create in us the attitude of expectation and desire for the Good News of Jesus Christ. But each of us must still make them a reality in his or her own life. The prayerbook of the Church should become our prayerbook as well. We can do this only by using the psalms frequently in our own personal prayer. Make a list of your favorite psalms and note what each psalm means to you and under what circumstances you find it most helpful. Keep the list handy and refer

to it when you encounter one of the situations listed. You also might want to join the Church by taking part in Morning and/or Evening Prayer on a daily basis.

**Questions.** Reflect on the following questions offered for discussion:

1. How would you describe the attitude of the author of Psalm 8 toward God, toward man, and toward the world?
2. How would you compare the description of Jerusalem in Psalm 122 and the place of your parish church in your life?
3. What does Psalm 60 tell us of God?
4. How would you evaluate the “self-conception” (how the psalmist thinks of himself) in Psalms 18, 22, 51, and 130?
5. If the author of Psalm 39 had possessed the full revelation of the immortality of the soul and the promise of eternal life in heaven, could he have written this psalm?
6. What is the relevance of Psalm 139 to today’s world?