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## Praying the Psalms with Jesus and His Body

Thomas M. Winger

### I. Introduction

“O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise” (Ps 51:15).<sup>1</sup> These beloved opening words of Matins, drawn from Psalm 51, were the subject of a regular joke in my childhood days, as I would hum them through pursed lips and grin up at my mother. After all, how could we sing them if the Lord had not yet opened our lips? The meaning was more sober for the early medieval monks who were woken in the darkness of early morning to process from dormitory to chapel, and this cry to God was literally the first sound to emerge from their somnolent mouths. Matins teaches us that the first words of the morning ought to be God’s praise. But *why* does God need to open our mouths before we can praise him? In the context of Psalm 51, this petition has little to do with sleep-induced lockjaw or even the priority of praise over chatter; rather, David’s mouth had been slammed shut by the shame that had overwhelmed him since the prophet Nathan exposed the evil of his sin with Bathsheba. His heart could not praise the Lord until the refreshing word of absolution would create in him a clean heart. That is how the Lord would open his lips.

The opening call of Matins is therefore a cry for forgiveness, and an acknowledgment that we are entirely unfit to praise the Lord until he moves it. It highlights the priority of God’s saving word over the babble emerging from our unclean hearts (cf. Matt 15:19–20). But that we express our appeal *in God’s own words*, drawn from the Psalms, is even more significant. It speaks our humble confession that we have nothing to say to God until he first speaks to us. Therefore, even our petition for words to speak comes from Scripture. Despite popular opinion, prayer and praise do not consist simply of what overflows from our troubled hearts that wish, sigh, lament, or rejoice heavenwards.<sup>2</sup> Though we are free to voice to our heavenly Father the very simplest of childlike requests, we do need to be taught how

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the ESV<sup>®</sup> Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version<sup>®</sup>), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

<sup>2</sup> See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together; Prayerbook of the Bible*, ed. Gerhard Ludwig Müller, Albrecht Schönherr, and Geoffrey B. Kelly, trans. Daniel W. Bloesch and James H. Burtness, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 5 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 155.

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to pray. When the disciples approached Jesus begging, “Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1), they were rightly confessing that God-pleasing prayer does *not* come naturally to us. Just as Christ responded by teaching them the Our Father, so also God’s people from of old had been furnished with a divine prayer book in the Psalter. In it, the Father taught his children to pray as any father voices words to his young children and beams with joy when they learn to say them back. As both God’s word to us and the cornucopia of our prayers back to him, the Psalms express most clearly the rhythm proper to the liturgy itself: like the heart that both pushes out oxygen-rich blood to the body’s starving cells and then draws back the exhausted vehicle of their nourishment, so the Psalms deliver to us the life-giving word of God and by their own muscular pulse return it to him as prayers and praise from our weak lips.

## II. The Psalms as Divine Revelation

So, before we can speak of the Psalms as prayer, we need to acknowledge their character as divine revelation. Though inspired through poets like David and Asaph, these are *God’s* Psalms. He teaches us the words to pray and sing, and we voice them back to him. And the Psalms do not simply give us a script for safe worship, as if by voicing them we merely tread a safe path through the liturgical minefield, stepping here and not there to avoid the explosive danger of his displeasure—though they certainly give us such confidence. But as divine revelation, the Psalms teach us who we are. They uncover the state of our hearts, as Nathan the prophet led David to acknowledge. They show us what we need and why we need it. They allow us to speak to God truthfully—not seeing ourselves through our own rosy eyes (like the Pharisee in the temple) but by God’s penetrating insight. And as divine revelation, they also reveal to us the heart of *God*. Horace Hummel warns that “like the whole Bible, [the Psalter’s] real subject is not man, his devotion, inspiration, or experience, but God as He still creates, elects, redeems, sanctifies, reigns, reveals, judges.”<sup>3</sup> So the Psalms are not just law—even law in which we take great delight—but embrace the fullness of God’s teaching. They teach us the nature of his kingdom and proclaim what he did for the saints of old: how he rescued them from every danger, how he redeemed his people Israel from Egyptian slavery, how he offers his righteousness in his holy dwelling place, how he will send the Messiah, and how in the end he will come to redeem us too. The Psalms are, then, as Luther put it in his preface to the Psalter, “a little Bible, . . . almost an entire summary of it, comprised in one little

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<sup>3</sup> Horace D. Hummel, *The Word Becoming Flesh: An Introduction to the Origin, Purpose, and Meaning of the Old Testament* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1979), 448.

book.”<sup>4</sup> In fact, they are purest gospel—and it is Jesus himself who, following the traditional division of the Old Testament into three parts with the Psalms representing all “the writings,” affirmed: “everything written *about me* in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled” (Luke 24:44, emphasis added).

We must keep their gospel character in mind when we observe their self-proclaimed division into five books—apparently imitating the five books of Moses, the Pentateuch. For they are not “law” but “instruction” in the way of the Lord, God’s “teaching” in both law and gospel, as Horace Hummel taught a generation of Lutherans to understand the Hebrew word *Torah*. With this in mind, and with the necessary tweaking of the translation, we can rightly see Psalm 1 as a prologue to the entire collection:

1 Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the | wicked,\*  
nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of | scoffers;  
2 but his delight is in the law [*Torah*/teachings] | of the LORD,\*  
and on his law [*Torah*/teachings] he meditates | day and night.  
3 He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its  
season, and its leaf does not | wither.\*  
In all that he does, he | prospers.<sup>5</sup> (Ps 1:1–3)

The image David uses explodes the notion of the law as mere commandments; the *Torah* is rather that life-giving stream that attracts our roots, nourishes our frame, and allows us to burst into life. The Psalter gives that righteous man, anchored in God’s word, the means to express his great delight. So while the Psalms are, like the Pentateuch, God’s revelation to man, they are much more; they are doxological, as each of the five books expresses at its close. For by teaching us the gracious nature of God as our Creator and Redeemer, the Psalms instill in us both rhyme and reason to thank and praise him.

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<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther, *Preface to the Psalter* (1528): vol. 35, p. 254, in *Luther’s Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–76); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–86); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009–), hereafter AE, “The Psalter ought to be a precious and beloved book, if for no other reason than this: it promises Christ’s death and resurrection so clearly—and pictures his kingdom and the condition and nature of all Christendom—that it might well be called a little Bible.”

<sup>5</sup> All Psalm verses appointed for singing are taken from The Commission on Worship of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006).

### III. The Psalms as Song

Perhaps it should *not* go without saying that the Psalms are also fundamentally *song*. Song and prayer are not mutually exclusive categories any more than revelation and prayer. Singing is simply the *way* we pray them. In the Hebrew text, each Psalm is introduced with a superscription that uses a variety of terms to describe these poems: some mean “song” (*shir*) or “instrumentally accompanied music” (*mizmor*); others mean “teaching” (*maskil*), “praise” (*tehillah*), “prayer” (*tephillah*), or “lamentation” (*miktam, shiggaion*). But these, too, are not mutually exclusive categories, and the superscriptions often give further instructions that emphasize their musical character, naming a melody (e.g., “The Hind of Dawn” in Psalm 22) or at least a tonality, identifying the instruments to be used, and sometimes giving a dedication to a temple musician (e.g., “To the choirmaster: with stringed instruments; according to ‘The Eighth.’ A Psalm of David,” Psalm 6). So also the puzzling interjections like *Selah* (seventy-one times) are probably to be understood as musical instructions. It is, then, no surprise that when the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) selected one term as the book’s title, it settled on ψαλμός, “psalm,” which means “song.” Originally, the word was onomatopoeic, the initial “ps” sound echoing the plucking of a stringed instrument like a lyre, harp, or cithara (κιθάρα, from which we get “guitar”). The related word “Psalter,” used as a title for the collection by way of metonymy, likewise originally referred to the instrument itself, the ψαλτήριον. I mention this because the origin of the Psalms may have been young David’s commission to pluck his lyre (τὴν κινύραν, *kinnor*) and sing to King Saul to soothe his troubled heart and drive away the evil spirit that burdened him (1 Sam 16:23). When the Lord gave David the throne of Israel, he inspired David to set in order the liturgical contribution of the Levitical choirs, who set the music of the tabernacle to the accompaniment of lyres, harps, and cymbals (1 Chr 25:1). Chief among them was Asaph, who together with David is named as a primary author of the Psalms.

These ancient stringed instruments were likely more rhythmic than melodic in function, which coincides well with the major poetic feature of the Psalms. For unlike traditional English-language poetry, whose defining character is rhyme, Hebrew poetry is marked exclusively by parallelism and rhythm. The Lord in his wisdom thus inspired a form of poetry that survives translation into other languages.<sup>6</sup> Normally divided into two halves, with roughly the same number of stressed syllables (most commonly 3:3), Psalm verses emphasize and elaborate on each idea by repeating it with synonymous terms or equivalent figures of speech:

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<sup>6</sup> See Clive Staples Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1958), 5.

“Praise the LORD, all nations! Extol him, all peoples!” (Ps 117:1). Even “antithetical parallelism,” which uses opposite expressions in each half, is meant to express a unified thought: “For the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish” (Ps 1:6). Through repetition, this form of poetry not only aids comprehension by restating its thought in other terms, but it also slows down the lips to allow the heart to digest the message. Like an extended Kyrie or litany, the prayer’s repetition ramps up its urgency, the repetition of praise ratchets up its height. More importantly, parallelism enables *dialogue* and suggests that the Psalms were fundamentally intended for use in *community* (Psalm 136 is the stellar example). St. Paul implies that the earliest Christians, in continuing Israel’s use of Psalms in their worship, also sang them *antiphonally*, back and forth on the fulcrum of the half verse: “speaking to each other in psalms and hymns and songs of the Spirit, singing and psalming with your heart to the Lord” (Eph 5:19, author’s translation; cf. Col 3:16). It is worth noting, then, that the widespread modern practice of singing the Psalms antiphonally by *whole* verse, likely driven by a desire to maintain the integrity of the musical tone, distorts the essential rhythm of the Psalm verses, 90 percent of which express their parallelism by half verse. By speaking the Psalms to one another as well as corporately to the Lord, we recognize their character as true *praise*, which does not simply express adoration but elevates him by proclaiming his mighty and gracious works. True praise is a form of preaching.

For those of us who grew up with *The Lutheran Hymnal* (1941) and ignored the small number of Anglican chant settings in the back of the book, the introduction of tones to sing them in *Lutheran Worship* (1982) was a revelation. In many congregations, it was not a smooth transition, and I remain surprised at the number of churches I visit that continue to *speak* the Psalms, a practice that is about as inspiring as a spoken recitation of “A Mighty Fortress.” Form and function are inseparable, and *singing* the Psalms is not only the church’s age-old inheritance but the rubric delivered by the Scriptures themselves. Their character as the *hymnbook* of the Bible is all the more emphasized by a remarkable feature of a great Greek Bible produced in the fifth century (Codex Alexandrinus) and some later manuscripts: at the conclusion of the 150th Psalm, they append a collection of canticles drawn from other parts of the Old Testament and its deuterocanonical insertions (such as the Song of the Three Young Men), and the canticles of Luke 1 and 2 (Benedictus, Magnificat, Nunc Dimittis). They confess that the Bible is not just a sourcebook of doctrine but a service book for the liturgy. While Calvin’s dry branch of the Reformation tree stunted its musical growth by restricting congregational hymnody to metrical Psalms, our Lutheran forefathers drew out the fundamentally Christian meaning of the Psalms by writing hymns on their basis that proclaimed Jesus Christ

(e.g., Luther’s paraphrases of Psalms 46 and 130). The historic church expresses the same conviction that these Old Testament hymns belong to the church of Jesus Christ by appending the doxological *Gloria Patri*. We confess that the same God to whom David sang is indeed the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.<sup>7</sup>

#### IV. The Psalms as Prayer

The Psalms are so obviously doxological that it may be counterintuitive to think of them as prayer. Not only are many Psalms extended expressions of praise, but the division of the Psalter into five books is marked by an explicit doxology.<sup>8</sup> The second book, for example, ends with this:

18 Blessèd be the LORD, the God of | Israel,\*  
 who alone does | wondrous things.  
 19 Blessèd be his glorious name for- | ever;\*  
 may the whole earth be filled with his glory! Amen and | Amen! (Ps  
 72:18–19)

And yet, to our surprise, this doxology is followed by the observation: “The *prayers* [*tephilloth*] of David, the son of Jesse, are ended” (Ps 78:20, emphasis added). Now perhaps the Hebrew word translated as “prayers” has a broader meaning, and this verse could simply mean “the *Psalms* of David are ended.”<sup>9</sup> But just as song and prayer are not mutually exclusive categories—a prayer can be sung and a song can be prayed—so also can words of praise be prayed. For prayer ought not be reduced to the act of supplication, as if it were merely an expression of what we hope to get from God, a sort of liturgical shopping list. The old acronym used in confirmation classes (ACTS) remains instructive: God-pleasing prayer ought to include Adoration, Confession (of faith and sins), Thanksgiving (with its concomitant praise), and Supplication. While one might admit that prayer is formally identifiable by its use of second person pronouns and verbs (you/thou), in distinction from praise language that proclaims what God has done in the third person (he/him), the distinction collapses when we speak back to God all the words he has given us in the Psalms. As Bonhoeffer puts it: “Even those psalms that do not address God a single

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<sup>7</sup> Hummel, *The Word Becoming Flesh*, 426: “The Gloria Patri is a symbolic way of stressing that the psalms (like the rest of the Old Testament) are not Christianized by ‘reading into’ them some alien meaning, by doing violence to their literary and historical integrity, but by ‘extending’ their literal sense, ‘reading out’ of them together with the New Testament their fulfilled and antitypical meaning in Christ and the Holy Spirit.”

<sup>8</sup> Psalm 41:13; 72:18–19; 89:52; 106:48; 150.

<sup>9</sup> The Septuagint translates ᾠδὴν as οἱ ὕμνοι, “the hymns,” either indicating a broader meaning for the word or perhaps evidencing the very confusion of form and function we are addressing.



time (e.g., 1, 2, 78) may be called prayers, for they serve to submerge us in God's purpose and will."<sup>10</sup> By taking up God's own word and praying it back to him, we find our voices strengthened and elevated—not that our own feeble thoughts are ever unworthy of God's attention, but that in our weakness we often struggle to find the words to pray. Even the simple prayers we were rightly taught in our childhood or the pious prayers of our devotional booklets can soon wear thin under the strain of repeated use. Our prayer life can become narrow and weak. So Luther can comment that those who begin to pray the Psalter earnestly will soon give up on light and personal "little devotional prayers and say: Ah, there is not the juice, the strength, the passion, the fire which I find in the Psalter. Anything else tastes too cold and too hard."<sup>11</sup>

### V. Types of Psalms

If "song," "praise," and "prayer" are not mutually exclusive categories, what of the other ways in which the Psalms have been divided into "types"? As we have noted, the Psalms themselves mark different types in their superscriptions, using a variety of technical terms whose difference is not always completely clear, but which may suggest an appropriate use (e.g., praise or lament). The superscriptions also attach personal names to many of the Psalms, seventy-three of which are written by or dedicated to David, twelve associated with Asaph, eleven with the sons of Korah, and so on. This helps to anchor them to a specific historical situation or purpose, and to suggest how they might fit our lives. Indeed, for most of her history the Christian church saw the Psalms chiefly as personal expressions of the faith and life of their historical authors, fit for our use precisely when and because we share their experiences. Liberal scholars in the nineteenth century, skeptical of the value of these historical notes in the superscriptions, thought they could discern behind the text of the Psalms the original circumstances of their use in public ceremonies of Israel's worship life. Hermann Gunkel, the ringleader of form criticism, proposed five genres: hymns, individual laments, individual thanksgivings, communal laments, and royal (enthronement) Psalms.<sup>12</sup> There is much absurdity in Gunkel's "phantastic" suggestions—why invent religious ceremonies for early Israel when the Old Testament itself provides plenty to choose from? His offhand rejection of their

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<sup>10</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Prayerbook of the Bible*, 160.

<sup>11</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Prayerbook of the Bible*, 161, citing Martin Luther, *Foreword to the Neuburg Edition of the Psalms* (1545), in Martin Luther, *D. Luthers Werke: Deutsche Bibel*, vol. 10/2 (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1906–1961), p. 157, hereafter cited as WA DB.

<sup>12</sup> See Hummel, *The Word Becoming Flesh*, 421–425.

historical roots in the lives of the Old Testament saints is pure whimsy. But his school reminded readers of the Psalter that these poems arose not only in the lives of individuals, but that many at least were composed for the public worship life of God's people.

Dividing the Psalms into categories can be helpful to our prayer life in both its personal and public spheres. Long before Gunkel, the ancient Jews grouped the Psalms according to their liturgical use, particularly those in the final third: Psalms 113–118, the “ordinary Hallel [praise] Psalms,” were associated with Passover and the other major festivals; Psalms 119–136 were known as the “Great Hallel” and were sung at the daily temple services. Luther once divided the Psalms into five types: prophecy (of Christ, the church, and the saints), instruction (in the word of God and the Christian life), comfort (in times of trouble and sorrow), prayer (in distress and mourning), and thanksgiving (praising God for his works).<sup>13</sup> Bonhoeffer broke them down logically into the major *loci* of Christian teaching: creation, law, the history of salvation, the Messiah, the church, life, suffering, guilt, enemies, and the end.<sup>14</sup> While the Psalms usually fit into more than one category, such divisions can function as a kind of index to help us find the words to pray in specific circumstances. On the other hand, we must take care not to limit our use of the Psalms to those we think will help us. As with the lectionary in the divine service and daily prayer, there is great value in allowing a wisely prepared cycle to deliver the Psalms to us, morning and evening, season by season, or even just in continuous reading. By praying the Psalms according to such a plan, we open ourselves up to the full counsel of God and pray words that we might not have otherwise chosen. In this way, our prayer is formed by the Psalms and not simply by the poverty of our heart.

### VII. Praying the Psalms from the Heart

It is our hearts, nonetheless, that pray. The Psalms do not take the words away from our hearts—as if praying from the heart and praying from a book were opposites—but help us to express the faith and feelings of our hearts. In 150 chapters, we find a collection that is both broad and manageable, ranging across the full spectrum of human experience and divine teaching while remaining brief enough to become familiar. There is also a trajectory in the collection. They are roughly chronological, the first two books mainly bearing David's name and the rest mainly deriving from later poets active in the temple over hundreds of years. There

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<sup>13</sup> Martin Luther, *Reading the Psalms with Luther* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007).

<sup>14</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Prayerbook of the Bible*, 160.

is also a thematic movement from lamentation to praise, from despair to faith, from confession to adoration. The Christian who prays them sequentially will find himself at first thinking, “This is what I’m feeling,” and then will be slowly lifted up to believe, “This is what my gracious heavenly Father feels toward me.” The final third of the Psalter is dominated by praise, as the pray-er learns to proclaim not what he has done but what God has done. And the Psalter ends with five alleluia Psalms in a row, “Praise the LORD,” the final Psalm multiplying the praise in every line, a doxology of doxologies.

Luther compares the Psalms to the popular lives of the saints that were read in the daily office in the Middle Ages. Not only do those legends lack historical credibility, but they paint the saints in such colors that we cannot recognize ourselves in them. The Psalter, on the other hand, gives us examples of real Christian lives and thoughts, and with a great nobility of faith and words:

It presents to us not the simple, ordinary speech of the saints, but the best of their language, that which they used when they talked with God himself in great earnestness and on the most important matters. Thus the Psalter lays before us not only their words instead of their deeds, but their very hearts and the inmost treasure of their souls, so we can look down to the foundation and source of their words and deeds. We can look into their hearts and see what kind of thoughts they had, how their hearts were disposed, and how they acted in all kinds of situations, in danger and in need.<sup>15</sup>

By connecting us to our fathers in the faith, the Psalms keep us within the communion of saints and protect us from falling into the way of the sects, Luther adds. They not only teach us, “Know thyself,”<sup>16</sup> but they teach us to know the heart of Christendom, God, and all his creatures.

The Psalter gives us prayers for every aspect of life, and thereby teaches us that it is okay for us to pray for all such things. And so we find prayers for life, protection from evildoers, daily bread, and earthly blessing (e.g., Ps 37; 65; 103)—topics we often fear to raise out of a sense that they are not spiritual enough. But these Psalms teach us that these, too, are gifts of God.<sup>17</sup> On this note, we must be cautious not to let the selection of Psalms provided in our hymnals restrict our use. While the *LSB* Liturgy Committee (on which I served) desired that all 150 Psalms find place in the pew edition, space considerations ultimately prevailed. What is found in the

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<sup>15</sup> Luther, *Preface to Psalter* (1528), AE 35:255.

<sup>16</sup> Luther, *Preface to Psalter* (1528), AE 35:257. The editor explains: “‘Know thyself,’ a well-known maxim from Greek philosophy, was the inscription on the temple of Apollo in ancient Delphi.”

<sup>17</sup> See Bonhoeffer, *Prayerbook of the Bible*, 168.

pew edition is only those Psalms required by the lectionaries for use in the divine service (plus a few others). Hence, it stands to reason that many Psalms most suited for *personal* prayer might be omitted—and it must also be admitted that lectionary committees have tended to omit the Psalms that are most uncomfortable or difficult.

Among them are the “Psalms of lament.” In the first two books of the Psalms, at least, the Psalms of lament significantly outnumber the Psalms of thanksgiving. There are perhaps forty in all, forming the very “backbone of the Psalter.”<sup>18</sup> On the one hand, we might think this reflects our natural—and the characteristically Israelite—tendency to grumble. We lament more than we give thanks. And we must acknowledge a certain sinfulness in this imbalance of our souls. But the Holy Spirit has taken up this human condition into his Psalter to give it a God-pleasing expression. So these Psalms, on the other hand, teach us that we are permitted to complain to God about our life and our various sufferings:

serious illness, deep isolation from God and humanity, threats, persecution, imprisonment, and whatever conceivable peril there is on earth . . . . They do not deny it, they do not deceive themselves with pious words about it, they allow it to stand as a severe ordeal of faith, indeed at times they no longer see beyond the suffering (Ps. 88), but they complain about it all to God.<sup>19</sup>

As these Psalms allow us to lift up these laments to God, they let us unburden ourselves. Psychologically considered, they can divert us from dumping this pain on our loved ones, and thus they can strengthen and heal our relationships. But more important is the matter of faith. Far from evidencing a lack of faith—as if groaning to God meant that we had lost hope in his goodness—the Psalms of lament teach us to whom we can turn for help. They are a profound expression of faith—a weak faith perhaps, which does not know where suffering will lead, but a faith that knows who loves us. And so each Psalm of lament teaches us ultimately to crown our complaint with submission. Note how this Psalm that begins with complaint ends with faith:

1 How long, O LORD? Will you forget me for- | ever?\*

How long will you hide your | face from me?

2 How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my  
heart | all the day?\*

How long shall my enemy be exalted | over me? . . .

5 But I have trusted in your | steadfast love;\*

my heart shall rejoice in your sal- | vation.

6 I will sing | to the LORD,\*

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<sup>18</sup> Hummel, *The Word Becoming Flesh*, 428.

<sup>19</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Prayerbook of the Bible*, 169.

because he has dealt bountifully | with me. (Ps 13:1–2, 5–6)

The seven psalms that we know as “penitential” (6; 32; 38; 51; 102; 130; 143) stand at the heart of the Psalms of lament. They teach us that the chief form of lamentation is sorrow over one’s own sin, the ultimate recognition that suffering arises from our misdeeds and not from God’s supposed callous disregard. Here we find the most intimate point of connection with the personal lives and faith of the psalmists. We may sympathize with David’s anger and fear over Saul’s persecution, or his appeal to the Lord for protection in battle, but these circumstances are literally foreign to us. But when David lusts over his neighbor’s wife and commits adultery with her, we can so much more easily see ourselves in the story. And so his words of repentance and faith inked with tears in Psalm 51, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me” (Ps 51:10), become our own prayer. As Lutherans, this is where we feel at home. It is the penitential Psalms that gave Luther his Reformation insight, that the “righteousness of God” by which we are justified is not our righteousness under the law but God’s just decree that we are forgiven because of Christ’s merits. And here Luther is simply following Paul, who quotes Psalm 32 in Romans 4:

1 Blessèd is the one whose transgression is for- | given,\*  
whose sin is | covered.

2 Blessèd is the man against whom the LORD counts no in- | iquity.\*  
(Ps 32:1–2)

This is the true unburdening the Psalms offer—not merely to cast our burdens on God but to know that he is willing and able to keep them. And so these can be the easiest and most refreshing Psalms to pray.

By contrast, the “imprecatory Psalms,” which cry out for God’s vengeance on our enemies, can be a great challenge to Christians. Is their language of hatred and violence a relic of a primitive Jewish religion that has been superseded by Christian mercy and love? Some have thought so; and these Psalms are conspicuously absent from lectionary use. But these, too, are written for our instruction, and three brief thoughts may help us overcome our inhibitions about praying them from our hearts. First, the imprecatory Psalms are really just the most extreme examples of Psalms of lament. They arise in response not only to personal suffering but to the suffering of God’s people on a grand scale. Their moral indignation stems from a heart that takes justice and God’s law seriously and cannot abide the persecution of the innocent. Despite the horrific nature of the

language, it would be far worse to remain silent in the face of such things.<sup>20</sup> Second, these the psalmist's harshest words are saved for those who oppose not him but his God. It is not that he believes God should take *his* side, but rather that he is taking *God's* side; *God's* enemies are *his* enemies, rather than the reverse:

21 Do I not hate those who hate you, | O LORD?\*

And do I not loathe those who rise up a- | gainst you?

22 I hate them with complete | hatred;\*

I count them my | enemies. (Ps 139:21–22)

Thus, the imprecatory Psalms commit vengeance into *God's* hands and restrain us from trying to carry it out ourselves. They let our anger burn in God's asbestos hands until its fuel is exhausted. Third, God reserves for himself in his wisdom how and when he will answer these prayers. Sometimes he wrought revenge on Israel's enemies, and sometimes he showed mercy. Justice will be served on the last day. But meanwhile, God surprises the psalmist by diverting his vengeance onto the one who was truly an innocent sufferer: he pours out his wrath on Jesus, forsakes him and kills him instead of taking vengeance on those who truly deserve it (Ps 22).

A similar stumbling block confronts the Christian who prays with the psalmist words like these:

19 He brought me out into a | broad place;\*

he rescued me, because he delight- | ed in me.

20 The LORD dealt with me according to my | righteousness;\*

according to the cleanness of my hands he re- | warded me.

21 For I have kept the ways | of the LORD,\*

and have not wickedly departed | from my God.

22 For all his just decrees were be- | fore me,\*

and his statutes I did not put a- | way from me.

23 I was blameless be- | fore him,\*

and I kept myself | from my guilt.

24 So the LORD has rewarded me according to my | righteousness,\*

according to the cleanness of my hands | in his sight. (Ps 18:19–24)

Is David playing the Pharisee, guilty of self-righteousness and pride? Unwilling to attribute these sins to him, we kick our Lutheran instincts into high gear and gloss “righteous” as “forgiven” and run this text in the way of the gospel: David is not claiming that he has kept God's law perfectly, but only that the Lord has imputed innocence to him by grace. But accelerating too quickly into the fast lane blurs the Psalm's true scenery. Instead of praying from the heart, we do dogmatics. What does

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<sup>20</sup> Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 20–33, develops this thought.

David actually mean? First, it is important that we distinguish between “righteousness” and “being in the right.” Confusing the two can be fatal.<sup>21</sup> In Psalms like this, David is not saying that he has never broken God’s law, but rather that he has remained within the covenant. He has not set aside God’s laws in order to chase after other gods. Therefore he can rightly (not “self-righteously”) lay claim to God’s promises to rescue his people. Furthermore, when David suffers at the hands of Israel’s enemies—who are by definition God’s enemies—he can likewise claim that this is “not right”; it is a violation of God’s order. How helpful it is for us to know that we can pray this way. We can make a claim before God on the basis of his covenant promises. And so these Psalms again call us back to God’s word. Second, when David claims innocence, he is not saying that he is without sin, but rather that he is not suffering *because* of his sin. It is vital to recognize this in an age when pious Christians burden people with the notion that true Christian obedience will ward off all suffering. On the contrary, David notes, he suffers for *God’s* sake. He is persecuted because he belongs to the true God (cf. Ps 139, above).<sup>22</sup> It is not his but God’s cause that is just. Israel is a theocracy; any attack on its earthly king is an attack on God. Third, we should take note how often such claims to innocence are accompanied by the confession of sins and an appeal for forgiveness. The same Psalm that cries out, “you have upheld me because of my integrity” (Ps 41:12) can include the plea, “O LORD, be gracious to me; heal me, for I have sinned against you!” (Ps 41:4)—which reminds us that the instinctive Lutheran reading is not entirely wrong!

### VIII. Praying the Psalms with Jesus

Nonetheless, it is the very outrageousness of David’s claims that can make our voices stammer to a halt with a true sense of unworthiness or even falsehood. Can we truly pray, “judge me, O LORD, according to *my* righteousness and according to the integrity that is in *me*” (Ps 7:8, emphasis added; cf. 18:20f.; 26:1)? Stumbling at this hurdle, Bonhoeffer avers, is the moment when we glimpse the Psalter’s true secret:

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<sup>21</sup> Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 16.

<sup>22</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Prayerbook of the Bible*, 173: “It is a thoroughly unbiblical and destructive idea that we can never suffer innocently as long as some kind of fault still remains in us. . . . If we are persecuted for the sake of God’s cause, then we suffer innocently, and that means we suffer with God. That we really are with God and, therefore, really innocent is demonstrated precisely in this, that we pray for the forgiveness of our sins. But we are innocent not only in relation to the enemies of God, but also before God, for we are now seen united with God’s cause, into which it is precisely God who has drawn us, and God forgives us our sins.”

The psalms that will not cross our lips as prayers, those that make us falter and offend us, make us suspect someone else is praying, not we—that the one who is here affirming his innocence, who is calling for God’s judgment, who has come to such infinite depths of suffering, is none other than Jesus Christ himself. It is he who is praying here, and not only here, but in the whole Psalter.<sup>23</sup>

When *Jesus* prays the Psalms, then the claim to innocence needs no qualification. He truly suffers without cause. He has truly kept the Lord’s covenant with all its precepts perfectly. By praying these words, we submerge ourselves in *Jesus*’ righteousness. In the Gospels, Jesus indeed claims the Psalter as his own. Its words are on his lips more than any other book of the Old Testament. All its outrageous claims find their meaning in him—even the royal psalmist’s claim to be the very son of God (Ps 2; cf. Ps 82:6; John 10:34–36).

How can it be that the Psalms of David are the Psalms of Christ? The answer, of course, is that Jesus is the Son of David; or rather, because David is the “type” of Jesus. This is why it is so important that the Psalms are preeminently known as David’s. Though he may have begun to write them in his youthful serenading of Saul, none appear in the canon until after his anointing as king—the anointing that placed him into the office of messianic pattern. David, as a prophet inspired by the Holy Spirit, knew that his words had a deeper meaning, that they pointed to the Son who would occupy his throne forever—so Peter quite remarkably claims when he applies Psalm 16 to Jesus’ resurrection (Acts 2:30–31). Thus, also are David’s dying words introduced:

The oracle of David, the son of Jesse, the oracle of the man who was raised on high, the anointed of the God of Jacob, the sweet psalmist of Israel: “The Spirit of the LORD speaks by me; his word is on my tongue.” (2 Sam 23:1–2)

Nowhere is this deeper meaning more certain than in Psalm 22, which Jesus takes up as *his* dying words from the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Ps 22:1). By quoting the opening line, Jesus claims the whole Psalm, its whole prophecy, as his own. And so the writer to the Hebrews, citing the very same Psalm, can claim that whenever David’s Psalms were sung in the temple, Christ himself was speaking through him, present in person to lead the worship of the congregation of Israel: “I [David/Christ] will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise” (Heb 2:12 quoting Ps 22:22; cf. Heb 10:5). After his resurrection, Jesus would tell his disciples that the whole Old Testament prophesied his passion, “that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and

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<sup>23</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 54.



the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled” (Luke 24:44). But Hebrews is making an even greater claim: that even those Psalms that do not seem to be explicit prophecies of Christ are nevertheless his own words, that he speaks and prays them all.

So if David’s prayers are really *Jesus’* prayers, does that perhaps make them even more remote from you and me? The answer, of course, is the opposite, and is hinted at in those very words of Hebrews 2:12: “*my brothers.*” Jesus claims us as his brothers, as his very own flesh. It is because we are one flesh with him that the Psalms are also ours. Through our Baptism into Christ, we are one with him, joint heirs of eternal life with him, and through him able to call upon God as *our* Father (Rom 8:15–17). Jesus is therefore the bridge between David’s praying and our praying. The Psalms can be our prayers precisely because they are Jesus’ prayers; they could never be truly ours if they were merely David’s. And they are our prayers because Jesus knows us and our hearts better than anyone else.<sup>24</sup> Jesus gives us the Psalms to pray with him just as he gave the disciples the Our Father to pray with him. The Father hears us because he hears Jesus. In the new temple of his body, the dividing wall of hostility (the law) is broken down so that “through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father” (Eph 2:18). This is a *liturgical* claim that describes how we approach the very throne of God in the divine service. It is made possible only because Jesus is the one mediator (1 Tim 2:5), who shares his divinity with the Father and shares his humanity with us, bridging the gap in his person. Jesus prays because of his human nature; the Father hears him because of his divine nature.

The recognition that in the Psalms it is always Jesus praying, and we through him, transforms the Psalms for us. It gives them strength and objectivity. “If we want to read and to pray the prayers of the Bible, and especially the Psalms, we must not, therefore, first ask what they have to do with us, but what they have to do with Jesus Christ.”<sup>25</sup> Then, because of our union with him through Baptism, we can be confident that what we pray of him, we pray of ourselves. His suffering gives meaning to our suffering; his righteousness becomes our righteousness; his cry

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<sup>24</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Prayerbook of the Bible*, 160: “It is really our prayer. But since the Son of God knows us better than we know ourselves, and was truly human for our sake, it is also really the Son’s prayer. It can become our prayer only because it was his prayer.”

<sup>25</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Prayerbook of the Bible*, 157. He continues: “We must ask how we can understand the Psalms as God’s Word, and only then can we pray them with Jesus Christ. Thus it does not matter whether the Psalms express exactly what we feel in our heart at the moment we pray. Perhaps it is precisely the case that we must pray against our own heart in order to pray rightly. It is not just that for which we ourselves want to pray that is important, but that for which God wants us to pray. If we were dependent on ourselves alone, we would probably often pray only the fourth petition of the Lord’s Prayer. But God wants it otherwise. Not the poverty of our heart, but the richness of God’s word, ought to determine our prayer.”

to God for vengeance and vindication makes our cries for help pure and faithful. This recognition allows us to overcome preoccupation with our own suffering and immerse ourselves in contemplation of his, to receive its blessings, to abandon concerns about our own puny righteousness and rejoice to be given his exceeding holiness. Because we know that the Father hears him, we know that he hears us.<sup>26</sup>

### IX. Praying the Psalms with the Church

Jesus serves as the link in one final relationship as well, for through him we are not only connected back to David and up to the Father, but also across to our brothers within the worshipping congregation. Because we are each baptized into him, we have a share in one another. So if we stumble over Psalms that speak of a suffering, a righteousness, a lament, a thanksgiving that we cannot immediately identify as our own, we may find we are praying on behalf of our brothers with Christ's body, the church. Thus when we pray the Psalms, we pray for and with one another. For this reason, the Psalms have found a central place in the church's liturgical life. This is, of course, true to their origin. Just as there is a movement in the Psalter from lamentation to praise (noted above), so also there is a movement from individual to corporate, from personal prayer to public. The Psalms kick us out of our chairs and drive us to church. Too often, we miss the original liturgical setting of the Psalms that is so clearly described in their superscriptions:

A Song of Ascents.

1 I lift up my eyes | to the hills.\*

From where does my | help come?

2 My help comes | from the LORD,\*

who made | heaven and earth. (Ps 121:1-2)

Psalms 121 has been a favorite text to offer bedside comfort to the sick and dying in my pastoral ministry. But I must admit that I have misinterpreted the opening lines for many years, as if they were presenting a *contrast*: looking to the hills for help is vain (like waiting for the cavalry to come); true help comes only from God. But reading the superscription changes the meaning: "A Song

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<sup>26</sup> Hummel, *The Word Becoming Flesh*, 431: "The Christian church confesses that Christ is the only one who can or who has plumbed the depths of the primal suffering of which these psalms ultimately speak, but whose experience of it was also undeserved and hence of vicarious and redemptive significance for those who join themselves to Him. Only He can fully pray these psalms in all their fullness, and only in covenant with Him can the faithful, Old Testament as well as New, pray them validly. Even more profoundly, we insist that via Baptism it is Christ, the last Adam, the 'new Israel,' who prays these psalms in us and for us before the throne of the Father. And because of His victory, we know that we do not pray them in vain."

of Ascents.” The Psalm was written to be sung by pilgrims climbing up to the temple at Jerusalem (or perhaps for choirs ascending the steps of the temple). Thus, “the hills” is indeed the place from which help comes, precisely because it is the place where the Lord is to be found.

The Psalms written for use in the temple point us to God’s presence among us with his grace and good gifts. They call upon us to enter in with praise and thanksgiving (Ps 100:4). The church has taken up this call by incorporating the Psalms inextricably into all her public worship. Just as the Levitical choirs sang them while the sacrifices were offered at the temple, just as faithful Jews sang them every Sabbath in the synagogue, so we have made them a part of our daily and weekly lectionaries. The Psalms give us the words to pray at key moments in the divine service: entering into his courts with praise at the Introit, thanking him for his word at the Gradual, and receiving his sacramental gifts with thanks in the Offertory. But it is in the daily office that they have truly flourished. It does not by any means go too far to say that they form its backbone; their singing and praying are the morning and evening sacrifice (cf. Ps 141:2). Early monastic orders strove to sing the Psalms continuously, the most rigorous attempting to pray all 150 each day. Benedict, in creating his reformed order in the fifth century, softened the discipline for his “slothful” monks by distributing them across an entire week. Thomas Cranmer’s *Book of Common Prayer* succumbed to human weakness by spreading them across a month. The *Lutheran Worship* daily lectionary proposed singing roughly one a day to get twice through the Psalter in a year, a pattern maintained in our seminary chapel in St. Catharines. *Lutheran Service Book* provides a plan for three select psalms a day. But I fear the rubric in Matins or Vespers that “one or more psalms are sung or spoken”<sup>27</sup> is more often breached than observed.

The restoration of psalmody to the center of daily public prayer will not, nevertheless, be attained through exhortation but through the self-testimony of the Psalms, as those who learn to pray them are moved by the Spirit to embrace them as their own. C. S. Lewis has a delightful commentary on what the Psalms mean when they “demand” God’s praise. Certainly, it entails obligation. But there is a nobler movement of the heart involved: “The Psalmists in telling everyone to praise God are doing what all men do when they speak of what they care about. . . . I think we delight to praise because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation.”<sup>28</sup> The praise of God is right because it is appropriate to him; it is fitting. And it is appropriate to us as his children and

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<sup>27</sup> *Lutheran Service Book*, 230 (emphasis added).

<sup>28</sup> Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 95.

heirs. The Psalms contain and express the twofold rhythm of worship with which we began: he promises his aid, and we delight to call upon him in every trouble. He gives himself to us, and we embrace his gifts with thanks and praise. So Luther, in introducing the Psalms, invoked God's blessing on our praying them:

Our dear Lord, who has given to us and taught us to pray the Psalter and the Lord's Prayer, grant to us also the spirit of prayer and of grace so that we pray with enthusiasm and earnest faith, properly and without ceasing, for we need to do this; he has asked for it and therefore wants to have it from us. To him be praise, honour, and thanksgiving. Amen.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Luther, *Foreword to the Neuburg Edition of the Psalms* (1545), WA DB 10.2:157; quoted in Bonhoeffer, *Prayerbook of the Bible*, 177.