

Pleading, Cursing, Praising



# Pleading, Cursing, Praising

Conversing with God through the Psalms

*Irene Nowell, OSB*



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*For Daniel Durken, OSB,  
who first encouraged me  
to write about the Psalms.*



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## Preface

I have lived with the Psalms most of my life. My monastic community prays them daily, and throughout the course of four weeks we pray the entire Psalter. My educational journey has also taken me to the Psalms. My undergraduate degree is in music, but after college I took a detour to study languages, particularly German. Finally I found my true love: Scripture. That somewhat disorganized journey led me inevitably to the Psalms. Where else can you find a subject that includes singing, language, and Bible?

My aim in writing this book is to encourage you not only to use the Psalms as your prayerbook but also to use them as models for additional personal prayer. I am convinced that the Psalms teach us to pray. I suggest that, as you read this book, you keep a Psalm book handy to ponder other psalms that teach us to tell our story, cry out our pain, and give praise to God. (At the end of the book is a table listing laments, thanksgiving psalms, hymns, etc.) In addition, I encourage you to write your own psalm-prayers. I have added exercises to the end of several chapters as an aid for this endeavor.

As you read this book, you will see signs of its long gestation. It originated with a few talks given to the chapter of the Federation of St. Scholastica. The talks then grew into a retreat that I enjoyed sharing with many communities across the country. Along the way some of the material also appeared in print. Now I am responding gratefully to the suggestion

of Father Daniel Durken, OSB, to turn the spoken word into the book that you have in your hands.

It is impossible for me to list all the people to whom I am grateful for having shaped the material in this book. I thank Abbot Gregory Polan, OSB, of Conception Abbey, my lifelong friend, for his excellent translation of the Psalms in the *Revised Grail Psalter*. He is a worthy follower of his insightful patron, Gregory the Great. I thank Michael Boschert at GIA for permission to quote Abbot Gregory's translation. I am grateful to Father Michael Casey, OCSO, for permission to print material from my article that appeared in *Tjurunga*. To all my friends at Liturgical Press, too many to be named, I say, "Thank you!" Your encouragement has been a great gift to me. Finally, I am deeply grateful to my wonderful community at Mount St. Scholastica. What I know about praying the Psalms I learned from my sisters.

Irene Nowell, OSB

# 1

## **Begin at the Beginning: “If you would be happy” (Ps 1)**

**W**hen I was a sophomore in high school, my English teacher used to quote the psalms to us all the time. She frequently said, “It’s so good to be a Benedictine. The psalms just soak into your bones.” I entered monastic life for a lot of the wrong reasons—or reasons I did not know—but one of the right reasons was because I wanted the psalms to “soak into my bones.” Gradually I came to realize that, even here, Sister Lillian Muell was quoting the psalms. Psalm 1 tells us that if we ponder the law of the Lord day and night, we will be like trees planted by a flowing stream. The Psalter (the book of Psalms) is a distillation of God’s law. So the law of the Lord, the Word of God in the psalms we pray day by day, will soak into our bones, refreshing and nourishing us, giving us life.<sup>1</sup>

What does it mean that the psalms will soak into our bones? What kind of people will we become if we pray the psalms regularly, daily? Demetrius Dumm uses the image of a Crock-Pot, which tenderizes even the toughest cuts of meat.

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He observes that “many a tough-willed monastic has been made docile and gentle before God by faithful praying of the psalms.”<sup>2</sup> Allan Bouley, OSB, suggests another image: The psalms are like a marinade that both tenderizes and adds flavor to our lives. Perhaps you have another image. Regardless, it is the questions that are significant: What kind of people will we become if we pray the psalms? What do the psalms teach us about how to live well? What is the effect on us of praying and pondering them regularly? Several years ago Pope John Paul II said in one of his Wednesday audiences, “the Book of Psalms remains the ideal source of Christian prayer, and will continue to inspire the Church in the new millennium.”<sup>3</sup> The psalms are a gift for all of us, whether we are professed religious or faithful laypeople.

The introduction to any book tells us many things: the purpose of the author, the author’s style, the basic content, and, perhaps, the organization of the book. So what is the introduction to the Psalter? Let us use our skills in *lectio divina* (slow, thoughtful reading) to ponder Psalm 1. What can this introductory psalm tell us about why we pray the Psalms and what their effect on us will be?

We begin with happiness. The first word of the Psalter is “happy,” in Hebrew, *’ashre*. From its first word this little book of 150 song-prayers promises to tell us how to be happy—truly, deeply happy. But the psalm does not begin with a recipe for happiness. Rather it begins by telling us what to avoid: “never walk with the wicked, / never stand with sinners, / never sit among cynics.”<sup>4</sup> This psalm shows us that happiness is clearly a communal virtue! If we associate with the wicked, sinners, and cynics, we will become like them. The first verse of the Psalter implies that these people are not happy!

Who are these people we are advised to avoid? The first two terms—wicked and sinners—are generic. But the third term—in Hebrew, *letsim*, meaning “cynics” or “scoffers”—is

more specific. The people we are warned to avoid if we want to be happy are not named as murderers or adulterers, embezzlers or muggers. They are the naysayers among us. These are people like Job's friends who scorn him and attempt to convince him that he is a sinner (see Job 16:20). According to Proverbs, they are proud and haughty and act with arrogance (Prov 21:24). These people have closed all the doors and are unable to be open to anything new that God might have to offer. Do you know any of these people? Have you ever met someone who always knows better than those in authority? Or who is wiser than the wisdom of the whole group and lies in wait for a community or family decision to fail? Saint Benedict calls these people "murmurers" or "grumblers," and he is insistent that this danger be rooted out; "Above all else we admonish them to refrain from grumbling" (RB 40.9).<sup>5</sup>

The progression of verbs in these first verses of Psalm 1 is also significant: walk, stand, sit. Psalm 1, the introduction to the Psalter, warns us that if we would be happy we should avoid getting drawn into a murmuring session: first strolling along, then standing in doorways or on street corners, and finally sitting down with a cup of coffee, grousing away. If you would be happy, don't do this!

So what *should* we do? Psalm 1 goes on to tell us that a person who is happy is one "whose delight is the law [Hebrew, *torah*] of the LORD, and who ponders his law day and night" (Ps 1:2).<sup>6</sup> Where and how does God teach us? When we think of *torah*, we think first of the Bible and especially the first five books, the Pentateuch. Scripture is God's word to us, God's teaching. It is the way God speaks to us day after day. Second, Psalm 1 may be referring in a special way to the Psalter itself as God's *torah*. Some ancient editor divided the Psalter into five books in imitation of the Pentateuch. Look at the final verses of Psalms 41, 72, 89, and 106. Each one ends by saying, "Blest be the LORD," and, "Amen." Psalm 106 adds, "Alleluia!" These closings are similar to the practice of adding

the doxology, “Glory to the Father,” to the end of a psalm. They indicate that a section is finished. This ancient editor wanted to tell us that the Psalter was a mini-Pentateuch, God’s law in a pocket version, so we can delight in and ponder it night and day.

Finally, God’s *torah* is written for us in the people with whom we live and work and in all the wonders of creation and culture. We find God’s *torah* in a beautiful sunset, in a Mozart symphony, in a child’s first word. In his Letter to the Philippians, St. Paul gives us this advice: “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (Phil 4:8).<sup>7</sup> God’s teaching comes to us in all these ways. If God’s teaching fills our thoughts and delights our hearts, then we will be truly happy.

Delighting in our hearts, however, is not enough. Verse 2 of Psalm 1 tells us not only to delight but also to “ponder,” “meditate,” and “study” God’s *torah*. The Hebrew word, *yehgeh*, literally means to “mutter” or to “growl.” The idea is related to the tradition of vocal prayer and also to the fact that in the ancient world almost no one read silently. So those praying or meditating “muttered” or “murmured.” You may have seen Jews at the Western Wall or Muslims in a mosque murmuring their prayers. You may also have heard someone whispering the rosary as she prayed. Bruno Barnhart, OSB-Cam, recommends this “murmuring” for anyone practicing *lectio divina*: Memorize a verse and carry it around like the desert monks; murmur it so you have a “muscular memory” of it.<sup>8</sup> Paradoxically, Psalm 1 tells us to avoid murmurers and that murmuring will make us happy—but only if what we are murmuring is God’s *torah*, God’s word to us.

To summarize, the first two verses of the Psalter promise us that, if we want to be happy, we must avoid the wicked and cynical murmurers and rejoice in God’s teaching, murmuring the Word night and day (see Ps 1:1-2).

What else happens to us as we pray the psalms? We began with happiness. What other insights are here for us? First of all, praying the psalms will lead us to become people who listen. This is the first injunction of Saint Benedict to his followers: "Listen with the ear of your heart" (RB Prol 1). It is also the beginning of the Jewish daily prayer, the *Shema*: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deut 6:4-5). The psalms demand of us careful attention. The listening they require must be constant and tuned to many voices: the voice of God, the voice of Christ, and the voices of all humankind. Saint Benedict also names the daily communal praying of the psalms the *Opus Dei*, "Work of God." The listening demanded by the psalms is, indeed, hard work!

The first voice that we hear in the psalms is the voice of God. The psalms that we pray day after day are a part of Scripture—that privileged text that we honor as the Word of God. So we come to them daily with the same question: What is it that God wants to say to me today through these words? We have a right and a duty to expect to hear the voice of God in the psalms—every day. Every day that word will be different: sometimes challenging and sometimes comforting, sometimes the still, small sound of silence and sometimes the roar of the devouring fire. Every day as we listen to the words of the psalms we listen to the voice of God.

I suspect, however, that most people who pray the psalms do not often reflect on this truth. We can become so focused on our own voices in the psalms, our own prayer, that we forget that the first voice we hear is the voice of God. That inattention can be dangerous. We may miss this all-important word addressed to us. It is guaranteed that today, as we pray the psalms, we will hear the voice of God (see Ps 95:7). What is not guaranteed is that we will be listening!

The second voice that we Christians hear in the psalms, if we are listening, is the voice of Christ. We must not forget

that the psalms are the prayerbook of Jesus. When we pray them, we join our voices to his. The early Christian writers were aware of the presence of Christ in the Psalms. Saint Augustine's massive work, *Expositions on the Psalms*,<sup>9</sup> is a clear example of this, as are works of Saints Ambrose and Jerome and others. In one of his Wednesday audiences in 2001, Pope John Paul II said that these early Christian writers "were able with deep spiritual penetration to discern and identify the great 'key' to understanding the Psalms as Christ himself. . . . Christians were thus able to read the Book of Psalms in the light of the whole mystery of Christ."<sup>10</sup>

Saint Augustine, in particular, emphasizes the presence of Christ in the psalms, not only as head, but also in all the members of his body, especially the poor and suffering. This brings us to the third voice we hear in the psalms: the human voice, the voices of Christ's members. We hear our own voices; we hear the voices of our brothers and sisters who are praying with us. We hear the voices crying out throughout the world. We realize how very human these prayers are.

There are serious implications that flow from listening to and praying with the human voices in the psalms. The first human voice my ears hear as I pray is my own. Do I believe that it is possible for me to speak with the voice of God? If I speak the Word of God in prayer, how careful must I be with my words in other situations? Second, if we are fortunate enough to be praying the psalms in a group, we hear the voices of those who are praying with us. What does this teach me about listening to those voices in other situations? Finally, we hear the voices of all humankind, especially those most in need. What can I do to be more attuned to these other voices: the poor, the refugees, the immigrants, the victimized, the trafficked, the sick, the imprisoned? A useful exercise for *lectio divina* is to take the psalm book in one hand and the daily newspaper in the other. After every few psalm verses, read another headline. The voices that cry out in the daily

news also cry out in the psalm. Every time we pray the psalms we pray in the name of the whole body of Christ, in the name of the whole world. We carry all those people in our prayer; by praying the psalms we take responsibility for the well-being of all of them.

The illuminations in the book of Psalms of *The Saint John's Bible* are a dramatic reminder of our oneness with all people as we pray the psalms.<sup>11</sup> Running horizontally across the page are voice prints, oscilloscopes, of the Saint John's monks praying the psalms. This is not a dead letter; it is a living word. But running vertically across the illuminations are other voice prints from other traditions: Jewish, Native American, Greek Orthodox, Buddhist, Taoist, Muslim. The faithful in all these traditions sing praise to God. When we sing the Psalms, we join our voices with theirs.

Susannah Heschel, daughter of the great Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel, said this about her father: "Religion evokes obligation and the certainty that something is asked of us, that there are ends which are in need of us. God, he once wrote, 'is not only a power we depend on; He is a God who demands. God poses a challenge to go beyond ourselves—and it is precisely that going beyond, that awareness of challenge, that constitutes our being. We often forget this, so prayer comes as a reminder that over and above personal problems, there is an objective challenge to overcome inequity, helplessness, suffering, carelessness, and oppression.'"<sup>12</sup> We acknowledge that "objective challenge" as we pray the psalms.

Again, praying the Psalms leads us to become people who listen—who listen to the voice of God, the voice of Christ, our own voice, and the human voices in our community and our world. As the psalms soak into our bones, they will teach us to listen, not only when we are at prayer, but throughout our whole day, throughout our whole lives. The psalms will teach us to listen with the ear of our hearts—every day.

What else happens to us as we pray the psalms? Demetrius Dumm outlines four characteristics of biblical prayer, especially of the psalms.<sup>13</sup> First of all, the psalms are *incarnational*; they are gutsy. Praying the psalms daily will teach us to be aware of the voice of nature—what is in us and what is around us. The psalms keep before us the very real presence of our own bodies. I complain that my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth, my throat is dry, my eyes are dim from weeping, I am so wasted that I can count all my bones (see Ps 22:16-18; 31:10; 69:4; 88:10). But our bodies not only complain; they also praise. For example, Psalm 16 says literally, “I bless the Lord who counsels me; even at night my *kidneys* instruct me. . . . So my heart rejoices; my *liver* dances; even my flesh dwells secure” (Ps 16:7, 9).<sup>14</sup> It is impossible to pray the psalms as a disembodied spirit!

The psalms are incarnational in another way: they sound the voices of all creation. We call the trees and rivers to clap their hands, the sea and its creatures to roar, the field and its animals to exult (Ps 96:11-12; 98:7-8). We are in awe of the storm (Ps 29) and the beauty of sun and stars (Ps 8:4; 19:2-7). We ponder God’s gift of water: “You make springs gush forth in the valleys; / they flow in between the hills. / They give drink to all the beasts of the field; / the wild asses quench their thirst” (Ps 104:10-11). We are grateful for the gifts of bread and wine to nourish us and warm our hearts (Ps 104:14-15). Every living thing looks to God for food and God provides (Ps 104:27-28). We who pray the psalms become the voice of all creation. Daily we take up our responsibility for the earth.

A second characteristic of the psalms is that they are *historical*. A central belief in the Judeo-Christian tradition is that God works within history—within all the mess of human history. Scripture certainly bears witness to that belief. But the psalms teach us that we not only *tell* our history but also *pray* our history. We pray our history in order to remember,

to make present, to bring God's saving deeds of the past into the present so that we might have a future. We pray our past, but this is the *living* word of God, so we also pray ourselves into the future. We will consider this idea in more detail in chapter 2.

A third characteristic of the psalms is that they are *communal*. It is impossible to pray the Psalms alone. You can go in your room and close the door, but by the end of whatever Psalm you pray, we will all be in there with you. If I begin to pray Psalm 130—"Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD"—I may feel very much alone. But even as I cry out, I find myself speaking not only to God but also to the community: "let Israel hope for the LORD" (Ps 130:1, 7). Another example is Psalm 131, which describes a very intimate moment with God. I rest in God "as a weaned child on its mother." But in the very next verse I find myself saying again, "O Israel, wait for the Lord" (Ps 131:2-3). (In Hebrew the first lines of Pss 130:7 and 131:3 are identical.) In the psalms we go to God together. If I have learned nothing else in my years of studying, teaching, translating, interpreting, and praying, I have learned this: The Bible—and thus the Psalter—is a community book. It is the community who prayed these prayers, kept them, fought over them, translated them, set them to music, and illuminated them. The Psalms are a communal prayer!

Finally, the psalms are *eschatological*; they are open to the future. And yet, they are not eschatological in the sense of a belief in life after death. They are too early for that. The concept of resurrection began to emerge only in the mid-second century BCE. But the psalms do have a strong belief in life. There is a constant prayer to be saved from death and a firm faith that God can and will do this for us. There is a strong conviction that God will eventually make things right—punishing the wicked and blessing the righteous. There is an undying trust that God will take care of each of us: "I believe

I shall see the LORD's goodness / in the land of the living," that is, now in this present life (Ps 27:13). The psalms are open to the future, and we who pray them daily will be open to the future too.

In his 1979 commentary on the psalms, *Runways to God*, Paschal Botz states this as his purpose: "to assist men and women of faith and prayer to become 'psalm happy.'" <sup>15</sup> If we would be happy, this is the *torah* we should ponder night and day. The promise of this *torah* is life. We will be like a tree, planted by a flowing stream, whose leaves do not fade (Ps 1:3). Our liturgical prayer bathes us in the psalms daily. They intersect with every experience of our lives. As John Cassian says, "Thus we shall penetrate its meaning not through the written text but with experience leading the way."<sup>16</sup> The psalms soak into our bones and nourish our roots. We murmur them in hopes that we will be happy. We pray them in hopes that gradually, imperceptibly, like the tree planted by a flowing stream, the same thing will happen to us that Donald Senior said of Carroll Stuhlmueller at his funeral: "This is a person of whom it can truly be said, 'The Word of God became flesh in him.'" This Word of God become flesh in us is the whole rhythm, the ultimate goal of our lives. Then, not only will we be able to sing the first word of the Psalter, "happy"; then we will truly sing the last word of the Psalter: "Let everything that breathes praise the LORD. Alleluia!" (Ps 150:6).

*Consider:* What do the psalms mean to you? How have they soaked into your bones?

*Prayer:* Loving God, you who created us with care and breathed into us that we might live, fill us with your Spirit that we may rejoice in your love. This we ask in the name of Jesus, who came that we might have life and have it to the fullest. Amen.