

“The psalms have shaped the core of official Christian prayer for centuries, incorporated into the liturgy of the Word at the Eucharist and forming the content of the Church’s daily morning and evening prayer. In this engaging and informative exploration of these great biblical prayers, James Chatham employs his skill as a scholar and a pastor to invite the lay reader to become part of the ‘conversation’ within the book of the Psalms, allowing the dynamic and sometime turbulent prayers of the psalmist to touch our own hearts.”

—Donald Senior, CP  
President Emeritus and Professor of New Testament  
at Catholic Theological Union

“I read *Psalm Conversations* and felt like I was part of the discussion. The power of Jim’s teachings transformed my faith. I recommend this book to anyone who is searching for understanding.”

—Rosemarie Mucci, PhD  
University Supervisor at Baldwin Wallace University

“For those of us who know and love the Psalms, James Chatham’s book is a gift that offers new perspectives and new avenues for faithful appropriation. For those who don’t know the Psalms, this book is a wonderful introduction! Chatham writes with a scholar’s wisdom and a pastor’s heart (he was a pastor for thirty-seven years), and he succeeds beautifully in showing how the psalmists speak to each other and to us in a way that we contemporary folk desperately need to hear. His exposition is clear; his many vignettes and stories are engaging; and each chapter’s concluding ‘Discussion Topics and Questions’ make this a perfect resource for adult education that aims at helping us realize that we are ‘accompanied always by God’s great heart of love’ (from the Preface).”

—Clint McCann  
Evangelical Professor of Biblical Interpretation  
Eden Theological Seminary  
Saint Louis, Missouri

“This book is simply beautiful. James Chatham manages to weave together explanatory notes on each psalm and its context along with stories from his own years in ministry. What emerges is a beautiful tapestry that is not yet finished. It requires our own connections—connections that begin to emerge in our reading and then more specifically through skillfully spun questions at the close of each chapter. As a teacher often called upon to help adults pray with the psalms and understand their source and meaning, this book will now be in my supply kit. As a Christian who wrestles with the ways God acts in our world, this book will become a companion.”

—Catherine (Cackie) Upchurch  
Little Rock Scripture Study director

# Psalm Conversations

*Listening In as They Talk  
with One Another*

James O. Chatham



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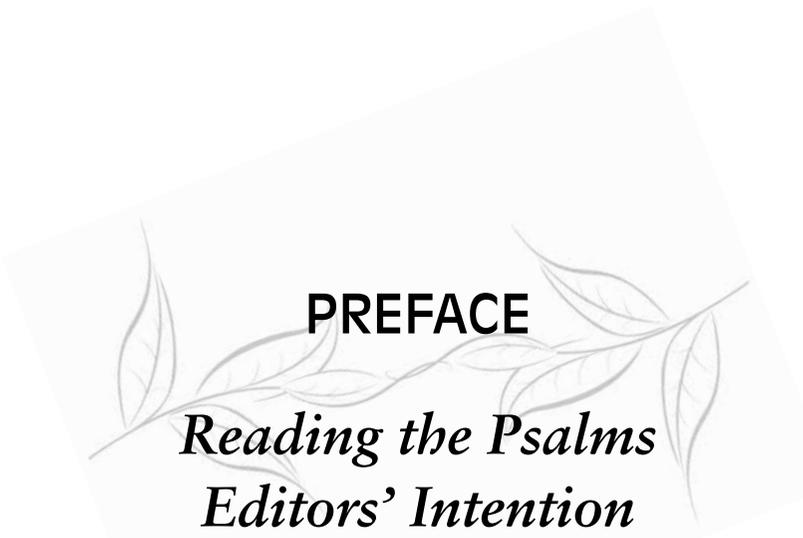
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## PREFACE

### *Reading the Psalms* *Editors' Intention*

If we are upright, honest people, life will reward us; if we are deceitful, dishonest people, life will punish us: Is this true? Should we teach it to our children? Or does the world actually work by some other moral formula? Psalms 1 and 73 struggle over the question. Our country is engaged in precisely the same struggle. The Psalms' insight is remarkable, unexpected, eye-opening.

How shall we relate to people who have wronged us viciously, people we basically despise? Should we banish such negative thoughts from our heads, cleanse ourselves of malevolence, be all-forgiving? Can you imagine pulling that off? Psalms 136, 137, and 138, heard together, speak a telling word.

What collective message do Psalms 8, 19, 24, 65, 90, 104, and 148 issue about the role of awe and wonder in our lives, the sensation of being in the presence of something vastly beyond our comprehension? What does each psalm contribute? And what, indeed, does Psalms as a whole book add? The result is a word often lost on modern ears.

Numerous biblical psalms engage in animated conversations with one another over what to us are everyday life issues. One psalm will state a point, another will question it or speak from a different angle, and another will add an entirely new dimension, all feeding the hearer (you and me) with larger and richer perspectives. The conversations

among psalms are sometimes implicit, challenging us as we knit together a picture. But often they are quite clear, leaving no doubt.

Amid all the negative emotions that can reside in you and me, can we implant a spirit of profound thanksgiving, making us fundamentally grateful people? This is a running psalm conversation.

How are we to face our own sinfulness, the great flaw within the self—individual and communal? Modern society often does this very poorly, urging us to pretense and self-deception. Psalms 51 and 106 join other texts in a chorus of commentary.

What can it do for us to feel *accompanied by the Spirit*, that a Presence travels with us on our path? What are the great hazards in believing this?

How shall I conduct myself when I get exceedingly angry with God, when the cruelties and injustices of life are beyond explanation? Am I supposed to shut up, keep my emotions inside, be accepting and polite? Or is there a better way?

When major catastrophe strikes, a horrible disaster, how are we to handle the despair that easily sets over us?

What about the times when God seems silent, when fervent prayer gets no answer?

These are conversations the psalms carry on with one another. The purpose of this book is for us to listen in on several psalm conversations, to realize how contemporary they are, and to join them. You and I have had plenty of experience with life, and we can make valuable contributions. The ancients invite us into the conversation.

A major role of the Psalms is to show us that we are not alone, that we are accompanied by a great crowd of fellow travelers, past and present, very much like us. The world has changed enormously in the twenty-five hundred years since the book of Psalms was gathered—space exploration, the tech world, genetic research—but we humans have changed very little, still engaging in the same internal plots and scripts as we always have. That's why we encounter ourselves repeatedly in the psalm conversations.

Another major role of the Psalms is to deliberate and discern the ways of God in this world. How is God like or not like what we envision? We humans tend to want God to bestow upon us special

favors from on high: victories in conquest, safety against danger, rain from the sky, food from the soil, babies from the womb, healing from illness, success in our endeavors. We also want God to grant to us and people like us an elevated status, as if we are chosen and set apart for privilege, “exceptional.” The book of Psalms has an enormously larger view of God, *God transcendent* as well as *God immanent*, God far beyond our small human life-orbits as well as God our intimate, personal companion. This two-faceted theology, the book urges, is critical in discerning accurately God’s relation to humanity. It, too, is the subject of psalm conversations.

A few years ago biblical interpreters began paying attention to what is called *the shape and shaping of the Psalms*. For years we had studied Psalms mostly in individual units, one document at a time. Now, we also wish to ask what the volume’s compilers (editors) were saying by the content and arrangement of the book. What interchange do Psalms 22 and 23, Psalms 89 and 90, Psalms 105, 106, and 107 have with one another? How may Psalm 73 be nearly the center of the entire volume, focusing everything before and after? What message is delivered by the fact that the closing psalms in the book, 145–150, issue unbounded praise and adoration for God, amplifying the highly enigmatic, final verse of the much-distraught Psalm 89? What was the purpose behind the shaping, and how are we to interpret the shape? The inquiry has led to rich results!

The Torah—the first five books of the Bible—has been long revered in the Hebrew/Jewish tradition as the sacred record of God’s acts in founding Israel and of God’s instructions for ordering the nation’s life. The history and the law: Torah. The creators of Psalms also divided their book into five units: Book I: Psalms 1–41; Book II: Psalms 42–72; Book III: Psalms 73–89; Book IV: Psalms 90–106; and Book V: Psalms 107–150. They almost certainly did this with parallel purpose. What was that purpose?

If the five books of the Torah present the event history of Israel, the five books of Psalms seem to present an internal/spiritual history of Israel: what took place in the nation’s mind and soul. Historical occurrences are clearly reflected, but the major subject is the human interior: its rejoicing and lamentation, its faith and doubt. The soaring peaks and deep canyons of the heart as it makes its way through human life: that is Psalms. You and I discover, as generations before us have, enormous identity with our own experience.

The formation of the Psalms as a gathered collection probably took place around 525–500 BCE. In 587 BCE, Jerusalem and its holy temple had been destroyed by the invading Babylonian army. Many of the city’s citizens had been deported into exile in refugee camps on the Euphrates River where they had remained for nearly fifty years. After 540 BCE, when Cyrus the Persian defeated Babylon, a great number of the refugees made their way back home and began rebuilding both the city and the temple. This “second temple” was completed and dedicated in 515 BCE.

The editors of the book of Psalms were creating what has been called “the hymnbook of the second temple,” songs sung or chanted by worshipers approaching the holy site or offering sacrifices in the temple courts. It is likely that on a normal day the temple was alive with psalm singing accompanied by stringed instruments. The book of Psalms seems designed to voice what Israel had been through in its recent tumultuous decades, and, through it all, to proclaim a deep and abiding faith in God. If the Torah told the historical-event story of what led to the first Israel, the Psalms would tell the spiritual/emotional story of what led to the second. From embattled kingship, through national disintegration and destruction, through bitter exile, and into restoration, the Psalms would track the nation’s inner plight.

From what we are told by ancient sources, several thousand “psalms of David” were available for inclusion in the book. These 150 were, therefore, likely selected and arranged with purpose. Reading and interpreting that purpose is our point here.

And, one other factor. The Psalms editors were working with documents composed previously by other people and already in popular use. They probably felt constrained, therefore, to use whole psalms pretty much as they received them, not changing individual documents very much. Several psalms seem to have “exilic post-scripts” (e.g., Psalm 51), verses at the end praying for national restoration, but there seems to be little other editing. As a result, one portion of a particular psalm may fit the editors’ overall purpose while another portion of that same psalm does not. Both portions will have been included, however. The outcome may be confusing to us until we recall how the editors were working.

Who edited the Psalms? No one knows; there is no record. Three things are apparent, however. The editors knew music, attaching

notations to their texts to guide their use by singers and music leaders. The editors also knew well the theological currents of their day, the Davidic covenant that was shattered by the destruction of Jerusalem, and the subsequent Deuteronomic covenant now emerging in the national consciousness (more on this in the chapters that follow). And, the editors knew intimately the internal struggles of their people, the mental turmoils of destruction and continued trauma. The editors had great insight and a message to bear, the purpose being to sustain both community and faith through a tumultuous time. This is what the book of Psalms is all about: faith through hard, hard struggle. Multitudes of believers have turned to the book for precisely that in the centuries since its collection.

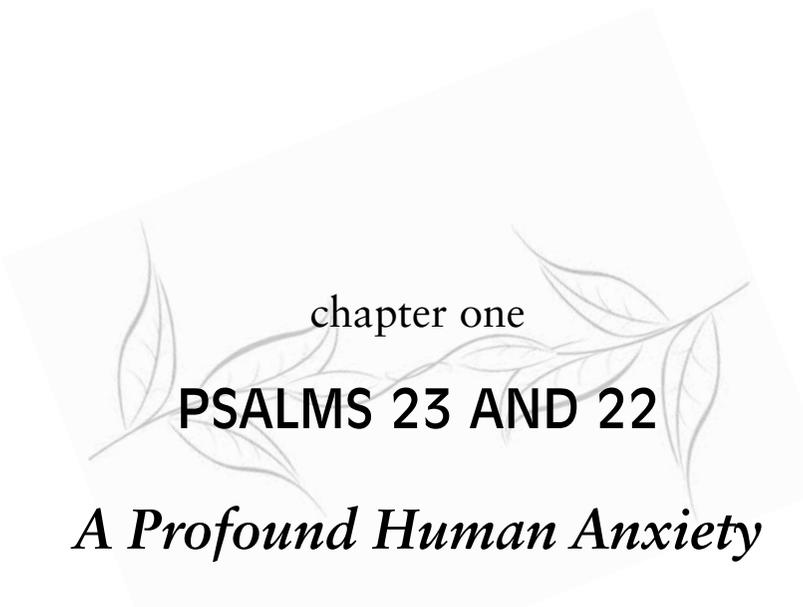
I invite you, throughout this book, to immerse yourself in the mind, heart, and world of the Psalms editors, to get to know the editors intimately, and to realize that their world was very much like ours. They have vital things to say to us, much of which has been lost to modern ears. We need to hear! The editors' purpose is to build in us faith, to enable us to be accompanied always by God's great heart of love. Let us listen intently to the ancient wisdom!

I have designed this book as a dialogue between author and reader. I will set forth psalm data, state my own thoughts, pose questions, and ask you to deliberate and reply. Perhaps, sharing your conversation in a group will be most valuable. I have used these materials a number of times in lay Bible courses and elder hostels, and invariably class participants, from their experience, offer valuable input I would have missed. I hope you will do the same.

Special thanks to Rosemarie Mucci of Parma, Ohio, who took this course in a classroom and then, from her long interest in lay Bible study and her career as a teacher of teachers, provided invaluable comments in the preparation of this manuscript.

Also sincere thanks to Clint McCann, Evangelical professor of Biblical Interpretation at Eden Theological Seminary in St. Louis, who provided very helpful feedback and considerable encouragement all along the way.





chapter one

## PSALMS 23 AND 22

### *A Profound Human Anxiety*

Probably the best-known text in the Bible is Psalm 23. Numerous people can recite it whole; many more recognize its words. With a quiet, poetic promise of God's assurance and support, it has spoken to embattled lives across cultures and generations. The stories of its effect are legion. We begin with a fresh look at this treasured gem.

#### **Psalm 23**

*A Psalm of David.*

- 23 The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.  
2 He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
he leads me beside still waters;  
3 he restores my soul.  
He leads me in right paths  
for his name's sake.  
4 Even though I walk through the darkest valley,  
I fear no evil;  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff—  
they comfort me.  
5 You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.

## 2 Psalm Conversations

- 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me  
all the days of my life,  
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD  
my whole life long.

The psalm uses two metaphors for God: God as a shepherd (v. 1) and God as a table host (v. 5). As a shepherd, God provides all my needs, leads me to green pastures, beside still waters, in right paths, and restores my soul. As a table host, God serves a meal, anoints my head, and overflows my cup.

A critical shift occurs in the middle of the psalm: from third person address (“he,” vv. 1-3) to second person address (“you,” vv. 4-5), and then back to third person (“the Lord,” v. 6). Verses 4-5 are clearly the *intimate center*, a heartfelt address from me to God, a prayer instead of a description. The prayer concerns my walking through what the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) calls “the darkest valley,” what the older Revised Standard Version (RSV) called “the valley of the shadow of death.” The difference is in the translation of one Hebrew term that can, in fact, be rendered either way. Bible translators swing back and forth. We shall use the RSV’s more vivid “the valley of the shadow of death.” The psalmist is treading a valley in which death is his close companion every step, an acutely dangerous plight. Is there a specific situation to which this psalm refers?

No certainty, but I suggest that the key word is “valley.” The land of Israel is hilly and mountainous. The mountains run generally north to south and recede into flat lands only in the west near the Mediterranean coast and in the east approaching the Sea of Galilee and Jordan River. In scattered locations among all these mountains are valleys, most of them small. By far the largest and best known is the Valley of Jezreel in the north, southwest of the Sea of Galilee. Jezreel is a broad, rambling expanse with a storied history. Often, Scripture calls it simply “the valley” or “a valley,” assuming that any reader will know the reference (just as any resident of the state of Virginia knows what “the valley” is).

Valleys served two main functions in the biblical era. One was to grow food. Work animals and farming implements had a much easier time on flat lands than on hillsides. Jezreel was fertile and, relative to the rest of the land, well watered with 27–30 inches of rain per year.

The other function of valleys was for fighting wars. Combat vehicles also worked much better on flat lands, and Jezreel, located on the primary northern approach into Israel, was the site of numerous military confrontations. On a hilltop overlooking Jezreel (southwest border) Israel erected the military-supply town of Megiddo, stocked with war implements and horses. The Hebrew word for “mountain” is “aram,” and “aram-Megiddo” became Armageddon, the anticipated site of the great final battle between the angels of God and the forces of evil on earth. See also Ezekiel 37:1 where the valley of dry bones is clearly this same location. The Valley of Jezreel stood large in the nation’s mind as a symbol of military engagement.

I suggest that “the valley of the shadow of death” refers to a battlefield, most likely Jezreel. This makes Psalm 23 the quiet prayer of a soldier preparing to go into war.

Two things, largely contradictory, happen with troops preparing for battle. One is invigoration of the macho spirit, the rev-up of a fight-mentality. War whoops, back-slapping, camaraderie shouts, a show of communal determination—football players do it on the sidelines before football games, nominating conventions before political elections, and soldiers in a pep rally before the battle. The ritual is as old as human rivalry.

Hiding beneath this show of determined spirit, however, is the subtle awareness in every troop that this could be his (or her) last engagement. “I may die here! Our opponents are strong too. The turmoil will be fierce and random, striking who-knows-where? This battle could be my last.” No matter how thick the overlay of ecstatic enthusiasm, every soldier knows this deep within.

Psalm 23 speaks quietly to this inner uncertainty. “The Lord is my shepherd. . . . He restores my soul. . . . He leads me in right paths. . . .” “You are with me; your rod and staff—they comfort me”: critical words of support through perilous conflict. Inside the human head, words build worlds, and a world of trust is profoundly needed. The image of God-as-my-shepherd, leading me rightly, protecting me from the hazards raging, making me strong—resonates as much in modern times as in ancient.

Troops are best sent into battle well nourished. As with modern-day competitions of many kinds, they were fed a prebattle meal. “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.” (A “table” was likely a woven, roll-out mat spread across the ground.)

But the meal in Psalm 23 also gave spiritual fortification. “You anoint my head with oil” was a ritual dedication of the soldier to God.

“My cup overflows.” This statement undoubtedly refers to an abundance of liquid nourishment—probably wine—provided during the meal. It also reminds me of the time I asked a friend in the state of Maine, “How did your state elections turn out?” to which he replied, “My cup runneth over!” I wonder if in ancient times, as today, the term was as much a metaphor as a reality.

In verse 6, the soldier voices confidence that the same “goodness and mercy” that will accompany him through the battle will remain with him “all the days of (his) life.” He concludes with a vow that he will dwell in the house of the Lord through all his days, probably meaning that he will be devoted to God continually and faithfully.

The key moment in the psalm is verse 4, the *intimate center*: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me.” Many of us have walked that valley, uncertain, fearful, not sure of the next step. It may have happened in military engagement or in medical struggle or in test-taking of several kinds: whenever our plight has been difficult and the dangers fierce. The word delivered by Psalm 23 is *the promise of Presence*, that we do not walk alone. A guiding, empowering Spirit walks with us. This promise of Presence, stated in the metaphor of God as shepherd, makes Psalm 23 a powerhouse of encouraging strength, the reason why it is probably the best-known text in the Bible.

A brief story.

I had a church member years ago named Frances Frazier. Frances, in her mid-fifties, lived alone in a small frame house in a paper-mill town. She had led a tragic life. Her father had died in a train accident when she was young. She had dropped out of school after the fifth grade to help support her family. Her first husband had been killed in an accident at the mill where he worked. He had jumped onto the lid of a boiler to keep hot liquid from scorching his coworkers nearby. Her second husband, after nine years, had announced that he was leaving and took most of their money with him. Yes, of course, there was another woman.

When I first met Frances, she had turned herself into a small housekeeping business and was cleaning homes. Her normal day was a sink full of dirty dishes, unmade beds, dirty bathrooms, a

house full of clutter and dust, plus whatever special instructions had been left. It was all to be made perfect before the occupants came home in the afternoon.

Frances had good friends. She enjoyed going to movies or to American Legion baseball games in their small community. She showed up for almost everything happening at her church. Beneath her calm exterior was a spark of playfulness that made her both fun and interesting. Frances plodded forward, rarely looking back.

I asked her one day, “Frances, you’ve lived a tragic life! Far more than your share of struggle. How have you kept going, standing back up on your feet over and over?”

She looked at me earnestly and replied quite simply, “The Lord has been with me.” No further explanation, no analysis. She assumed I would understand.

For a long time, I patronized that idea, thinking it a bit childlike and naïve, the product of a very simple faith. But, over years, I was told the same thing by other people who had fought through calamity and survived, “The Lord was with me.”

It finally occurred one day to dumb, thick-headed me that Frances had named the most critical issue in human life: Is anyone there? Does someone else travel beside me, or am I alone?

Abandonment in a void universe is the worst human plight. Presence is the greatest gift.

After thirty-seven years as a pastor, I believe that the most pervasive mental pathology in our society is loneliness, people who feel essentially by themselves, disconnected from others. It happens among children, especially when parents devote little attention to them. With adults; the most prevalent problem that walks through the pastoral counselor’s door is loneliness. It happens at all levels of the culture, having no regard for money or education.

Another brief account.

Do you remember the first question you ever asked in your life? The very first question—can you recall what it was? You were lying in your crib, perhaps three or four days old. You awoke in the night from an infant’s sleep. You cried, weakly at first, then more steadily. Your cry continued until—until—someone came and picked you up and held you against her or his body, moved you about slightly, and

sang softly in your ear. After a few moments, your crying stopped, because your question had been answered. What was your question? Was it not, Is anyone there? Is someone left now that I have departed the intimacy of my mother's womb? Does there remain a living being who will relate to me, an accompaniment with me? This, I suggest, was the first thing you wanted to know in your life: Is anyone there?

I stood beside the frail figure in the bed, an old man in his final days of life. He had peered up at me momentarily when I had entered the room, acknowledging with his eyes that he knew who I was. I had spoken several words, but conversation was now beyond his strength. The one thing he had done, however, was grope for my hand at his bedside. Finding it, he had gathered it into his own hands and nestled it toward his body. He closed his eyes and lay in silence. For a number of minutes I stood there, saying nothing. No word passed between us, and yet the communication was clear. "Is anyone there?" he was asking. Is there someone who is willing to travel with me through these waning moments of my life?

I am repeatedly impressed that the first question we ask in life and the last question we ask in life are exactly the same question. Our initial anxiety, and our final anxiety. And I have come to suspect that, through the many activities and pursuits that fill our lives, this remains the most critical question at all points in between.

Transport your mind now into an ancient Israelite troop encampment on the edge of the Jezreel Valley the night before a violent clash with an enemy. You, a soldier, lie in fitful sleep. You recite to yourself, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. . . ." Back at home in your village miles away, your family is also praying, but their words are Psalm 91:

A thousand may fall at your side,  
ten thousand at your right hand,  
but it will not come near to you. (v. 7)

For he will command his angels concerning you  
to guard you in all your ways. (v. 11)

Prayers for the soldier in battle emerge at several places throughout the Psalms, with Psalm 23 at the center.

## **Psalm 22**

*To the leader: according to The Deer of the Dawn. A Psalm of David.*

- 22 My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?  
Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my  
groaning?
- 2 O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;  
and by night, but find no rest.
- 3 Yet you are holy,  
enthroned on the praises of Israel.
- 4 In you our ancestors trusted;  
they trusted, and you delivered them.
- 5 To you they cried, and were saved;  
in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.
- 6 But I am a worm, and not human;  
scorned by others, and despised by the people.
- 7 All who see me mock at me;  
they make mouths at me, they shake their heads;
- 8 “Commit your cause to the LORD; let him deliver—  
let him rescue the one in whom he delights!”
- 9 Yet it was you who took me from the womb;  
you kept me safe on my mother’s breast.
- 10 On you I was cast from my birth,  
and since my mother bore me you have been my God.
- 11 Do not be far from me,  
for trouble is near  
and there is no one to help.
- 12 Many bulls encircle me,  
strong bulls of Bashan surround me;
- 13 they open wide their mouths at me,  
like a ravening and roaring lion.
- 14 I am poured out like water,  
and all my bones are out of joint;  
my heart is like wax;  
it is melted within my breast;
- 15 my mouth is dried up like a potsherd;  
and my tongue sticks to my jaws;  
you lay me in the dust of death.

8 *Psalm Conversations*

- 16 For dogs are all around me;  
    a company of evildoers encircles me.  
My hands and feet have shriveled;
- 17 I can count all my bones,  
    They stare and gloat over me;
- 18 they divide my clothes among themselves,  
    and for my clothing they cast lots.
- 19 But you, O LORD, do not be far away!  
    O my help, come quickly to my aid!
- 20 Deliver my soul from the sword,  
    my life from the power of the dog!
- 21 Save me from the mouth of the lion!
- From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me.
- 22 I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters;  
    in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:
- 23 You who fear the LORD, praise him!  
    All you offspring of Jacob glorify him;  
    stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!
- 24 For he did not despise or abhor  
    the affliction of the afflicted;  
he did not hide his face from me,  
    but heard when I cried to him.
- 25 From you comes my praise in the great congregation;  
    my vows I will pay before those who fear him.
- 26 The poor shall eat and be satisfied;  
    those who seek him shall praise the LORD.  
    May your hearts live forever.
- 27 All the ends of the earth shall remember  
    and turn to the LORD;  
and all the families of the nations  
    shall worship before him.
- 28 For dominion belongs to the LORD,  
    and he rules over the nations.
- 29 To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down;  
    before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,  
    and I shall live for him.
- 30 Posterity will serve him;  
    future generations will be told about the LORD,
- 31 and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,  
    saying that he has done it.

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (v. 1). This psalm begins with an absolute contradiction. “My God . . .” implies intimate, binding, unbreakable relationship, a bond not severed by any event or circumstance, similar to “my father” or “my mother” or “my child”—forever, no matter what.

“My God, my God . . .” Ancient Hebrew had no punctuation marks, including exclamation points. The way to express passion was to repeat, say it twice. “My God, my God . . .” intimacy with double exclamation! An unbreakable bond, sealed in steel!

“. . . why have you forsaken me?” Abandoned me? Vanished? Consigned me to cosmic solitude? Verse 1 is a non sequitur: the first line cannot lead to the second.

Thus does Psalm 22 open by placing before us total contradiction. The Presence is absent. God has vanished. The Great Void.

Following this opening, the psalmist paints a series of metaphorical pictures depicting his/her plight.

O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;  
and by night, but find no rest. (v. 2)

But I am a worm, and not human;  
scorned by others, and despised by the people.  
All who see me mock at me;  
they make mouths at me, they shake their heads. (vv. 6–7)

Many bulls encircle me,  
strong bulls of Bashan surround me;  
they open wide their mouths at me,  
like a ravening and roaring lion. (vv. 12-13)

The desperation continues through the horrible scenes of verses 14-18.

These metaphorical descriptors were probably spoken originally to describe Israel’s plight in the destruction of Jerusalem and the consequent exile. As they stand now, they describe the universal human experience of abandonment. The fact that someone created the psalm tells us: “It happens! It’s part of the human plight! We are all susceptible! The experience can strike anyone!” The tandem of Psalms 22 and 23 is meant to speak to us when it does.

Psalm 22 goes on, in verses 19-31, to plead with God for help, for deliverance from the sword, the wild dog, and the ravenous lion. If God will help, the psalmist will preach God's deliverance in the great congregation of the faithful, will give abundant alms to the poor, will enliven many hearts, will proclaim God's saving acts to the ends of the earth—to all families of all nations, to those dead in their graves, and to future generations not yet born. This great proliferation of promise says one thing clearly: that the psalmist is desperate, but will turn to joyous and even more prolific thanksgiving if God will grant mercy.

Psalm 22 is a lament, a mournful cry for help, with bits of hope and a promise at the end. Out of the 150 psalms, lament psalms vastly outnumber all other types. They strongly dominate Books I–III (Psalms 1–89) and do not disappear in Books IV and V. It is obvious that lament—standing before God and voicing urgent plea—was a huge element in Israel's faith. To read Psalms 6–7, 10, 12–13, 17, 25–26, 31, 35, and beyond is to get the flavor.

We in the modern church have never known what to do with lament. We have based many of our hymns on psalms—the index of scriptures in any modern hymnal is filled with psalm references—but they are virtually all psalms of praise and adulation, almost never laments. Neither has lament found a place in our worship. We include a call to worship, a prayer of petition, an affirmation of faith, a Scripture reading, a sermon, an offering, and a benediction, but no opportunity for the worshiper to express struggle, upset, anger, and urgent plea. Those who come to worship deeply unsettled are told, by implication, to put a lid on it and be nice. One is not to voice the vicious words of Psalm 58, demanding that God wage vindication against the wicked. Or of Psalm 60, which chastises God for not supporting the army in battle. From some unknown place, we have concluded that in worship we are supposed to be polite to God, courteous, restrained. We are supposed to wear nice clothes, smile, and not question severely. We certainly did not get this from the Psalms.

And we pay a huge price for it. In one of my congregations' families, a teenage child committed suicide. It was—of course—deeply traumatic, horrible to the core! Church people gathered around in support, doing all the things friends do. Through those dreadful, miserable aftermath days and weeks, the church's presence and support continued.

The family's first Sunday back in worship was notable, many people greeting them with warm sympathy. Thus did things proceed. Until, a few weeks later, the family stopped coming to worship. One Sunday, two, three—no word, no explanation. I arranged to see Mom and Dad, and here is my interpretation of what they said.

“The things going on inside us right now don't belong in worship. We feel bitter, angry, abandoned, guilty, hurt. She was our beloved child; why us? This torment keeps rising in us at unexpected moments, drenching us in empty dread. We come to worship to feel uplifted, joyous, hopeful. But that's not where we are right now. We're roiling inside, and worship is not a place for that. We'll be back; that's for sure. This is our community, you are our dear friends, and you've done everything imaginable to help us. We love you. But it may take a while.”

Modern worship does not offer space for lament! The ancients had an insight into us that we have lost. There will be times when we need to pray Psalm 22, to let it speak what is in our depths, to let it shout our feelings! Our neglect of this, indeed, comes with a price.

Apparently, this psalm was considered by later biblical writers to represent abandonment at its most profound. When the gospel writers, half a millennium later, described the passion of Jesus, they took Psalm 22 as their model, their table of contents. They placed “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Ps. 22:1) on Jesus' lips. They had Roman soldiers and bystanders in the crowd mock and make mouths at him (Ps 22:7). They had his mouth dry up like a potsherd and his tongue stick to his jaws (Ps 22:15). And they had the guards cast lots for his clothing (Ps 22:18). This portrays a clear picture of their esteem for Psalm 22, that it tracks a typical and authentic journey of the human soul.

*Psalms 22 and 23.* Psalm 22 walks us through the depths of human desolation. Psalm 23 promises that a Shepherd walks with us. Psalm 22 says that life, including the life of faith, will contain dreadful times when the path seems nothing but dark. Psalm 23 says that even with death shadowing, we need fear no evil. Psalm 22 depicts “the passion.” Psalm 23 prefigures the empty tomb.

I want you to stop reading here and do an assignment. Find pen and paper. Imagine that you are writing a sermon. It is to be a one-point sermon, a single message to be delivered. That point will be:

what Psalm 23 says to Psalm 22. What the Psalms editors wanted to convey to us by placing these two documents side by side. For several years I led a section of first-year seminary students in basic preaching. Beginning preachers often suffer from fuzziness, a general idea of what they want to say but without focused clarity. I told my classes that I wanted them to begin the course with one-point sermons. They could have two or three or four sub-points under the one point, but I wanted them to be precisely certain of the main thing they wished to say. Accompanying each sermon they were to include a sentence that stated their one point. The sentence was to have no more than seven words. The sermon might be twelve to seventeen minutes long, but the defining sentence was to be short and direct. I now give you the same assignment. In no more than seven words, write down what you think Psalm 23 is saying to Psalm 22. Please don't read further until you have made a good try.

Here are what two people before you have said. "No matter how dark, light shines." Also, "Think you are alone? Look again." I, myself, have been playing with this assignment for a while, and my defining sentence is five words. "Through deepest darkness, God leads." I can visualize an entire sermon from any of these statements. What did you write?

Now, one further idea. If Psalm 23 is the prayer of a soldier going into battle, then the prebattle meal and the ritual anointing in the psalm take on intense meaning. Across the New Testament, especially in Luke's gospel and in Paul's letters, Jesus is metaphorically cast as God's holy warrior, here to battle against the sin and evil living in all human beings. As Jesus' final battle approaches, there is a preparatory meal, his "last supper" (Matt 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:14-23; 1 Cor 11:23-26). The ritual anointing is performed by a woman of Bethany (Matt 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9; John 12:1-8) who pours an alabaster jar of costly ointment on his head. The meal and the anointing reflect Psalm 23. His passion and crucifixion echo Psalm 22.

These connections give our sacrament of Holy Communion a meaning we have not always realized. We usually think of "communion" as a time when we celebrate God's forgiveness, when bread and wine, Christ's Body and Blood, are offered to redeem us and

make us new people. Hearts and souls bind with God and with one another in a renewing camaraderie.

Our analysis here suggests a second dynamic: battle preparation. When Jesus ate the Passover meal, this was nourishment for the impending conflict, a promise that even through the depths of his passion, the Lord was his Shepherd. This will mean, further, that our current-day sacrament of the Lord's Supper is also battle preparation. This may seem strange, but think further.

I remember one Sunday morning standing in the pulpit and viewing across the congregation. I knew most of them well, and I knew what they faced that afternoon or the next day. One young man supervised the loading of cargo onto airplanes. He had been told by his boss that either he would sign off on falsified loading records or he would be fired. Which was he to do, take the small risk of a jet crash, or lose his job? A woman had learned that an employee embezzled \$800,000 from her business, and she was agonizing over whether there was some better alternative than sending the mother of three small children to prison. An attorney was involved in a raw, nasty courtroom battle in which the winner appeared likely to be whichever lawyer most effectively trashed the other side—not his accustomed style. A woman was a volunteer domestic relations court advocate for two children in their parents' heated and bitter divorce battle. The husband of an alcoholic wife was trying to create the best path for their oft-tortured family. These were valleys of conflict I knew about that morning, fairly normal in the everyday life of the congregation. Anyone who tries to live integrity, compassion, and faithfulness in that world is going to need an accompanying Presence. Numerous people quietly asked for it in prayer, just as that ancient soldier did. I suspect that this is why Psalm 23 is at the pinnacle of biblical passages known by believers.

### **Discussion Topics and Questions**

1. Have you experienced Psalm 22? Do you know firsthand what this psalmist was going through? A number of different people have told stories of occasions when Psalm 23 played a strong and powerful role in their lives. Has that happened with you? When have you found yourself quietly praying it?

2. The statement, “God is with me,” can also have a very destructive side. It can lead to theological arrogance, the claim that—because of my close relationship with the Almighty—my opinions, my agenda, my instructions, my orders have heightened authority. “God accompanies *me*, and *you*, therefore, should receive as truth what I say.” Preachers have played this charade, presidents, corporation leaders, men with regard to women, power/authority figures of many kinds. It is usually subtle but also strong and imperialistic. Cite an example you have witnessed. If you were wanting to educate your children in how to identify the game and avoid being sucked in by the narcissistic personalities who play it, what might you try to reach them?

3. Place yourself again in that ancient army encampment the night before battle. Tomorrow there will be clash, turmoil, chaos, violence, blood, wails of pain, groaning, and death. What can you best do to calm your swirling mind on this night and get at least a little sleep?

4. Providing a time for Psalm 22-style lament in worship is a formidable challenge—I know from experience. On the one hand, we want to let worshipers express what is going on inside them, and to take every voice seriously. On the other hand, people can get consumed with upset over small neighborhood disputes and sick gerbils. Deliberate: How can a church best provide time and voice in public worship for lament? How can lament psalms be used well? If you have a poetic flair, try turning one of the lament psalms into hymn words sung to a familiar tune. Or try using a lament psalm to devise an effective responsive reading. Act as if you are on a church worship committee; try to devise an effective lament-mode to use in the congregation’s worship.

5. Does the notion of the Lord’s Supper as battle preparation speak to you? For some people formidable moral challenges occupy nearly every day of their lives. Can you, a person of faith, remember a struggle over fundamental integrity in which you have been involved? How might the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper have strengthened your resolve?