

PSALMS AND OTHER SONGS
FROM A PIERCED HEART

Psalms and Other Songs from a Pierced Heart

Patricia Stevenson, RSJ

With a Foreword by Alice Camille



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This book is for all people who love the Scriptures
and know they are a well that never runs dry.

My thanks to all those who have joined with me
over the years, my family, friends, fellow explorers
and teachers.

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Foreword

I've not met Patricia Stevenson. Yet in all the ways that matter I feel I have, through her songs from a pierced heart.

This book came to me as a gift from my friend Jennifer, a fellow sister of Patricia's. When it arrived, I glanced ruefully at the bookcase, which already contains nine translations and paraphrases of the Psalms. I was tempted to stack this one with the rest. After all, like a lot of folks, I pray the Liturgy of the Hours daily. My life is stuffed fat with psalms.

Yet Jennifer had sent the book to me. She's an artist and mystic, and I'm always hopeful of seeing the world better through her eyes. So instead of shelving this gift, I decided to read it. What a surprise it turned out to be.

Patricia Stevenson's inspired paraphrase of psalms and other biblical passages reveals why we still look to ancient texts to express fresh ideas. What brings us back to the psalms, again and again, is that these yellowed old prayers are very like our shiny recent

attempts at praying. They are the cries of believing hearts—hearts that, like our own, are not always as faithful as we might wish. Psalms hold the world of human experience within their borders: joy, pain, relief, fear, hope, outrage, exultation, despair, wonder, weariness, and more. It's the emotional content of these texts—not their poetry, antiquity, or origins—that draws us to them. So in choosing a translation to ferry our prayers, it's important to find one that taps this passion.

Some may ask: Why reinterpret old texts at all? Aren't the original phrases enough? Think in terms of music and it makes sense. A song is written and recorded, is soon beloved, becomes a classic, and may over time seem immutable. When Pete Seeger composed and sang “Turn! Turn! Turn! (To Everything There Is a Season),” for example, that might have been enough. But who would want to have missed The Byrds' memorable take on this song—or subsequent versions by Judy Collins, Marlene Dietrich, Dolly Parton?

Seeger himself, of course, was adapting an antique set of verses from Ecclesiastes. Turn, turn, turn indeed! Reshaping a good idea is rarely a bad idea. It is, in fact, the soul of homiletics, art, love letters, not to mention every gospel after the first one. So maybe ten translations of psalms on one's shelf are not excessive, but simply a good start.

As T. S. Eliot put it: “Good writers borrow. Great writers steal.” Eliot may have stolen this motto from Picasso, who said the same thing about artists. The point being that anything worth creating is worth a good re-vision now and then.

The biblical adaptations here are enchanting because they are well chosen and well said. As a seeker, I love the questions Patricia raises in these prayers: Do you want to be happy? Where does trouble come from? Why does God care for us? These are queries worth pursuing for any believer.

As a writer, I appreciate the clarity, brevity, and honesty of these prayers. The familiar version of Psalm 100, for example, is four verses long. But Patricia distills it down to four pithy lines of text: a miracle of economy, no less powerful for being succinct. Or how about this stunning interpretation from Psalm 33: “God speaks: we have a universe.” The story of creation, delivered in six words!

How we might long for world leaders to heed her simple, authoritative directions in the verses inspired by Psalm 72: reduce poverty, protect children, value justice. The poetry sings in lines like “Let us wear your grace as our true clothing” and “When I see the birds / wheeling in the sky, / I wish for wings to rise above the storms” (riffs on Psalms 5 and 55, respectively).

Yet it’s the Jewish-flavored chutzpah in these meditations that I value most. Here’s a phrase I must have

intended to lob upward in prayers past and will surely use in the future, now that I've learned it: "I think my prayer deserves an answer" (from Psalm 17)! Come now, let's be frank: Don't we all feel the same?

I can't think of a more poignant interpretation of Psalm 69's pleading stance than this: "Look at me, when I'm speaking! / I feel desperate." We might say this to a friend or family member. Why not to God?

This is real conversation, delivered by a woman who must have such unadorned talk with the people in her life, including her Maker. Patricia captures the bartering spirit of the psalmist—"I promise to deal with my depression" (from Psalm 43)—and also how that doesn't always pan out in real life: "God, I feel depressed again" (from Psalm 69). Such intimacy between psalmist and interpreter is beyond commentary. It's closer to channeling.

Highlighting my secret favorite phrases in this short introduction is as hopeless as it is unnecessary. There's a line that leaps up to find me on each page; and naturally, you'll discover your own, based on the life you happen to be living. And isn't that the way of Scripture, after all—to meet us where we are?

Patricia doesn't include her personal encounter with all 150 psalms, but she does add explorations of Isaiah's Servant Songs, and passages from Lamentations, Sirach, and Wisdom. Even a few New Testament texts get her special treatment. At first I felt a

little cheated of other texts I would have liked to see included. Then it occurred to me that the pierced heart summoned up by the title refers not just to Patricia, or to the original composers of these verses. Each reader who savors holy texts risks a similar piercing. We who pray are invited to make these passages, and the ones that didn't make it into this book, our own. "We, too, must continue the line of storytellers" (from Psalm 105).

Happiness

If you want to be happy:
avoid evil,
choose to make God's word
your delight and guide.
Study it always.

You will be like a fruitful evergreen
on the banks of a stream.

Unwise choices
leave you like litter in the wind,
blown about achieving nothing.
There is only ruin in store for the corrupt.

Let God be your compass.

inspired by Psalm 1



Learn to Serve

Why is there so much trouble in the world?
Why is time wasted
in destructive plotting?

There are those who place personal power above
everything,
even their own people.

God knows their plans
will achieve no good.
God shares authority with those who are humble;
with those who work
for the good of all.
Come to your senses you who wield power.
Learn to serve the Lord with joy.

inspired by Psalm 2



Trust

Faithful God, hear my prayer.
You have helped me in the past.
When I've felt threatened by darkness I've tried to
be calm.

When I've felt caught in endless night
I've tried to keep you as my lodestar.

In the face of trouble I hold tight to your word.
Your gifts mean more to me than material things.
My security in the face of the unknown is a loving
blessing.

inspired by Psalm 4



Help

Hear my words that are heavy with sadness.
My prayer begins with the dawn and in trust I wait.

I try to avoid evil, especially all violence,
as I know it offends the spirit of your kingdom.

Your mercy has given me the strength to pray.
Help me clear my path so that your justice may be
my light.

Let all believers come together in praise of God.
Let us wear your grace as our true clothing.

inspired by Psalm 5

