



God's Prayer Book showcases the mature words of a man who has thought, read, lived, and prayed deeply. Ben Patterson has a marvelous gift of being able to engage the seasoned disciple of Christ while also ably tutoring those just beginning the journey. This book is a deeply affecting, gentle, and practical guide to the art and relationship of prayer.

GARY THOMAS

Author of The Beautiful Fight

Ben Patterson has written a wise book about a tough topic. He helps us not only *understand* the Psalms but *pray* them—so that our fractured souls can embrace the fullness of God.

MARK GALLI

Senior managing editor of *Christianity Today*; author of *Jesus Mean and Wild: The Unexpected Love of an Untamable God*

If you are like me, you find yourself often drawn to prayer, and at other times, utterly incapable of it. Using the Psalms as a lighted path, Patterson guides us, with great freedom, to prayers that unlock our souls and cause us to experience a compelling vision of God. These pages are by my bedside table, my nighttime companion in my conversations with God.

NANCY ORTBERG

Founding partner of Teamworx2; author of *Looking for God: An Unexpected Journey Through Tattoos, Tofu, and Pronouns*

The Psalms are the prayer book of the people of God, but his wonderful resource of communion with God is foreign to many Christians today. Ben Patterson masterfully opens up the riches of the Psalms in a way that will deepen and enliven the prayer life of his readers.

TREMPER LONGMAN III

Robert H. Gundry Professor of Biblical Studies, Westmont College; author of *How to Read the Psalms*

In this wise, thoughtful, and engaging introduction and reflections on the Psalms, Patterson invites us to a fresh and deeper life of prayer in response to God and in communion with God's people throughout the centuries and around the world. This is a helpful resource for beginners and beyond.

THE REV. DR. ROBERTA HESTENES

Educator, speaker, and author of *Using the Bible in Groups*



THE POWER
AND PLEASURE OF
PRAYING THE PSALMS

GOD'S PRAYER BOOK

BEN
PATTERSON



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God's Prayer Book: The Power and Pleasure of Praying the Psalms

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DEDICATION

*To Laretta, my dearest, my wife, my prayer companion,
my wise editor, and fountain of insights into the Psalms.*

*You have prayed with me through these psalms every
step of the way, and through a marriage whose grace,
richness, and hilarity I could not have imagined when
we began this pilgrimage together thirty-seven years ago.*

In his light we have seen light.

*To the good folks at Santa Barbara Community Church
and to the finest pastors I know: Reed, Steve, Kelly, and
Mike. You great people have met with me weekly every
Tuesday morning at 6:45 for six years to learn prayer!*

This is your book too.

SOLI DEO GLORIA.

CONTENTS

THE PSALMS: MUSIC TO GOD'S EARS . . . 1

PSALMS AND DEVOTIONALS

PSALM 1	23	PSALM 57	153
PSALM 2	27	PSALM 63	158
PSALM 3	31	PSALM 67	161
PSALM 4	35	PSALM 69	164
PSALM 5	40	PSALM 70	171
PSALM 6	45	PSALM 71	174
PSALM 7	49	PSALM 73	178
PSALM 8	54	PSALM 75	183
PSALM 12	58	PSALM 76	187
PSALM 14	62	PSALM 77	191
PSALM 16	66	PSALM 78	196
PSALM 19	70	PSALM 83	204
PSALM 22	75	PSALM 84	209
PSALM 23	81	PSALM 87	213
PSALM 24	85	PSALM 88	217
PSALM 27	89	PSALM 90	222
PSALM 30	94	PSALM 91	227
PSALM 31	98	PSALM 96	233
PSALM 32	103	PSALM 100	237
PSALM 36	107	PSALM 102	240
PSALM 37	111	PSALM 103	245
PSALM 40	117	PSALM 119	250
PSALM 42	122	PSALM 120	257
PSALM 46	128	PSALM 121	261
PSALM 51	132	PSALM 122	265
PSALM 52	137	PSALM 123	269
PSALM 53	140	PSALM 127	272
PSALM 55	144	PSALM 128	276
PSALM 56	149	PSALM 131	280

PSALM 133 284

PSALM 137 288

PSALM 139 292

PSALM 150 297

NOTES 303

PSALMS FOR SPECIFIC NEEDS 311

THE PSALMS: MUSIC TO GOD'S EARS

James Boice said learning to pray is a little like learning to play the violin with the virtuosos. No instrument sounds worse in the beginning stages of learning; it's all screech and scratch. But if the student is determined to play well, he checks the program guide for the classical music station and notes when the violin concertos will be aired. He buys the music score for each concerto and does his best to play along with the orchestra. At first he sounds terrible. As time passes, however, he begins little by little to sound more and more like the orchestra. But all along, as he groans on his instrument, the orchestra plays the music beautifully—his poor performance is caught up and completed in the music of the masters. So it is with us and prayer: By praying the Psalms back to God, we learn to pray in tune with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.¹

It is no accident that the great prayers of the book of Psalms are also songs. They are the sheet music, the score and libretto of prayer. They are the building blocks for the music of eternity. Better than the things we ask God for in prayer is the God we pray to—and *with*—and the sweet music we make as we do.

I am learning to pray in harmony with the Psalms, but I must admit I got off to a slow start. I became a Christian at age ten, but it wasn't until decades later that the Psalms began to teach me to pray. So although I'm now well into adulthood, you are reading the words of a new convert. I'm still wide eyed and breathless and maybe a little over the top with enthusiasm when I talk about their value. If I succeed with this book, you will be too.

There is no better place in all of Scripture than the Psalms to learn to be with God and to see with the eyes of faith the face of the One who longs to form us fully in his image. But the Psalms can be hard; they often stretch and perplex as they teach. How could it be otherwise? The Psalms are *God's* prayer book, and they teach us to talk to God in his own language.

Learning to pray is, in fact, like learning language. Most babies come

into the world full of some very strong desires and feelings. They are quite capable of expressing them in grunts, gurgles, squeals, and sobs. But it's a stretch to call their utterances language. It would be tragic if, at age eighteen, these noises were still all they knew about communication. And it would be worse than tragic if at age eighteen they were still asking for the things they wanted at three months, if their desires had not expanded and matured as they learned to speak.

The process of learning language is complex and wonderful; it begins with a child listening to his or her parents, then mimicking and copying what he or she hears. But a child is not a parrot, and very quickly mimicry turns to meaning. Words and ideas and desires match up with each other and are woven together in syntax and grammar. With language comes a culture and a way of understanding the world and other people. It's marvelous what happens when we learn language: We are taken out of ourselves to what is beyond ourselves. It's not just our informing the world who we are; it's the world informing us who it is. It's not just our telling others what we want; it's others telling us what they want. Language changes us, making us more than we were when we were merely trying to express ourselves.

Prayer, like language, begins with being able to hear. Prayer starts not when we speak to God but when God speaks to us. In the beginning was the Word; God's word, not ours. Before all time, before you and I were, was the Word; the Light that gives light and life to everyone.² There would be no speech if God had not first spoken. We would have nothing to say if God had not first said something to us. Ultimately then, all our prayers are answers to God's prayer—his gracious Word of love to us! We love, and we pray, because he first loved us.³ That's what Dietrich Bonhoeffer was referring to when he wrote, "The richness of the Word of God ought to determine our prayer, not the poverty of our heart."⁴ The Bible, the written Word of God, tells us what God wants, and more important, what God is like. It expresses his will and reveals his character. The relationship between the Bible and prayer is profound. This is especially true when it comes to the Psalms.

Picture it this way: Children and other novices to the Scriptures have long been told that the best way to find the book of Psalms, the longest book in the Bible, is to put their fingers in the middle of the Bible—in its heart, so to speak. What is the book of Psalms? It is a book of prayers. And

the longest prayer in this longest book is Psalm 119, a prayer about God's Word, the Scriptures. Prayer is at the heart of the Bible, and the Bible is in the heart of prayer.

But that's just a picture, an illustration of the relationship between the Psalms and prayer. Better is a demonstration—the prayer life of our Lord Jesus Christ. At the end of his life, as he hung dying on the cross, he went to the Scriptures for his prayers—more specifically, to the Psalms. “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” (Matthew 27:46) is a quotation from Psalm 22:1. “Father, I entrust my spirit into your hands!” (Luke 23:46) comes from Psalm 31:5. At the point of his greatest anguish and extremity, Jesus turned to the Bible for his prayers. Charles Spurgeon reminds us that, when he most needed to pray, Jesus, the grand original thinker, saw no need to be original or extemporaneous. “How instructive is this great truth that the Incarnate Word lived on the Inspired Word! It was food to him, as it is to us; and . . . if Christ thus lived upon the Word of God, should not you and I do the same? . . . I think it well worthy of your constant remembrance that, even in death, our blessed Master showed the ruling passion of his spirit, so that his last words were a quotation from Scripture.”⁵

As a devout Jew, Jesus considered the Psalms to be his prayer book. A close look at the Psalms shows the Lord's Prayer—the prayer Jesus taught us to pray—to be a summary and distillation of all the prayers that are to be found in the heart of the Bible. It's all there in the Psalms: prayer that God's name be hallowed, that his rule be supreme and his will be done, that our needs be met and our sins forgiven, that we be kept safe from all danger to soul and body.

Martin Luther loved the Psalms. He called them “a little Bible,” because they contain, “set out in the briefest and most beautiful form, all that is to be found in the Bible.”

SIZING UP THE PSALMS

The psalms that first got my attention were the psalms that always seem to be the right thing to pray, no matter the mood or situation. I call them the “one size fits all” psalms, like the band on my adjustable baseball hat. These psalms can be expanded or contracted to fit any situation. For example, Psalm 103 is always the right thing to pray—always true, always fitting, in every time and place:

Let all that I am praise the LORD;
with my whole heart, I will praise his holy name.
Let all that I am praise the LORD;
may I never forget the good things he does for me.
He forgives all my sins
and heals all my diseases.
He redeems me from death
and crowns me with love and tender mercies.
He fills my life with good things.
My youth is renewed like the eagle's!

Next came the psalms that seemed to fit my mood, that helped me say what I felt in the moment. I call them the “this size fits some” psalms. For instance, when I was feeling guilty, speechless with remorse, Psalm 51 was a perfect fit. No matter how mute guilt had made me, I could open my Bible and my mouth and say, “Have mercy on me, O God, because of your unfailing love. Because of your great compassion, blot out the stain of my sins.” Same with Psalm 130: “LORD, if you kept a record of our sins, who, O Lord, could ever survive? But you offer forgiveness, that we might learn to fear you.” I literally couldn't have said it better myself. If God held my sins against me, I'd be toast, dead meat, on the ash heap. But he forgives them all! Therefore I bow in abject, broken, and joyful reverence. Psalms like these gave me confidence to speak to God when I least felt that I could. They still do.

Adding up the psalms in the two categories I could relate to—the “this size fits some” psalms, or the mood psalms; and the “one size fits all” psalms—I didn't know what to do with all the rest, which was most of them. The most obvious example is Psalm 137, with its chilling last line: “Happy is the one who takes your babies and smashes them against the rocks!” But that's an extreme example. There were plenty of psalms that seemed too remote from my experience to have much to do with my prayer life. Psalm 87 has a good line or two if I was preaching a sermon that needed to reference ancient Jewish attitudes toward Jerusalem, but otherwise I didn't know how I could meaningfully pray personally,

On the holy mountain
stands the city founded by the LORD.

He loves the city of Jerusalem
more than any other city in Israel.
O city of God,
what glorious things are said of you!

I was really at a loss with psalms like Psalm 88. It doesn't have one happy thing to say about God or life and ends with, "You have taken away my companions and loved ones. Darkness is my closest friend." Those lines do not describe anything I have ever felt. Maybe they will someday, but so far, so good. But most problematic was Psalm 22, which Jesus quoted on the cross. I could preach this psalm as a meditation on the sufferings of Christ, but I couldn't get myself to pray, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? Why are you so far away when I groan for help?" Would it not be blasphemous for me, Ben Patterson, to pray what only Jesus could pray?

My enemies surround me like a pack of dogs;
an evil gang closes in on me.
They have pierced my hands and feet.
I can count all my bones.
My enemies stare at me and gloat.
They divide my garments among themselves
and throw dice for my clothing.

So there were a lot of psalms that seemed either alien or off limits. Most of them, actually. My slim psalm repertoire was a picture of the thinness of my prayer life—and my heart.

It was also a picture of my shallow sense of Christian identity. I was what someone called a "yearbook Christian." I came to the Psalms like I came to my twenty-year high school reunion—thumbing through the index of my old yearbook, looking only for the page numbers of the pictures of me and my friends, and ignoring the rest.

NOT MUCH IN MY HEART TO POUR OUT

My sophomore year in college, my friends and I decided to spend two hours in prayer for the salvation of the unsaved high school students we were working with. We purposed to storm heaven and bring down

the blessings of God for these kids. One of us had a part-time job in a church, so he asked the pastor if we could meet for prayer in the church building, a logical place to pray, one would think. The pastor told us just to show up some evening, any evening, and since my friend had a key to the building, we could pray anywhere we wanted. But the night we came to pray the church was bustling with activity, as various committee meetings, youth programs, and choir practice were spread throughout the facility. It was busier and more full of distraction than our homes and dorm rooms. The only free space was a large janitor's closet that smelled strongly of detergent and disinfectant.

So we gathered in that closet to pour out our hearts to God. We had two hours to do nothing but stand before the Lord's throne and plead for the salvation of souls. We prayed every which way we knew: We praised God and confessed our sins and lifted up the names of all the students we could think of. Then we praised and confessed and interceded some more. When we had prayed for everything and in every way we could think of, over and over, I looked at my watch to see if we had any time left. Just fifteen minutes had passed! The next one hour and forty-five minutes of prayer were the longest and slowest I had ever experienced.

I came to pour out my heart to God and discovered that there wasn't much in my heart to pour out. It would be years before I understood why I saw prayer in the same way I saw the Psalms—only as a tool to help me ask God for what I wanted. The problem was that I wanted so little! What I didn't understand was that learning to pray was learning to desire the things God wants to give, and then asking him for them.

The greatest enemy of prayer is not asking for too much of God but for too little. We're like Bontsha the Silent in the Yiddish writer Isaac Peretz's sad tale. All his life he had been denied, passed over, oppressed, and forgotten. Chronic disappointment had robbed him of the ability even to dream or desire; he had come to expect nothing and want nothing. He was Bontsha the Silent.

When he died he found himself standing before God in the court of heaven. God smiled tenderly at Bontsha and said, "My son, all your joyless life you had nothing. You lived without hope. But now, here in my pres-

ence, there is the fullness of joy, eternal pleasures at my right hand. Only ask, and you shall receive. Anything, anything you want, shall be yours.”

The little man with a shrunken soul squinted his eyes and pondered the offer. “Anything? Anything at all?” he asked suspiciously.

“Yes,” said the Almighty. “Anything you want.”

After a long pause, he said to the Almighty, “I would like a freshly baked roll, with real butter.”

Heaven wept.⁶ The greater tragedy of Bontsha’s life was not what he had been denied, but what he had ceased to desire. God had been reduced to the size of a loaf of bread and butter. This man had become far too easily pleased.

It wasn’t—and isn’t—that Bontsha’s desires or ours are unworthy to express to God in prayer. He is our loving and compassionate Father, and he listens to all we say with a kind and wise heart. But he knows better than we do what we need—and better yet, he desires things for us that we may not even desire for ourselves.

MORE THAN A TOOL FOR SELF-EXPRESSION

Prayer is more than a tool for self-expression, a means to get God to give us what we want. It is a means he uses to give us what he wants,⁷ and to teach us to want what he wants. Holy Scripture in general, and the Psalms in particular, teach us who God is and what he wants to give.

When the members of his synagogue complained that the words of the liturgy did not express what they felt, Abraham Heschel, the great philosopher of religion, replied wisely and very biblically. He told them that the liturgy wasn’t supposed to express what they felt; they were supposed to feel what the liturgy expressed. To be taught by the Bible to pray is to learn to want and feel what the Bible expresses—to say what it means and mean what it says.

Those who have practiced this kind of prayer over time make a surprising discovery: As they learn to feel what the Psalms express, their hearts and desires are enlarged. They find that what they once regarded as strong desires were really weak, puerile little wishes, debased inklings of what is good. Of course! Would not the God who made us in his own image understand better than we ever could what we really need? And shouldn’t we ask him for it? As C. S. Lewis put it,

Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.⁸

The best part of prayer is who you pray to. Answers to prayer are wonderful, but the Answerer is better. Spend enough time with Jesus, and you'll start to look and think and act like Jesus. Seeing is becoming. The church father Irenaeus said, "The glory of God is man fully alive, and the life of man is the vision of God." It's true: God is never more glorified than when we come alive to the vision of God. Prayer is anticipation and preparation for the great day promised in Scripture when we will see Christ fully and "will be like him, for we will see him as he really is."⁹

Augustine prayed,

How shall I call upon my God, my God and my Lord, since in truth when I call upon him I call him into myself? Is there any place within me where God can dwell? How can God come into me, God who made heaven and earth? O Lord my God, is there any place in me that can contain you?¹⁰

Is there any place in us that can contain God? No, there is not. Something must expand us for that to happen. The Psalms are God's gracious gift to us to do that very thing. How sweet and kind of God to give us a book of prayers in his Word. This Word "is alive and powerful . . . sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit, between joint and marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires."¹¹ This is the very Word he gives us to pray in the Psalms!

Paul coined a word to describe the character of Scripture: He said it is "inspired by God" (2 Timothy 3:16). The Greek is literally "God-breathed." The breath of God permeates the Bible. The breath of God is the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit who spoke light into darkness and turned dust into living beings made in the image of God. This is the Spirit who

speaks to us in the Bible, making it “useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right” (2 Timothy 3:16). With this thought no doubt in mind, the poet George Herbert described prayer as “God’s breath in man returning to his birth.”¹² The same Breath that gives us breath to pray comes to us through the God-breathed Scriptures. What we inhale in the Word of God, we exhale in prayer. Like language, what comes in comes out, changing us in the process.

Certainly, God invites us to pour out our hearts to him. The Psalms, which John Calvin called “an anatomy of all parts of the human soul,” can help us do that.¹³ All the joys, pleasures, hopes, fears, despairs, doubts, heartaches, terrors, and longings of which we are capable are mirrored, clarified, sanctified, and transformed in the Psalms, as are all the ways we may pray: supplication, intercession, praise, thanks, lament, and meditation. The Psalms, as many have said, are a mirror; they will reveal you. Yet they are much more. Read them and they will read you. Pray them and they will change you.

Prayer is better than a tool for mere self-expression, unless the self being expressed is the self being shaped by the Word of God into the image of Christ. And who is Christ, but the new Adam, the true human, the faithful Son who lived as we were all created by God to live? When we sin we are apt to excuse ourselves and say, “I’m only human.” But Jesus knows better. He points to himself and says, in effect, “When you sin, you are less than human.” We say, “Just be yourself when you pray.” Jesus says, in effect, “You need to be a self, a true self, before you can be yourself.”

To be in God’s presence is to be transformed. At the end of *The Divine Comedy*, Dante writes of passing through the levels of hell and purgatory before ascending through heaven into God’s very presence. He tries to describe what he saw when he looked into the face of God. Words fail him, for human language cannot express such a sight. But he does describe the effect gazing into the face of God has on his will and desire:

But now my desire and will were revolved, like a wheel which is moved evenly, by the love that moves the sun and other stars.¹⁴

The same love that moves stars and constellations and nebulae moves you. The apostle Paul said that to be in the presence of God is to have a

veil lifted so we “. . . can see and reflect the glory of the Lord. And the Lord—who is the Spirit—makes us more and more like him as we are changed into his glorious image.”¹⁵

James Gilmour, the great Scottish missionary to Mongolia, went to the Psalms again and again when he was stuck in his prayer life, powerless to generate devotion on his own. “When I feel I cannot make headway in devotion, I open the Psalms and push in my canoe, and let myself be carried along in the stream of devotion which flows through the whole book. The current always sets toward God, and in most places is strong and deep.”¹⁶

IT’S ABOUT *US*

So learning to pray is learning to ask for the things that God wants to give. It is to be expanded in mind and spirit. There’s a second thing I didn’t understand about prayer that night in the janitor’s closet: Prayer is not just about me; it’s about us. This is especially the case with the Psalms—the “one size fits some” and the “one size fits all” types. The Psalms were first the prayers of Israel, the people of God. With the coming of Christ they continue to be the prayers of Israel, but now it is the new Israel, the church—all those Jesus “ransomed . . . for God from every tribe and language and people and nation . . . [and] caused . . . to become a Kingdom of priests for our God” (Revelation 5:9-10). For millennia the people of God have prayed the Psalms, corporately and individually, but with the accent always on corporate prayer.

My problem with the Psalms was my problem with prayer: There was too much “me and Jesus” in my praying, and there needed to be a lot more “we and Jesus.” Eugene Peterson is right on the mark when he writes, “No Christian is an only child.”¹⁷ I never pray merely as an individual. Whether I am physically alone or in a group when I pray, I always pray as a member of the Body of Christ, a priest in a whole Kingdom of priests. To come into the presence of the living God is always to come with all those other people who, like me, have been given the same privilege. To ignore them is to reject the gift. “Prayer is an act, indeed *the act of fellowship,*” writes Peter Taylor Forsyth. “We cannot truly pray for ourselves without passing beyond ourselves and our individual experience. . . . Even private prayer is common prayer.”¹⁸

Now that is a liberating thought! When I pray, even if I am alone, I may imagine myself standing in the midst of a colossal assembly of God's people, "from every tribe and language and people and nation"¹⁹ *praying with them*. That insight alone would have transformed that smelly janitor's closet into a place of wonder and awe. According to Hebrews 12, when we pray we enter into a scene that is something like the Rose Bowl on New Year's Day, times a billion: exuberant, majestic, noisy, the mother of all prayer meetings. For when we pray we come to:

Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to countless thousands of angels in a joyful gathering . . . to the assembly of God's firstborn children, whose names are written in heaven . . . to God himself, who is the judge over all things . . . to the spirits of the righteous ones in heaven who have now been made perfect. (Hebrews 12:22-23)

We Don't Start the Praying, We Join the Praying

I am humbled and thrilled to know that the praying doesn't begin when I begin to pray. When I begin to pray, I join the praying! The implications are stunning. When we pray we participate in what the Apostles' Creed calls "the communion of saints." We stand before the throne of God with all who are his—past, present, and future. Peter Kreeft calls God the "eternal contemporary," meaning Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are as alive to him as we are.²⁰ They are really there with us in God's presence, along with countless others, living and dead: Moses and Peter and Paul and J. S. Bach; Luther, Augustine, Aquinas, and my dad. And you. We're all there together.

Enter the Psalms: I may not personally be in the dark pit the man who prayed Psalm 88 was in, but there are many who were and are this very moment, my sisters and brothers in the persecuted church worldwide. We are part of the same Body; we're family in a family closer and more enduring than any earthly family. The psalm enables me to enter into real fellowship with them, whether or not I ever meet them on earth, whether or not I ever experience personally what they experience. Their experiences are ours. I can pray that psalm, and as I do, I pray with them and for them. I may not know their names, but I am, in a very concrete way, obeying Scripture's command to "rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn

with those who mourn.”²¹ The first time I prayed Psalm 88 that way, tears flowed as I saw myself standing with those who grieve so deeply, and praying with them as I prayed for them,

O LORD, God of my salvation,
I cry out to you by day.
I come to you at night.
Now hear my prayer;
listen to my cry.
For my life is full of troubles,
and death draws near.
I am as good as dead,
like a strong man with no strength left.
They have left me among the dead,
and I lie like a corpse in a grave.
I am forgotten,
cut off from your care.
You have thrown me into the lowest pit,
into the darkest depths.²²

Your Place in God’s Story

It took a while for me to appreciate what Paul meant when he said we Gentiles, by the grace of God, have been grafted into the vine of Israel.²³ But when the lights came on, I was stunned and delighted to realize that their story is my story too. It’s *our* story. What happened to Israel at the Red Sea and Sinai and Meribah is as much about me as it is about them. I began to see my name written into the whole biblical story. I started reading and praying the Psalms like a child learning how to read, learning a new “vocabulary, a grammar, and a plot line”²⁴—discovering a family tree I didn’t know I had. Huge parcels of the Psalms that had formerly seemed to belong to someone else started feeling like home, like Psalm 106:

The people made a calf at Mount Sinai;
they bowed before an image made of gold.
They traded their glorious God
for a statue of a grass-eating bull.

They forgot God, their savior,
 who had done such great things in Egypt—
such wonderful things in the land of Ham,
 such awesome deeds at the Red Sea.
So he declared he would destroy them.
 But Moses, his chosen one, stepped between the LORD and
 the people.
He begged him to turn from his anger and not destroy
 them.²⁵

I had known that story for a long time—how those foolish folks had sinned so stupidly but Moses had prayed for them and God had relented in his judgment. I had even made “life application” from that story as the Scriptures encouraged me to do: “These things happened to them as examples for us. They were written down to warn us who live at the end of the age.”²⁶ Yes, of course, I do the same kinds of things they did. God forgive me.

But now! I was no longer learning *from them*; I was learning *about us*. This sin problem is not just my problem; it’s our problem. The implications are critical to spiritual health. I tended to think I sinned mainly in isolation, as an individual. I thought I was taking responsibility for my own actions when I confessed my sins privately, but I was really separating myself from the protection of the community of God’s people, the Body of Christ. Sin flourishes in isolation, for we belong to Christ’s Body, not as members of a group, but as organs in a body. A member of a group can survive outside the group, but a member of a body dies outside the body. My individualistic approach to my sin increased the power that sin had over me. There is great comfort and strength in being able to pray, after a long litany of confession like Psalm 106, “Save *us*, O LORD our God! Gather *us* back from among the nations, so *we* can thank your holy name and rejoice and praise you.”²⁷

Merely knowing this much that night in the janitor’s closet would have been a great encouragement to that little band of praying students. The walls with their shelves of detergent and disinfectants would have been pushed back and opened to include a lot more people—and some very fascinating people, at that. We would have been strengthened to

see that our prayers were not about us as individuals in agreement; they were about us as living stones fitted together in the temple of the Holy Spirit, as royal priests, a holy nation.²⁸ We were a cast of millions, maybe trillions. Prayer is not about me, or you; it is about all of us who belong to God.

NOT ABOUT US, BUT ABOUT GOD

But the third, and biggest, thing I didn't appreciate that night in the janitor's closet is that prayer ultimately is not even about us but about God. It's not about the living stones that make up the temple but the Spirit in the temple. Overcoming this third misconception has been the most transforming of all to my prayer life.

Question: Who are the Psalms about? On the surface, they are about a lot of people: David, especially, but also Moses, Asaph, the sons of Korah, Jeduthun and Heman and Ethan and all Israel. Bigger question: Who is the Bible about? On the surface, the list is even longer. But Jesus made it radically short when he said to his opponents, "You search the Scriptures because you think they give you eternal life. But the Scriptures point to me!"²⁹

This wasn't a throwaway line for Jesus, an odd and obscure saying on the periphery of his teachings, something for future generations of scholars to puzzle over. It was right at the center, because he insisted that his whole mission was not to cancel what we know as the Old Testament Scriptures but to fulfill them.³⁰ To fulfill is to fill-full, to complete what was implicit and incomplete in what came before.

So in Luke's account of the Resurrection, establishing this fulfillment theme was very high on the Lord's priority list. The Gospel writer tells us that, shortly after stepping out of the tomb, Jesus sought out two disciples walking to the village of Emmaus and explained to them what he meant when he said the "Scriptures point to me." Luke says Jesus "took them through the writings of Moses and all the prophets, explaining from all the Scriptures the things concerning himself."³¹ Later he appeared to the apostles and reiterated what he'd said earlier:

"When I was with you before, I told you that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and in the Psalms

must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures.³²

Every Psalm Whispers His Name

Jesus said he fulfilled all the Bible, including the Psalms of the Bible! The apostles grabbed hold of this and ran with it. On the Day of Pentecost, when Peter stood before the crowds in Jerusalem to preach the gospel, he went to one of David’s psalms, Psalm 16, to explain Christ’s resurrection. Peter said,

King David said this about him:

“I see that the LORD is always with me.

I will not be shaken, for he is right beside me.

No wonder my heart is glad,

and my tongue shouts his praises!

My body rests in hope.

For you will not leave my soul among the dead

or allow your Holy One to rot in the grave.

You have shown me the way of life,

and you will fill me with the joy of your presence.”³³

Then Peter did something with the psalm that took tremendous chutzpah and would have been absolutely outrageous if the Lord had not given him the authority to do it: He said that David wasn’t really talking about himself; he was talking about Jesus!

Dear brothers, think about this! You can be sure that the patriarch David wasn’t referring to himself, for he died and was buried, and his tomb is still here among us. But he was a prophet, and he knew God had promised with an oath that one of David’s own descendants would sit on his throne. David was looking into the future and speaking of the Messiah’s resurrection. He was saying that God would not leave him among the dead or allow his body to rot in the grave.³⁴

Peter could say this because Jesus had opened the door for him to say it. The church has been going through that door ever since. The writers of the New Testament write with the conviction that every story and

psalm of the Old Testament “whispers his name.”³⁵ The Bible is all about Jesus. As Peter explained it on the Day of Pentecost, when you pray the psalms of David as the psalms of Jesus, you pray exactly as David intended! You pray with David’s greater Son. Your voice resonates with a voice deeper than yours or David’s. You pray with Jesus. As Bonhoeffer put it, “If we want to read and pray the prayers of the Bible and especially the Psalms, therefore, we must not ask first what they have to do with us [and, I would add, or David or Israel!], but what they have to do with Jesus Christ.”³⁶

So use your imagination. It helps me to think of it this way: I bow my head and begin to pray a psalm. I sense Someone’s presence, I hear Someone’s voice in my head, speaking as I speak. I look up, and behold! There is Jesus praying beside me. He smiles, and I know without his saying a word that when I began to pray it was not I who got his attention; it was he who got my attention. He didn’t join me in my concerns; I joined him in his. As I prayed his Word, my voice joined his voice. Precious mystery! Divine communion! Sweet intimacy!

There is more. I look at Jesus and see gathered around him his Body—countless multitudes there with me, also joined to him in prayer. Gathered from every tribe and language and nation, our voices are somehow subsumed, incorporated into Christ. Yet the intimacy with Jesus is not diluted! We are not a mass but members of a body. Just as every organ in a body is as directly connected to the head as any other organ—the nose no more connected to the head than the little toe—each of us in Christ’s Body is as close to Jesus as we would be if we were the only one. But—and this is crucial—*there would be no intimacy outside the Body.*

My wife grew up in a wonderful, loving family—a mom and a dad with six kids, living on the meager salary of a professor at a Christian college. There may not have been enough money, but there was no shortage of love. When they became adults, the brothers and sisters laughed uproariously when they discovered that each thought he or she was the parents’ favorite child! That’s a little bit like the Body of Christ: love and intimacy not in spite of the family but because of the family.

All the members of the Body of Christ are empowered to pray with Jesus, but never alone with Jesus. His brothers and sisters join their voices with his and pray whatever he prays, as family: “So now Jesus and the ones

he makes holy have the same Father. That is why Jesus is not ashamed to call them his brothers and sisters.”³⁷ If you are in Jesus, you are now permitted to say whatever he says—not in yourself as an individual, but only as a member of Christ’s Body, with everyone else in his Body.

Body and Spirit

This unique relationship of union to Christ in prayer, with others, touches on what is sometimes called the communion of the saints, or the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Blaise Pascal saw with clarity how our love for God, for ourselves, and for each other—and therefore our prayers—are inextricably bound together in the Body (note: Pascal doesn’t capitalize the word *Body* as I do).

But in loving the body [each member] loves itself, because it has no being except in the body, through the body, and for the body. . . . We love ourselves because we are members of Christ. We love Christ because he is the body of which we are members. All are one. One is in the other like the three persons [of the Trinity].³⁸

Here I must tread cautiously and reverently, for I touch on a mystery that goes far beyond my understanding. But for prayer it is a very practical mystery. The organic union of the Body of Christ is rooted in the loving union of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Together, the “community” of God helps us pray. In fact, we are drawn up into the communion of the Godhead when we pray. Jesus, the Son, teaches us to pray to the Father and intercedes for us as we do.³⁹ The Spirit also helps us to pray, as something of a translator. In our weakness we don’t know what God wants us to pray for.

The Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in words. And the Father who knows all hearts knows what the Spirit is saying, for the Spirit pleads for us believers in harmony with God’s own will.⁴⁰

HOW TO PRAY THROUGH THIS BOOK

Given the mystery of prayer, you may wonder how this book can help you learn to pray through the Psalms. *God’s Prayer Book* is a beginner’s

guide to learning to pray the Psalms, a “devotional commentary.” My aim is not to *tell* you what to pray. I want to say just enough about each psalm to stir your heart and imagination to lead you into prayer. So it’s far more devotional than commentary, more workbook than textbook. There are several wonderful commentaries any serious student of the Psalms should acquire. But the guides to prayer in this book say, “Here’s a psalm, here are a few things you should know about it, now use it.” Like a tool—a shovel, a hammer, or a saw—a psalm is best understood by using it, by praying it. Eugene Peterson likes the phrase “owner’s manual”⁴¹ for a book like this. I do too. The main idea is to give you enough information and reflection to get you started using the Psalms to teach you to pray.

Each devotional commentary has three parts:

A Psalm Text

This book contains the complete text of 62 psalms that I believe can transform your prayer life. Read through each psalm slowly and thoughtfully two or three times. The psalm will be better than anything I say about it. Take note of any word or phrase that “glimmers”—stands out or gives you pause. The Holy Spirit may use these “glimmerings” to prompt you to pay attention to some specific matter in your personal life.

A Devotional Window

I offer a short devotional perspective on each psalm only as an aid in understanding and an encouragement to pray. But I am no more than a servant of the Word of God, a kind of pastoral docent in an art museum. Its halls are lined with the works of masters, objects of profound wisdom and breathtaking beauty. My job is to point out a thing or two about these great works and then get out of the way so you can look *into them* more deeply and personally and be taught by the Holy Spirit to pray more like Jesus. Be careful what you look into—the Psalms are mirrors that will look *into you* and read you more searchingly than you will ever read them.

A Prayer Route

The prayer points listed after each devotional are suggested ways to pray the psalm, routes one may take to pray through it, like climbing a great rock.

My son Andy is an expert rock climber. In May 2007 he climbed El

Capitan in the Yosemite Valley, an imposing mass of granite that rises three thousand feet above the valley floor. It's the kind of climb that normally takes a few days and nights—which means climbers typically anchor themselves in portable “ledges” in which to sleep at night.

One of the fascinating things about any great “wall,” as climbers term the rocks they climb, is that there is usually more than one way to the top. The wall is what it is, and it cannot be altered. It must be respected. There is one wall, and no amount of wishing it to be something other than what it is will make it so. Disaster awaits anyone who climbs wishfully. But within the parameters or boundaries the wall offers, there may be several routes for the climber, strategies one may take to move along the contours of the rock.

Like the God who gave them, the Psalms are like these great rocks. They are what they are, and no amount of wishing them to be otherwise will change that. Any attempt to make a psalm what it is not invites spiritual peril. But there are usually a variety of ways to pray through a psalm, while respecting its integrity. The prayer prompts after each devotional window are my suggested routes. They are based on my own prayers and analysis of the Psalms from dialogue with commentators and others I pray with—particularly my wife and the fine folks who have been praying with me these past four years in the school of prayer at Santa Barbara Community Church. But if you are moved to pray in different directions (see above, “A Psalm Text”), by all means do so.

You probably don't know that you know one of the main Hebrew words for belief. It's *amen*. It means to rest on something, to put your full weight down, to lash yourself to a truth as you would a tent to a stake or a rope to a rock face. Every time you pray a psalm, you anchor your soul to God's truth the way a climber rests his or her weight on a handhold on El Capitan—Spanish for something like “*the Lord*.”

One more thing: During Andy's three-day climb, my wife, Laurreta, and I went on a Web site to follow the route he took to the top. The wall is named the Salathe, and the Web site was loaded with photos of the breathtaking vistas he was enjoying on his climb. The prayer routes are like those photos. They're vistas I got when I prayed the Psalms. It is my earnest prayer that they will encourage you to take your own photographs—or better, to paint your own pictures.

But this book is still just a beginner's guide—or perhaps a change of pace for those seasoned in prayer. As you read through each devotional, I invite you to try out some other ways to learn prayer from the Psalms that may serve you over your lifetime. I'll list five.

1. Say Them Out Loud

Just read the Psalms slowly and thoughtfully, assenting to what they say with as much understanding as you have, intellectually and emotionally. Don't just read them, pray them; *say them from the heart*.

Does it strike you as odd that the Word of God, the Bible, should have at its center a prayer book, the Psalms? It's better than odd; it's beautiful and mysterious, for the Psalms contain both the Word God has to say to us about prayer and the words he wants us to say to him in prayer. "This is pure grace," exclaimed Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "that God tells us how we can speak with him and have fellowship with him."⁴²

2. Festoon Them

Think of a psalm as a Christmas tree. Read it and then festoon it with your own prayers, as you would decorate a tree. Your prayers are answers to what God says to you in the psalm. Or think of its words as a road map—let it show you where to go, and then go there. The psalm is your guideline, the Holy Spirit is your guide, and you are the traveler.⁴³

A simple way to understand a psalm's intent is to read it through the lens of the "three Rs": Rejoice, Repent, and Request. Ask these three questions:

Rejoice: What do I find here that gives me cause to rejoice, to give praise and thanks? Then do it.

Repent: What do I read here that brings to light sin in my life? Then confess and repent.

Request: What in this psalm can inform the way I pray for others and myself? Then make your requests of God accordingly.

3. Paraphrase Them

Meditate and study a psalm until you understand it well enough to put it into your own words. Then paraphrase the psalm as you have come to understand it, and pray your paraphrase.

The Living Bible, a paraphrase by Ken Taylor, opened a generation's eyes to the vitality of the Bible. You don't have to be as skilled as Ken Taylor to write a paraphrase that helps you pray from the heart what you hear God saying to you in his Word. No one need read or hear what you have written but you and the Lord, who delights in the prayers of his people.

4. Learn Them by Heart

Memorize the Psalms—but not by rote. Rather, learn them by heart; make their words your words. Come to understand them so well you can recite them—by inflection and tone—as though you had written them yourself. This is, by far, the best way I know to learn to pray the Psalms. I can think of no more powerful way to allow the Word of God to change who you are and how you think. Over the years I have been grateful for every line of Scripture I have committed to memory, but the prayers of the Psalms have offered incomparable comfort and clarity in desperate, murky, and confusing situations, when I didn't have a worthwhile word of my own to say—when I quite literally didn't have a prayer.

5. Marinate in Them

Some people use the Bible like they use spice to liven up the taste of food—a little Tabasco here, some salt and pepper and oregano there; a favorite verse, a “one size fits all” psalm like Psalm 23 or 103 to read when you are (check one) sad or glad or afraid or lonely or struggling with doubt. Nothing wrong with that, unless that's the only way you come to Scripture.

But it's better to use the Psalms as you would a marinade. A spice touches only the surface of the food; a marinade changes its character. Chicken soaked in lemon juice or a steak drenched in garlic and teriyaki sauce isn't the same thing it was before the treatment. The soul should marinate in Scripture by repeated, thoughtful, slow, comprehensive, and Spirit-enlightened reading. Make it your aim for Scripture to be for you what Charles Spurgeon said it was for John Bunyan: “Prick him anywhere, his blood is bibline.”⁴⁴

Soak in the Psalms, using any of the methods I've suggested above: saying, festooning, paraphrasing, and memorizing. Mature Christians have long known that the best way to learn to pray is to pray through the Psalms systematically, psalm by psalm, day in and day out, week by

week and month by month for a lifetime. Liturgical traditions use prayer books with assigned daily readings arranged on a monthly cycle. Anyone can divide them up for monthly (thirty-day) or bimonthly (sixty-day) cycles; just divide 150 by the number of days. A thirty-day cycle would pray Psalms 1 to 5 on the first day of the month, Psalms 6 to 10 on the second day, and so on. It's not complicated.

Woody Allen once said that 80 percent of success is just showing up. So it is that 80 percent of learning to pray is just showing up—and doing it. Saint Benedict promised that this steady practice of prayer would eventually cause the mind to “echo in harmony with the voice.”⁴⁵ Serious prayer is the work of a pilgrim, not the occasional dalliance of a tourist. It comes from what Nietzsche called “a long obedience in the same direction.” Certainly this was what Jesus did. The man who prayed the Psalms so meaningfully on the cross had been drenched in the Psalms from boyhood. As a matter of fact, the first psalm in the Psalter is quite specifically about Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of David.

PSALM 1

- 1 Oh, the joys of those who do not
follow the advice of the wicked,
or stand around with sinners,
or join in with mockers.
- 2 But they delight in the law of the LORD,
meditating on it day and night.
- 3 They are like trees planted along the riverbank,
bearing fruit each season.
Their leaves never wither,
and they prosper in all they do.
- 4 But not the wicked!
They are like worthless chaff, scattered by the wind.
- 5 They will be condemned at the time of judgment.
Sinners will have no place among the godly.
- 6 For the LORD watches over the path of the godly,
but the path of the wicked leads to destruction.



For the LORD watches over the path of the
godly, but the path of the wicked leads
to destruction. (6)

Get ready. Things are going to get violent, even bloody, very quickly. No choice about that. The question is not whether you'll be in the fight but on whose side you'll fight. The choices, just two, spoken of in brief outline in this psalm, will present themselves full blown in the psalms that follow. In Psalm 1 we know them as the path of the godly and the path of the wicked.

These paths are not merely two separate directions, one going east, the other going west, and never colliding. They are two different ways of life, implacably opposed to one another. Neither will tolerate the other.

So get ready. The first two psalms have been called the gateway to the book of Psalms. Strictly speaking, they aren't even prayers but preparation for prayer—meditations on the nature of things in the universe, the world we move in when we pray. So take note; be forewarned: The world of prayer is a world of intense conflict. The enemy is never far away when we pray. Prayer is not escape; it is engagement.

Erwin McManus tells the story of the night his little boy Aaron didn't want the lights off when he went to bed. He was afraid of the demons he had heard about the week before at summer camp. McManus groaned inside and fought back the temptation to say, "They're not real." He knew they are real. Before he could answer, Aaron asked him to pray for him:

"Daddy, Daddy, would you pray for me that I would be safe?" I could feel it. I could feel warm-blanket Christianity beginning to wrap around him, a life of safety, safety, safety.

I said, “Aaron, I will not pray for you to be safe. I will pray that God will make you dangerous, so dangerous that demons will flee when you enter the room.”

And he goes, “All right. But pray I would be really, really dangerous, Daddy.”⁴⁶

I don’t know what McManus did next, but it wouldn’t have been a bad idea to begin to teach Aaron to pray the Psalms. They are the prayers of a warrior, *the* Warrior.



Oh, the joys of those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or stand around with sinners, or join in with mockers. (1)

Examine your life: what you listen to and look at, whom you associate with and identify with. There seems to be a progression in this verse—a descent into hell—from listening to acting to the worst possible place one can ever be: mocking what is true and good.

Old Testament scholar Bruce Waltke compares listening to the advice and ways of sin to looking at the Greek mythological figure Medusa. One look at her and you freeze. To have a frozen heart is to be cold and hard, not only toward God, but also toward other people.

Stop now. Confess the ways you are frozen hearted.

But they delight in the law of the LORD, meditating on it day and night. (2)

Again, examine your life. Do you spend quality time in the Word of God? Is it your delight? Pray that it will be.

Sin is directional: It only looks around, horizontally, but not up. The advice of the wicked, the society of sinners, is all it knows. Righteousness is directional too: It looks up to God and meditates on his ways, his truth, his law. It sees things from heaven’s point of view. Heaven’s perspective is breathtaking and delightful!

James Packer describes this upward look of prayerful meditation as an activity of

calling to mind, thinking over, dwelling on, and applying to oneself the various things one knows about the works and

ways and purpose and promises of God . . . of holy thought, consciously performed in the presence of God, under the eye of God, by the help of God, as a means of communication with God. Its purpose is to clear one's mental and spiritual vision of God, and to let his truth make its full and proper impact on one's mind and heart. It is a matter of talking to oneself about God and oneself.

It is, indeed, often a matter of arguing with oneself, reasoning oneself out of moods of doubt and unbelief into a clear apprehension of God's power and grace.⁴⁷

To pray is to meditate, to hear God and answer God. To hear well is to pray well. We would never speak to God unless God had first spoken to us. Your prayer life will never go further than your grasp of God's Word.

Right now—ask the Lord to speak his Word with “its full and proper impact” into your life.

They are like trees planted along the riverbank, bearing fruit each season. Their leaves never wither, and they prosper in all they do. (3)

Remember, since life is war, you must be sustained for the long haul.

Pursue the life of meditation and prayer the way tree roots seek water.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer believed meditation on the Word of God to be as vital to the health of his soul as water to the vitality of a tree:

Because I am a Christian, therefore, every day in which I do not penetrate more deeply into the knowledge of God's Word in Holy Scripture is a lost day for me. I can only move forward with certainty upon the firm ground of the Word of God. And, as a Christian, I learn to know the Holy Scriptures in no other way than by hearing the Word preached and by prayerful meditation.⁴⁸

Your choice is either to flourish like a well-watered tree or to allow yourself to be blown about like chaff, to be a person of substance or to be shallow and hollow inside. Pray that God will help you choose well.

PSALM 2

- 1 Why are the nations so angry?
 Why do they waste their time with futile plans?
- 2 The kings of the earth prepare for battle;
 the rulers plot together
against the LORD
 and against his anointed one.
- 3 “Let us break their chains,” they cry,
 “and free ourselves from slavery to God.”
- 4 But the one who rules in heaven laughs.
 The Lord scoffs at them.
- 5 Then in anger he rebukes them,
 terrifying them with his fierce fury.
- 6 For the Lord declares, “I have placed my chosen king on the
 throne
 in Jerusalem, on my holy mountain.”
- 7 The king proclaims the LORD’s decree:
 “The LORD said to me, ‘You are my son.
 Today I have become your Father.
- 8 Only ask, and I will give you the nations as your inheritance,
 the whole earth as your possession.
- 9 You will break them with an iron rod
 and smash them like clay pots.”
- 10 Now then, you kings, act wisely!
 Be warned, you rulers of the earth!
- 11 Serve the LORD with reverent fear,
 and rejoice with trembling.
- 12 Submit to God’s royal son, or he will become angry,
 and you will be destroyed in the midst of all your
 activities—
for his anger flares up in an instant.
 But what joy for all who take refuge in him!



Why are the nations so angry? Why do they waste their time with futile plans? The kings of the earth prepare for battle; the rulers plot together against the LORD and against his anointed one. (1-2)

When my mentor retired, I asked him what advice he had for me in my work as a pastor. He had been a wise and courageous minister for decades and had taught me so much. Was there anything else he thought I needed to know? “Don’t take it personally” was what he told me.

“Don’t take what personally?” I asked.

“Don’t take it personally when you get beat up, harassed, and depressed in the ministry. You’re in a war. It goes with the territory.”

I thought about that for a minute, and agreed. When a soldier gets shot at in a battle, he doesn’t get his feelings hurt. It’s not about him; it’s about the war he’s in. He doesn’t look over the top of his foxhole and ask the enemy, “Was it something I said?”

What my mentor told me applies to all believers, not just pastors. Anyone who belongs to Jesus Christ will get Christ’s enemies in the bargain.

That’s what this psalm is about: the enemies of the Christ. *Christ* is Greek for the Hebrew “anointed one.” The nations and kings of the earth hate him. They actually meditate on their hatred. For the word translated “plans” in verse 1 of this psalm is the same word translated *meditate* in Psalm 1.

Remarkable! Just as the Christ delights in and meditates on God’s law,⁴⁹ his enemies meditate on how to overthrow him and his God. While he prays for God’s Kingdom to come, they pray for God’s Kingdom to be overthrown.

This primal conflict is never far from the Psalms, and those who pray

the Psalms are usually engaged in spiritual warfare. The New Testament brings an added insight to this war:

We are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places.⁵⁰

There are unseen powers behind the thrones of this world, darker and more malevolent than the darkest powers we know. The likes of Hitler, Stalin, and Osama bin Laden, along with the multibillion-dollar pornography and abortion industries, are merely slaves, houseboys, and lackeys for these powers.

Psalm 2 not only assures us of the outcome of the battle; it also shows us how to fight the battle—in prayer.

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“Let us break their chains,” they cry, “and free ourselves from slavery to God.” (3)

This is the battle cry of all God’s enemies. The freedom that comes from obedience seems like slavery to them, so they rebel.

Think of rebellion in all its forms—in nations, peoples, families, individuals. How have you raised your fist to God and railed against his authority? Confess brazen rebellion in your own spirit. Confess the rebellious audacity of your community, your nation, even your church.

For the Lord declares, “I have placed my chosen king on the throne in Jerusalem, on my holy mountain.” (6)

Declare the Lord Christ’s sovereignty in your heart. Praise him that God has appointed him ruler over all creation, that every tongue will confess that he is Lord, and that every knee will bow to him in heaven and on earth and under the earth to the glory of God.⁵¹

Only ask, and I will give you the nations as your inheritance, the whole earth as your possession. (8)

The nations are the Father’s to give to his Son—and to his church! Using the very language of this psalm, the risen Christ promises that the church will share in his victory and sovereignty:

To all who are victorious, who obey me to the very end,
 To them I will give authority over all the nations.
 They will rule the nations with an iron rod
 and smash them like clay pots.
 They will have the same authority I received from my Father,
 and I will also give them the morning star!⁵²

Christ's command that his people make disciples of all nations flows directly from the message of Psalm 2. The warfare of this psalm is no less than the battle to preach the gospel to the nations and to win the obedience of faith from all peoples. Both Christ's command and the words of this psalm are the fulfillment of God's promise to Abram to bless all the nations of the earth through him.⁵³

This is a very big psalm—and so is the mission of the church to share in the victory it promises: Christ's victory! As Emil Brunner notes, "The church exists by mission as a fire exists by burning."

Stand before a map or globe and lay your hands on the nations represented there. Pray that Christ's victory will be complete and that you and your church will play your part in that victory. Pray for missionaries, and pray for the church in every nation to be faithful to the very end to preach the Good News of the risen Lord.

Submit to God's royal son, or he will become angry, and you will be destroyed in the midst of all your activities—for his anger flares up in an instant. But what joy for all who take refuge in him! (12)

Consider carefully what is at stake in this battle: either the joy of refuge in Christ or the horror of destruction outside of him. Let the weight and urgency of the gospel move you to prayer for the lost—and to be a bold witness for Christ.

PSALM 3

A psalm of David, regarding the time David fled from his son Absalom.

¹ O LORD, I have so many enemies;
so many are against me.

² So many are saying,
“God will never rescue him!”

Interlude

³ But you, O LORD, are a shield around me;
you are my glory, the one who holds my head high.

⁴ I cried out to the LORD,
and he answered me from his holy mountain.

Interlude

⁵ I lay down and slept,
yet I woke up in safety,
for the LORD was watching over me.

⁶ I am not afraid of ten thousand enemies
who surround me on every side.

⁷ Arise, O LORD!
Rescue me, my God!
Slap all my enemies in the face!
Shatter the teeth of the wicked!

⁸ Victory comes from you, O LORD.
May you bless your people.

Interlude



Arise, O LORD! Rescue me, my God! Slap all my enemies in the face! Shatter the teeth of the wicked! (7)

Were this psalm a movie, the folks who rate films according to their suitability for children would probably give it an R rating for violence and strong language. A slap is one thing, but asking God to break your enemy's teeth is another. True, David was under extreme duress when he prayed this; his son Absalom had led a full-scale rebellion, and many were trying to kill him, grinning mockingly and crowing, "God will never rescue him!" But still, aren't words like that excessively violent for a Christian? Aren't we called to a higher and gentler standard?

Some modern Christians have even excluded psalms like this from use in lectionaries and prayer books. What are we to make of this? I'll let Patrick Henry Reardon answer for me:

This is unmitigated nonsense. The enemies here are the real enemies, the adversaries of the soul, those hostile forces spoken of in the very first verse of the Book of Psalms. . . . To relinquish any of the psalms on the excuse that its sentiments are too violent for a Christian is a clear sign that a person has also given up the very battle that a Christian is summoned from his bed to fight. The psalms are prayers for those engaged in an ongoing spiritual conflict. No one else need bother even opening the book.⁵⁴

The New Testament urges us to see the warfare as spiritual, but that changes nothing about the language and attitudes we should use to pray. Our adversaries may not be "flesh-and-blood enemies,"⁵⁵ but they are

enemies nonetheless. These spiritual powers wage war against our very souls⁵⁶—which Jesus says is a far greater evil than anything mere flesh-and-blood powers can do.

The whole world doesn't equal the value of just one soul:

What do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul? Is anything worth more than your soul?⁵⁷

Nothing in all creation is worth more than your soul, absolutely nothing. Anything or anyone who would try to destroy a soul is an enemy deserving our fiercest anger and prejudice—and our most fervent and desperate prayers for protection.

Do you pray this way for yourself? For your family, for your friends, for the persecuted church?



But you, O LORD, are a shield around me; you are my glory, the one who holds my head high. (3)

Paul said we should put on the whole armor of God to fight this spiritual battle—things like the belt of truth, the body armor of God's righteousness, the shoes of peace, the helmet of salvation, and the shield of faith.⁵⁸ But how, on earth, does one put on things like that? The answer is we put these on with prayer, by praying "in the Spirit at all times and on every occasion."⁵⁹ The point is, the spiritual armor we wear to fight the battle is not a collection of inanimate objects, of "things." *The armor is God.* That's why we pray to fight. As David puts it here, "But you, O LORD, are a shield around me." Merely to pray is to be surrounded and protected by God. So pray for protection—by praying!

Saint Patrick understood the life of spiritual warfare. A long prayer attributed to him, which has no doubt morphed and been added onto through the centuries, is called his "breastplate prayer." Pray it as a way of praying Psalm 3.

I bind unto myself today
The power of God to hold and lead,
His eye to watch, his might to stay,
His ear to hearken to my need;

The wisdom of my God to teach,
 His hand to guide, his shield to ward;
 The word of God to give me speech,
 His heavenly host to be my guard.

Christ be with me, Christ within me,
 Christ behind me, Christ before me,
 Christ beside me, Christ to win me,
 Christ to comfort and restore me,
 Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
 Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
 Christ in hearts of all that love me,
 Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.

I lay down and slept, yet I woke up in safety, for the LORD was watching over me. (5)

For centuries the church has recommended praying this prayer in the morning, thanking God for what is easily overlooked by many of us—that when we let go and fell into sleep the night before, God took care of us, even as he ran the universe, watched over little birds, and kept track of the hairs on our heads.⁶⁰ We have no guarantees that we can fall asleep and wake again, apart from God’s kindness.

With this in mind, pray these words when you awake from sleep each morning.

Victory comes from you, O LORD. May you bless your people. (8)

Declare God’s ultimate victory over the things that appear formidable, even overwhelming. Say it out loud—it can make the exultation of final victory more vivid and real. You might list concerns such as:

war and famine across the globe
 poverty and hopelessness
 HIV/AIDS
 estranged couples and wayward children
 depression

Then say after each, “Victory comes from you, O LORD. May you bless your people.”

- 1 James Boice, *Romans*, vol. 2, “The Reign of Grace,” Romans 5–8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992), 892.
- 2 John 1:1-4
- 3 1 John 4:19
- 4 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1974), 15.
- 5 Charles Spurgeon, *Spurgeon’s Expository Encyclopedia*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1978), 329.
- 6 From Ben Patterson, *He Has Made Me Glad* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 12. Isaac Loeb Peretz (1852–1915) was a Polish Jewish writer of great distinction in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The story, as I tell it, is embellished somewhat but faithful to the events as Peretz told him in his short story, originally titled “Bontsche Shveig.”
- 7 I am indebted to W. Bingham Hunter for this insight in his fine little book on prayer, *The God Who Hears* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 12.
- 8 C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 26.
- 9 1 John 3:2
- 10 Augustine, *The Confessions* (Chicago: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1952), 1.
- 11 Hebrews 4:12
- 12 George Herbert, “Prayer” *The Complete English Works*, edited and introduced by Ann Pasternak Slater (London: David Campbell Publishers, Ltd., 1995), 49.
- 13 Quoted by Samuel Zwemer, *Taking Hold of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1936), 121.
- 14 Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, Canto 33 (Chicago: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1952), 157.
- 15 2 Corinthians 3:18
- 16 Zwemer, *Taking Hold of God*, 121.
- 17 Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 175.
- 18 P. T. Forsyth, *The Soul of Prayer* (London: Independent Press Ltd., 1954), 11.
- 19 Revelation 5:9
- 20 Cf. Matthew 22:31-32
- 21 Romans 12:15, *NIJV*
- 22 Psalm 88:1-6
- 23 Romans 11:13-24
- 24 Rodney Clapp, *Tortured Wonders* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004), 173. Clapp uses these words to describe the whole of Christian spirituality: “In worship and through the sacraments, and in other practices of Christian spirituality, we learn the story of Christ. We are, as it were, written into it—body and soul. Participating in this story, hearing and imitating parts of it like a child learning how to read, we learn a vocabulary, a grammar, and a plot line not otherwise available to us.”
- 25 Psalm 106:19-23
- 26 1 Corinthians 10:11
- 27 Psalm 106:47 (emphasis added)
- 28 1 Peter 2:5, 9
- 29 John 5:39
- 30 Cf. Matthew 5:17, where “accomplish their purpose” has the same meaning as “fulfill” in other translations.
- 31 Luke 24:27

PSALMS FOR SPECIFIC NEEDS

Abandonment

(*see also* Lament, Loneliness)

13, 22, 31, 55, 57

Anger

4, 73, 137

Anxiety

27, 46, 139

Busyness

23, 131

Church/Kingdom of God

76, 87, 122, 133

Confession

6, 32, 38, 51

Confusion (Lies)

12, 14, 37, 120

Contentment

16, 131

Crisis

11, 23, 31, 32, 121

Danger

11, 23, 46

Dark Days

23, 56, 57

Death

16, 90

Delight in God

16, 63

Depression

42, 88

Disappointment

13, 55

Discouragement

42, 59

Dryness (spiritual)

42, 63

Family

27, 128

Fear

46, 55, 123

Frustration

13

Guidance

19, 23

Help

70, 121

Hope in Trial

22, 30, 37, 59, 77

Joy

126, 150

Justice

52, 75

Lament

3, 7, 13, 22, 42, 51, 74, 80

Loneliness

22

Missions

(*see also* Spiritual Warfare)

2, 67, 87, 96