THE DAILY BREAD

The Acts of the Apostles



Praying the Psalms

A FORMATION BOOK BY

Kendall Peterson

The Everyday Apostle

THE DAILY BREAD

The Word Series

Praying the Psalms

The Prayer Book God Wrote for You

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INTRODUCTION

The Prayers You Did Not Have to Write

There are days when you do not know how to pray. Something has happened, or nothing has happened, and you sit down to talk to God and find you have no words. The polite prayers feel false. The memorized ones slide off without touching anything. And the honest thing you are actually feeling, the rage, the fear, the grief, the numb flatness, seems like the last thing you could bring into the presence of God. So you say a hollow Our Father and get up, and the prayer that needed to happen did not happen, because you did not have the words for it.

Here is what almost no one tells the ordinary Catholic man: God saw this coming, and he did something about it. He gave you a book of prayers, a hundred and fifty of them, that cover the entire range of human experience, including all the parts you were sure you could not bring to him. He gave you prayers for when your heart is breaking and prayers for when it is soaring. Prayers for when you are drowning in guilt and prayers for when you are consumed by gratitude. Prayers for when you are so angry you want your enemies destroyed, and yes, those prayers are in there, and God put them there on purpose. He gave you the Psalms.

The Psalms are the prayer book of the people of God. They are the only book of the Bible composed entirely of prayers, and they were given for exactly the situation described above: the situation of a man who needs to pray and does not have the words. On the day you cannot find your own words, you can pray God's, and discover that he has already written the prayer your soul was trying to pray.

Think about what it means that God did this. He did not leave prayer entirely up to us, to be invented from scratch by each person in each moment of need, which would have left most of us mute in exactly the moments we most needed to pray. He gave us a book. He put words in our mouths. A father teaching a small child to talk supplies the words the child cannot yet form, saying them slowly so the child can repeat them until they become the child's own. God has done this with prayer. In the Psalms he supplies the words we cannot form, so that we can say them after him until they become our own, until we can pray them from the heart and eventually pray beyond them in words of our own that the Psalms have taught us how to shape. The Psalms are the school of prayer, the place where God teaches his children to speak to him by giving them the words first. No man is too

inarticulate, too far gone, too wordless for this, because the articulacy is provided. You bring only your voice and your need. God supplies the rest.

> *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.* — Colossians 3:16

This book is about how to pray them. Not how to study them, though we will learn a little about where they came from and how they work, but how to pray them, how to make these ancient words your own words, so that on the day you have nothing to say, you are not left silent. We will look at what the Psalms are and why they matter. We will confront the honesty of the Psalms, including the parts that shock people, because that honesty is the key to everything. We will walk through the different kinds of Psalms and when to reach for each. We will see how Jesus himself prayed them, and how the Church has prayed them without ceasing for two thousand years. And we will end with the practical business of making the Psalms part of your actual life.

The aim is that you never again sit down to pray and find yourself wordless. The words have been provided. A hundred and fifty of them. They are, as always, waiting.

A word about why this matters especially for men. Men are often taught, without anyone ever saying it directly, that the acceptable emotions are few and the rest must be managed in silence. A man learns to present competence, control, and calm, and to keep the rest, the fear, the grief, the fury, the doubt, locked somewhere no one can see. This works, more or less, in the world of work and appearance. It is catastrophic in the life of prayer, because the God who made you is not asking for your managed presentation. He is asking for you, the actual you, including all the parts you have spent years learning to hide. The Psalms are God's direct assault on the masculine habit of hiding from him. They take a man who has learned to bring only his competent surface to God and they hand him words for everything underneath it, and they say: bring this too. Bring all of it. That is what this book is really about. Not a technique for prayer, but permission, God's own permission, written into his inspired word, for a man to stop hiding and bring his whole self into the presence of the God who already sees it anyway.

CHAPTER ONE

The Prayer Book of the People of God

What the Psalms Are

The Book of Psalms is a collection of one hundred and fifty prayers, most of them originally sung, composed over a span of centuries by many hands, though David is the towering figure behind them and the author of a great many. The Hebrew name for the book is Tehillim, which means praises. The Greek name, from which our English word comes, is Psalmoi, meaning songs sung to the accompaniment of a stringed instrument. Both names tell you something. These are praises, and these are songs. They were meant to be sung, in worship, by the whole gathered people of God.

Not About God, But To God

The first thing to understand about the Psalms is what makes them different from almost everything else in Scripture. Most of the Bible is God speaking to us: the Law, the Prophets, the Gospels, the letters, all of it is, in various ways, God's word addressed to his people. The Psalms are different. The Psalms are us speaking to God. They are the one book in the Bible that is primarily prayer, human words directed upward, and yet, remarkably, they are also inspired Scripture, God's own word. This is the great paradox and the great gift of the Psalms: they are simultaneously the words we say to God and the words God gave us to say. When you pray a Psalm, you are praying words that come from your own heart and words that come from God's, at the same time. God has, in effect, written your side of the conversation for you, so that even your speaking to him is carried by his own inspired word.

> *O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.* — Psalm 51:15

The Whole Range of a Human Life

The second thing to understand is the sheer range of the Psalms. This is what makes them the complete prayer book. There is no human condition that does not have a Psalm. Consider the range. There are Psalms of pure praise, exploding with joy at the goodness and greatness of God. There are Psalms of desperate lament, cried out from the pit by a man who feels abandoned. There are Psalms of confession, in which the sinner lays his guilt bare. There are Psalms of thanksgiving, of trust, of wisdom, of longing, of triumph, of exhaustion. There are Psalms for the man watching the wicked prosper and losing his grip on why goodness matters. There are Psalms for the man who has everything and still feels the ache. Whatever a man is feeling, whatever season he is in, there is a Psalm that has already put it into words and lifted it toward God.

This is why the Psalms have been the backbone of prayer for the people of God for three thousand years. They do not require you to already be in a good spiritual state before you pray them. They meet you exactly where you are, in whatever condition, and they give you words to bring that condition to God. The man who is furious can pray a Psalm of

anger. The man who is grieving can pray a Psalm of lament. The man who cannot feel anything can pray a Psalm of desolation and mean every flat, numb word of it. The Psalms are not for the man who has it together. They are for the man in the middle of real life, which is to say, they are for you.

A Prayer Book You Grow Into

There is a further mercy in the range of the Psalms, one that reveals itself over years of praying them. When you pray a Psalm whose emotion you do not currently feel, you are not praying falsely. You are praying for the whole Body of Christ. When you pray a Psalm of grief on a day you feel fine, you are lending your voice to the countless members of the Church who are grieving right now and may not have the words. When you pray a Psalm of joy on a day you feel flat, you are joining the praise of those whose hearts are full. The Psalms are never merely private. To pray them is to pray with and for the whole people of God across all time, so that no Psalm is ever inappropriate to your mood, because you are never praying only for yourself. This is one of the deep things the Church understood when she built her daily prayer on the Psalms, and we will return to it.

The Man Behind So Many of Them

It is worth knowing something about David, because his fingerprints are all over the Psalter and his life explains its honesty. David was a shepherd, a warrior, a musician, and a king. He was also an adulterer and, through the engineered death of a loyal soldier, a murderer. He was a flawed father whose household fractured in violence, a man who failed in about every way a man can fail. And he is the one Scripture calls a man after God′s own heart. This should stop us. The title was not earned by a clean record; David′s record is a wreck. It was earned by something else: by the completeness with which David brought his entire self to God, holding nothing back. He sang his triumphs and his sins, his faith and his fury, his praise and his despair, all of it, directly to God, in the Psalms that pour out of his life. That total honesty, that refusal to hide any part of himself from God, is what made him a man after God′s own heart. And it is the model the Psalms hold out to every man who prays them. You will not be made a man after God′s own heart by presenting God a clean record you do not have. You will be made one, as David was, by bringing him the real record, all of it, in honest prayer.

CHAPTER TWO

The Honesty That Shocks People

Why Nothing Is Off Limits

If you actually read the Psalms, and not just the handful of comforting ones that appear on greeting cards, you will eventually run into something that stops you cold. The Psalms are not polite. They are not the sanitized, careful, emotionally managed prayers that most of us think we are supposed to bring to God. They are raw. They are sometimes shocking. And that rawness is not a flaw to be excused. It is the single most important thing the Psalms have to teach a man about prayer.

The Prayers of Rage

Scattered through the Psalter are prayers that make comfortable modern Christians deeply uncomfortable. There are Psalms in which the one praying asks God to destroy his enemies in vivid and violent terms. The most notorious ends by pronouncing a blessing on anyone who would seize the infants of Babylon and dash them against the rocks. Others ask God to break the teeth of the wicked, to let them vanish like water, to pour out his wrath upon them. These are called the imprecatory Psalms, the Psalms of cursing, and many a modern reader, encountering them, quietly concludes they must be a primitive embarrassment, a leftover from a cruder age, certainly not something a Christian should pray.

This conclusion, however understandable, misses the point so completely that it is worth stopping to correct, because the correction unlocks the whole book. The shocking honesty of the imprecatory Psalms is not a defect. It is a revelation about what God is willing to receive from us. God included these prayers in his inspired word deliberately. He is telling us something. He is telling us that he would rather have our rage brought honestly to him than have us hide it behind a mask of false serenity. The man praying the Psalm of cursing is doing something profoundly healthy: he is taking his violent, vengeful, murderous feelings, which he really has, and instead of acting on them, he is handing them to God. He is saying, in effect, here is what is actually in me, this darkness, this desire for the destruction of the ones who have wronged me. I am not going to pretend it is not here. I am going to give it to you.

> *O Lord, how many are my foes. Arise, O Lord. Deliver me, O my God.* — Psalm 3:1,7

The Alternative to Honesty Is Not Holiness

Here is the crucial insight for a man's prayer life. The alternative to bringing your rage to God is not that the rage disappears. The alternative is that the rage goes underground, where it festers, where it hardens into resentment, where it eventually comes out sideways in ways that do real damage. The man who cannot bring his anger to God in prayer does not become a serene man. He becomes a man carrying a hidden reservoir of anger that poisons him from within. The Psalms offer a different path: bring it up, bring

it to God, say the true and terrible thing directly to him, and let him do with it what only he can do. The imprecatory Psalm is a controlled release. It takes the poison out of the man and puts it in the hands of the only one who can handle it safely.

This connects to something a man learns in the spiritual battle, and it is worth naming for the man doing the Acts station on spiritual warfare. The enemy of your soul does not mind if you have rage. He minds if you bring it into the light. Rage kept in the dark is his territory; he can work with it, grow it, twist it into bitterness and eventually into the kind of hatred that destroys a man. Rage brought honestly to God in the words of a Psalm is taken out of the enemy's reach. This is why the honesty of the Psalms is not a spiritual liability but a spiritual weapon. The man who has learned to pray his anger to God has taken away one of the enemy's most reliable tools.

The Man Whose Child Was Harmed

It helps to make this concrete, because the imprecatory Psalms are easy to dismiss in the abstract and impossible to dismiss once you feel their weight. Consider the most shocking of them, the one that ends by blessing the man who would dash the infants of Babylon against the rocks. Read coldly, it is monstrous. But it was written by exiles, men who had watched Babylon's armies do exactly that to their own children, who had seen their infants killed and their city burned and their people marched off in chains. The Psalm is the cry of men who have suffered an atrocity, and it is giving voice to the most natural human response to atrocity: the desire that the same be done to those who did it. Now consider a man in your own world whose child has been destroyed by another man, through violence, through abuse, through a drunk driver. The rage that fills such a father is total and, in a sense, righteous. What is he to do with it? He cannot act on it without becoming a murderer himself. He cannot pretend it away without being consumed by it. The Psalm gives him the third path: he can bring it, all of it, the full murderous fury, and lay it before God, in words God himself provided, and let God be the judge and the avenger, which is precisely what God claims to be. The imprecatory Psalm is not permission to hate. It is the safe channel through which even the most violent human anguish can be handed to God rather than acted out or buried. It trusts God enough to tell him the terrible truth.

> *Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.* — Romans 12:19

Notice what happens in that handing over. When the father brings his rage to God and asks God to be the avenger, he is, in the same act, renouncing his own right to vengeance. He is saying: this is yours, not mine; you deal with it; I cannot and will not. The imprecatory Psalm, prayed honestly, is therefore not the opposite of forgiveness but often

the first step toward it, because it takes the vengeance out of the man's own hands and places it in God's. The man who has genuinely handed his enemy over to God's justice has begun, however painfully, to let go of the enemy's hold on him. This is why God gave us these prayers. Not to nurse our hatred, but to give us a way to release it that does not require us to first pretend it was not there.

Every Emotion Is Welcome

Once you understand this about the Psalms of rage, you understand it about everything. If God will receive your murderous anger, he will certainly receive your grief, your fear, your doubt, your despair, your confusion at his apparent absence. The Psalms model the bringing of all of it. There are Psalms that accuse God of sleeping, of forgetting, of hiding his face. There are Psalms that end without resolution, in darkness, the one just before the darkest ending simply with the word darkness. The Psalter does not require you to tie a bow on your prayer. It does not require you to arrive at a hopeful conclusion. It lets you bring the unresolved thing and leave it unresolved, in God's presence, which is the truest thing a man in genuine anguish can do. The lesson is total and liberating: there is nothing you feel that you cannot bring to God. He has already written the prayer for it.

The Psalm That Ends in Darkness

There is one Psalm worth naming on its own, because it does something no other does and something a suffering man desperately needs to know is permitted. The eighty-eighth Psalm is a lament that never turns. Every other lament, however dark, eventually pivots toward trust or praise. This one does not. It begins in trouble, deepens into greater trouble, and ends, its final word in the Hebrew, with darkness. There is no resolution, no upward turn, no bow tied on the suffering. And God put it in the Bible. He inspired a prayer that ends in unrelieved darkness and made it part of his own word. Consider what mercy that is. It means that on the day your suffering has no resolution, when you cannot honestly reach the turn toward trust, when the darkness is simply the truth of where you are, you are not failing at prayer and you are not excluded from it. There is a Psalm for you too, a Psalm that ends where you are, in the dark, and God receives it as prayer. You do not have to pretend to a hope you cannot feel. You can bring the darkness, name it fully, and leave it before God unresolved, and that raw and hopeless-sounding prayer is as pleasing to him as the most triumphant praise, because it is true, and he wanted the true thing. Psalm 88 is God's permission to pray from the bottom, with no light in sight, and be heard.

CHAPTER THREE

The Prayer Book Jesus Prayed

The Psalms in the Mouth of Christ

Before we learn to pray the Psalms, it is worth understanding that we are learning to pray the prayers of Jesus. The Psalms were the prayer book of Jesus Christ. He grew up praying them, as every devout Jew did. He knew them by heart. They shaped his interior life, and at the most important moments of his existence, they were on his lips.

On the Cross

Consider the crucifixion. As Jesus hung dying, the words that came out of him were the words of a Psalm. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me. Many hear that cry as a shout of pure despair, and it is a cry of genuine anguish, but it is also the opening line of the twenty-second Psalm, a Psalm Jesus clearly knew intimately. He was praying. In the extremity of his suffering, when he could barely breathe, he reached for the Psalter, for the prayer that had put his exact anguish into words centuries before he was born. And that Psalm, which begins in abandonment, moves through the description of a suffering that reads like an eyewitness account of crucifixion, and ends in vindication and praise. When Jesus prayed its first line, he was invoking the whole. His last recorded words, in Luke, are also from a Psalm: Father, into your hands I commit my spirit. He died praying the Psalms.

It is worth staying with Psalm 22 a moment longer, because it reveals something about how the Psalms work that transforms how you pray them. The Psalm begins in what sounds like total abandonment, the cry of a man convinced God has forsaken him. If you stopped at the first line, you would think it a Psalm of pure despair. But it does not stop there. It moves through a harrowing description of suffering, surrounded by enemies, bones out of joint, hands and feet pierced, garments divided by lot, details that read, written centuries before the event, like an eyewitness account of a crucifixion. And then it turns, as the laments do, and ends not in darkness but in triumph and universal praise, all the ends of the earth turning to the Lord. When Jesus prayed its opening line from the cross, he was not expressing simple despair. He was invoking the entire Psalm, the whole arc from abandonment through suffering to vindication, praying it as his own because it was, in the deepest sense, written about him. This is the pattern of Christian suffering: it is real, it cries out honestly, and it moves, in God's time, toward vindication. The man who learns to pray Psalm 22 in his own darkness is praying himself into that same arc, joining his abandonment to Christ's and, with Christ, being carried toward the ending the Psalm promises.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? — Psalm 22:1

Praying With Christ

This changes what you are doing when you pray a Psalm. You are not merely reciting ancient Hebrew poetry. You are praying the very prayers that formed the human heart of the Son of God, the prayers he prayed at the table, in the synagogue, on the mountainside, and in his agony. When you pray Psalm 22 in your own darkness, you are praying the prayer Jesus prayed in his. When you pray a Psalm of trust, you are joining your voice to his. The tradition has long understood that in the Psalms, it is Christ himself who prays, and that when we pray them, we pray in him and he prays in us. The whole Christ, head and members, prays the Psalms together. You are never praying them alone. You are praying them with Jesus, who prayed them first and prays them still in his Body.

This also unlocks the Psalms that seem too grand for you, the ones spoken by a king, or a righteous sufferer, or a voice of perfect confidence you do not feel. You can pray them because Christ prays them, and you are in Christ. The Psalm that speaks with a righteousness you do not possess is prayed truthfully because the one you are praying in does possess it. And the Psalm of suffering that seems too extreme for your comfortable life is prayed rightly because you are lending your voice to the whole suffering Body of Christ, in which someone, right now, is suffering exactly that much. The Psalms fit, always, because you pray them in the one to whom they perfectly belong.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Kinds of Psalms

Knowing Which One to Reach For

The hundred and fifty Psalms are not a uniform mass. They fall into recognizable kinds, and learning the kinds is enormously practical, because it lets you reach for the right Psalm for the condition you are in. What follows is not a scholarly taxonomy but a working man's map: the main types, what each is for, and when to turn to it.

Psalms of Lament

The largest single category in the Psalter is lament. This surprises people who assume prayer should be mostly praise. But God, who knows the human condition, gave us more prayers of complaint than of any other kind, because he knew how much of life is spent in

trouble. The Psalms of lament follow a rough pattern: they cry out to God, they describe the trouble honestly, they ask for help, and most, though not all, turn at some point toward trust. These are the Psalms for the hard days, the days of grief, fear, sickness, betrayal, failure, and darkness. When life has knocked you down, reach for a lament. Psalm 13, how long O Lord, will you forget me forever. Psalm 42, my soul thirsts for God, as a deer pants for water. Psalm 130, out of the depths I cry to you. These are the prayers for the pit, and there are many of them because God knew you would need them.

Psalms of Praise

The Psalms of praise do the opposite work: they lift the heart in adoration of who God is and what he has done. They are not asking for anything. They are simply celebrating God, his greatness, his creation, his faithfulness, his mercy. These are the Psalms for the good days, when the heart is full and wants to overflow, and also, importantly, for the flat days when you need to praise as an act of the will rather than the emotions. Psalm 103, bless the Lord, O my soul. Psalm 145, I will extol you, my God and King. Psalm 150, the great final explosion of praise that ends the whole Psalter, let everything that has breath praise the Lord. When your heart is full, reach for praise. When it is empty and you want to prime it, reach for praise anyway.

> *Let everything that has breath praise the Lord.* — Psalm 150:6

Psalms of Thanksgiving

Close to praise but distinct from it are the Psalms of thanksgiving, which give thanks for a specific deliverance, a particular rescue, a concrete gift received. Where praise adores God for who he is, thanksgiving thanks him for what he has just done. These are the Psalms for the moment after the crisis has passed, when you have come through something and want to acknowledge that God brought you through. Psalm 30, I will extol you, O Lord, for you have drawn me up. Psalm 116, I love the Lord, because he has heard my voice. When you have been rescued, reach for thanksgiving, and do not skip it, because the failure to give thanks is one of the great quiet corrosions of the spiritual life.

Psalms of Trust

The Psalms of trust are the ones that rest in God′s care with a settled confidence. The most beloved of all Psalms, the twenty-third, is a Psalm of trust: the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. These are the Psalms for when you need to steady yourself, to remember who is holding you, to quiet an anxious heart. Psalm 23, Psalm 27, the Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear, Psalm 91, he who dwells in the shelter of the Most

High. Keep these close. They are the Psalms to pray when fear is rising and you need to plant your feet on the fact of God's care.

Psalms of Confession

A smaller but vital group are the penitential Psalms, the prayers of a sinner bringing his guilt to God. The greatest of these is the fifty-first, David's prayer after his sin with Bathsheba was exposed, one of the most complete confessions ever written: have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love. These are the Psalms for after you have fallen, for preparing to go to Confession, for the honest reckoning with your own sin. When you have failed and need to bring it to God, reach for a penitential Psalm, and let David, who fell about as far as a man can fall and was still called a man after God's own heart, teach you how to come back.

Psalms of Wisdom

Finally there are the wisdom Psalms, which teach rather than cry out or celebrate, reflecting on how to live, on the difference between the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked, on the goodness of God's law. The first Psalm is one of these, and the longest of all Psalms, the hundred and nineteenth, is an extended meditation on the beauty of God's word. These are Psalms to sit with when you want to be formed in wisdom, to have your sense of what matters recalibrated toward God's. They reward slow reading and repay a lifetime of return.

How to Use This Map

You do not need to memorize these categories or become a scholar of Psalm types. The map is for one practical purpose: so that when you are in a particular condition, you know roughly where in the Psalter to reach. Grief points you toward the laments. Rescue points you toward thanksgiving. Fear points you toward the Psalms of trust. Sin points you toward the penitential Psalms. A full heart points you toward praise. Over time, as you pray the Psalms, you will stop needing the map at all, because you will simply know, the way a man who has lived somewhere long enough no longer needs directions, which Psalm to reach for. Until then, keep the categories loosely in mind, and let them guide you to the right prayer when your own resources fail. That is the whole use of knowing the kinds: not knowledge for its own sake, but knowing where to turn on the day you need to turn somewhere.

CHAPTER FIVE

How the Psalms Work

The Poetry That Prays

To pray the Psalms well, it helps to understand a little about how they are built, because Hebrew poetry works differently from the poetry most of us grew up with, and knowing the difference changes how you read.

Not Rhyme, But Rhythm of Thought

English poetry, in the tradition most of us absorbed, tends to rhyme sounds. Hebrew poetry does something else: it rhymes ideas. The basic building block of a Psalm is a pair of lines in which the second line answers, echoes, intensifies, or completes the first. This is called parallelism, and once you see it, you see it everywhere in the Psalms. The Lord is my shepherd, that is the first line, I shall not want, the second line draws the consequence. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters. The two lines belong together; the second deepens the first.

This matters for prayer because it tells you how to pace yourself. You do not rush through a Psalm line by line. You pray the first line, then let the second line land as its answer. The parallelism creates a natural rhythm, a call and response within the prayer itself, that slows you down and lets each thought complete before you move on. Praying the Psalms in this rhythm, unhurried, letting each pair of lines breathe, is close to Lectio Divina, and in fact the Psalms are among the finest texts for Lectio precisely because their structure teaches you to slow down.

As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. — Psalm 42:1

The Turn

Many Psalms, especially the laments, contain a turn, a hinge where the prayer pivots. It begins in trouble, describing the distress at length, and then, often on a single word like but or yet, it turns toward trust. Psalm 13 spends four verses on how long, O Lord, and then turns: but I have trusted in your steadfast love. Learning to notice the turn is important, because it teaches you the shape of honest prayer. You do not have to leap immediately to trust. You are allowed to dwell in the trouble, to describe it fully, to hold nothing back. And then, when you are ready, and the Psalm shows you when, you turn. The turn is not a denial of the trouble. It is the choice to bring trust into the middle of the trouble, which is the deepest act of faith a suffering man can make. Some Psalms never turn, and that too is permitted. But most do, and they teach a man how his own prayer can move from anguish toward hope without ever pretending the anguish was not real.

Made to Be Sung

One more thing about how the Psalms work: they were songs. Every one of them was composed to be sung, often with instruments, in the worship of the gathered people. We have lost most of the original melodies, but the fact that they were songs still matters, because it tells you something about the kind of prayer they are. A song engages the whole person, body and breath and emotion, not just the analyzing mind. When you sing, or even when you speak rhythmically, something in you opens that stays closed in silent reading. This is why the Church has always chanted the Psalms rather than merely reading them, and why a man who is willing to hum or chant or simply speak a Psalm aloud with some sense of its rhythm will find it reaching deeper than a Psalm scanned silently off a page. You do not need a good voice. You need only to remember that these are songs, and to let your prayer of them be, in whatever modest way, a little more like singing and a little less like reading. There is a companion book in this library on music and worship that develops this at length; for now it is enough to know that the Psalms want to be sung, and that giving them even a little of your voice honors what they are.

CHAPTER SIX

The Church at Prayer

The Psalms Without Ceasing

You are not the first to pray the Psalms, and you will not be praying them alone. For as long as there has been a Church, and for a thousand years before that among the people of Israel, the Psalms have been prayed continuously, without a single day's interruption, by the people of God. When you take up the Psalms, you join a river of prayer that has been flowing without stopping for three thousand years.

The Liturgy of the Hours

The Church's official daily prayer, the Liturgy of the Hours, is built almost entirely on the Psalms. At fixed times through the day, in monasteries and rectories and increasingly in the homes and on the phones of ordinary laypeople, the Church prays through the Psalter on a repeating cycle, so that the Psalms are always being prayed, somewhere, by someone, in the name of the whole Body of Christ. When you pray Morning Prayer or Evening Prayer, you are not praying a private devotion. You are joining the official prayer of the Church, adding your voice to a chorus that circles the globe and never falls silent. There is a companion volume in this library devoted entirely to the Liturgy of the Hours, and the man who falls in love with the Psalms through this book will find the Hours the

natural next step, the structured, daily, ecclesial way of praying the Psalms that the Church has refined over centuries.

Seven times a day I praise you for your righteous rules. — Psalm 119:164

Praying With the Whole Body

This connects back to the great gift we named earlier. Because the Psalms are the prayer of the whole Church, you are never limited to the ones that match your mood. When you pray a Psalm of joy on a heavy day, you lend your voice to the joyful members of the Body. When you pray a lament on a good day, you carry the sorrowing members in your prayer. The monk praying the full cycle of Psalms does not pray only what he feels. He prays the whole range, every day and every week, because he is praying not merely for himself but for the entire Church and the entire world. This is a liberating thing to understand, because it removes the pressure to feel the Psalm you are praying. You do not have to. You are praying it in solidarity, in Christ, with and for everyone. The feeling is optional. The solidarity is the point.

An Unbroken Inheritance

There is something steadying in knowing that the words you pray have been prayed by an unbroken line stretching back through history. The Psalm you pray this morning was prayed by the desert monks, by the medieval religious, by the persecuted faithful in every century, by the saints you admire, by Jesus himself. When you pray Psalm 23, you are saying words that have been said over deathbeds and battlefields and altars for three thousand years, words that comforted the dying and steadied the frightened and lifted the grateful across the whole span of the people of God. You are not inventing your prayer life from scratch. You are receiving an inheritance, worn smooth and made trustworthy by three thousand years of use, and adding your own voice to it for the length of your life before handing it on.

The Company You Pray In

There is a particular comfort here for the man who prays alone, which is most men most of the time. You sit in your kitchen before dawn, or in your car before work, and you open the Psalms, and it feels solitary. It is not. The moment you begin a Psalm, you step into a vast company. Somewhere a monastery is chanting the same Psalm at the same hour. Somewhere a priest is praying it in his breviary, a mother in her exhaustion, a prisoner in his cell, a dying man in his last hours. And behind the living stretches the whole company of the dead who prayed it before you, the saints in glory who prayed these words on earth and pray them still. When you pray a Psalm, you are never in an empty room. You are in

the largest gathering in the universe, the whole communion of saints, living and dead, lifting the same ancient words to the same God. The solitude is an illusion the Psalms quietly dissolve. You pray alone only in appearance. In reality you have joined the endless choir, and your single voice in a dark kitchen is part of a song that fills heaven.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Praying Them as Your Own

Making Ancient Words Personal

The great obstacle men report with the Psalms is that they can feel like someone else's words. You are reading about enemies you do not have, in a landscape you have never seen, using images from a herding and farming world three thousand years gone. How do these become your prayer, the honest cry of your own heart, rather than a recitation of an ancient text? Here is how.

Find Yourself in the Psalm

The first move is to find your own life inside the Psalm's images. The enemies in the Psalms need not be literal armies. Your enemies are real: the addiction you cannot beat, the fear that stalks you, the injustice done to you, the temptation that keeps winning, the voice of accusation in your own head. When the Psalm cries out against enemies who surround him, you can bring your enemies, the real forces arrayed against your soul, into those words. When the Psalm speaks of the pit, bring your own pit, the specific darkness you have been in. When it speaks of green pastures and still waters, bring the rest your own soul is longing for. The images are deliberately broad so that every man in every age can pour his own particular life into them. Do not read past them as ancient scenery. Fill them with your own reality, and the ancient prayer becomes precisely your prayer.

Pray Them Slowly, and Often

The second move is repetition. A Psalm prayed once may feel foreign. The same Psalm prayed every day for a month becomes part of you. The words work their way in, until one day you find them rising on their own at the moment you need them, the way Psalm 22 rose in Jesus on the cross because he had prayed it ten thousand times before. The Psalms are meant to be prayed repeatedly, cyclically, until they are memorized not as a feat but as a natural consequence of long use, until they live in you and become the native language of your soul before God. Choose a few Psalms that speak to your current season

and pray them daily. Let them sink in. Over time they stop being words on a page and become the words your own heart reaches for.

I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you. — Psalm 119:11

Let the Psalm Correct You

The third move is subtler. Sometimes the Psalm will not match your mood, and instead of forcing your mood onto the Psalm, you let the Psalm form your mood. If you come to prayer self-satisfied and pray a penitential Psalm, it can crack you open and show you the sin you were ignoring. If you come despairing and pray a Psalm of trust, it can, slowly, lift your eyes. The Psalms are not only a mirror that reflects what you already feel. They are also a teacher that shapes what you ought to feel, drawing the angry man toward eventual peace, the frightened man toward trust, the proud man toward humility, the numb man toward praise. Let them do this work. Do not only use the Psalms to express yourself. Let the Psalms, over time, remake the self that is doing the expressing.

A Worked Example: Psalm 23

Take the most familiar Psalm and see how these moves turn it from recitation into prayer. The Lord is my shepherd. Before you rush on, stop. Is he? Do you pray this as a fact you are resting in, or as a claim you are reaching for on a day you do not feel shepherded at all? Either way, pray it as yours: either resting in it or reaching for it. I shall not want. Bring your actual wants here, the things you are anxious about lacking, and hold them against this line, letting it challenge and comfort you. He makes me lie down in green pastures. When did you last lie down, actually rest, in the presence of God? Bring your exhaustion here, your inability to stop, and let the line name the rest your soul is starving for. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. Bring your depleted soul, the specific ways you are running dry, and pray this as the restoration you need. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me. Now name your valley, the specific darkness you are walking through or dreading, and pray this line into it: not a denial that the valley is dark, but the declaration that you are not walking it alone. Do you see how the familiar Psalm, prayed this way, filled with your own life line by line, stops being a funeral recitation and becomes the intimate prayer of a man bringing his real exhaustion and fear and longing to the God who shepherds him? That is praying the Psalms as your own. Every Psalm yields to it.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Building the Psalms Into a Life

The Practical Rule

As with any practice, the Psalms will change your life only if they become a habit rather than an occasional visitor. Here is how to build them in.

A Psalm a Day

The simplest possible beginning is one Psalm a day. Not a rushed reading, but a slow, prayed Psalm, in the rhythm we have described, filling the images with your own life, letting the parallelism pace you. You can move through the Psalter in order, which takes about five months at one a day and gives you the whole range. Or you can pray the Psalms the Church assigns each day in the Mass or the Liturgy of the Hours, tying your prayer to hers. Or you can keep a small set of Psalms you return to, matched to your seasons. Any of these works. What matters is the daily return, the one Psalm faithfully prayed, which over a year becomes a hundred and fifty prayers deeply lived.

Match the Psalm to the Day

As you grow familiar with the kinds of Psalms, let your choice sometimes follow your condition. On the day of grief, pray a lament. On the day of rescue, pray a thanksgiving. On the day of fear, pray a Psalm of trust. On the day after a fall, pray a penitential Psalm. This is one of the great practical gifts of knowing the Psalter: you always have the right prayer available. Keep a short list somewhere you can find it, a lament, a praise, a trust, a confession, a thanksgiving, the Psalm numbers noted, so that on the day you are leveled and cannot think, you can reach for the one that fits and let it pray for you.

Pray Them Aloud

The Psalms were made to be spoken and sung, and they come alive when prayed aloud, even quietly, even in a murmur. Speaking them slows you down, engages more of you, and plants them deeper. If your circumstances permit, pray the Psalm aloud, or at least move your lips. The ancient people of God did not read the Psalms silently in their heads. They sang them, chanted them, spoke them into the air. You will find the Psalms yield more when your voice is involved, when the prayer is embodied and not merely mental.

I will sing to the Lord as long as I live. — Psalm 104:33

Let Them Be There for the Wordless Day

Finally, and most importantly, remember why you are building this habit. You are storing up the Psalms against the day you will need them and have nothing of your own. The man who prays the Psalms daily in the ordinary seasons is preparing for the

extraordinary one, the day of catastrophe, of grief, of fear so great it steals his words. On that day, the man who has lived in the Psalms will find them rising in him, ready, the exact prayer his shattered heart cannot compose. This is the deepest reason to build the habit now, while you can, while things are calm enough to establish it. You are laying up prayers for the day you cannot pray, so that when it comes, and it will come, you are not left silent before God, but have on your lips the words he wrote for exactly that hour.

When You Do Not Feel Like It

A final practical word, because it is the one most likely to determine whether this habit survives. There will be many days, most days, when you do not feel like praying the Psalms. The alarm is early, the mind is already racing toward the day, the whole thing feels like one more obligation. On those days, pray them anyway. This is perhaps the single most important thing to understand about building any life of prayer: it runs on faithfulness, not on feeling. The Psalms are especially suited to the unfeeling day, because they do not require you to generate an emotion. They are already written. You need only to say them, to lend them your voice and your attention, and let them do their work whether or not you feel anything. The monk who has prayed the Psalms every day for forty years did not feel like it most of those mornings. He prayed them anyway, and they made him a saint. Feeling is a poor foundation for prayer because it is so variable. Faithfulness is the foundation, the simple decision to show up to the Psalms daily regardless of mood, and it is within the reach of any man who decides to make it. Decide it. Then keep it, on the days you feel it and the far more numerous days you do not, and let the Psalms, over years, do in you what they have done in the faithful for three thousand years.

CONCLUSION

The Words Are Already Yours

Return to where we began, to the man sitting down to pray with nothing to say. Everything in this book has been aimed at making sure that man is never you, or never you for long. The words have been provided. A hundred and fifty prayers, covering everything a human heart can hold, given by God, prayed by Christ, carried by the Church for three thousand years, and now placed in your hands. On the day you have no words, you have these.

The Psalms ask only that you take them up and make them your own, which happens not through study but through use, through the daily, slow, honest praying of them until they live in you. Pray your anger in the Psalms of rage, and let God take the poison you would otherwise have carried alone. Pray your grief in the Psalms of lament, and discover you were never as alone in it as you feared. Pray your gratitude, your trust, your confession, your praise, and find that for every condition of your soul, God has already written the prayer, and that praying it joins you to Christ and to the whole Body of Christ praying the same words across all the world and all of time.

You do not have to be eloquent. You do not have to feel the right things. You do not have to arrive at prayer already holy. You have only to open the book of Psalms, find the prayer that fits your condition or the one that would form the condition you lack, and pray it, slowly, aloud if you can, filling its ancient images with your own real life, until the words that were David's and Christ's and the Church's become, truly, yours.

Tomorrow, pray a Psalm. Choose one that fits where you are, or simply begin with the first and move forward. Pray it slowly. Fill it with your life. And know, as you do, that you have joined a prayer that has never stopped, the prayer of the whole people of God, lifting these same words toward heaven in an unbroken voice for three thousand years, and glad, today, to make room for yours.

The prayers are written. They are, as always, waiting.

✦ ✦ ✦

Praying the Psalms: The Prayer Book God Wrote for You is part of The Daily Bread Library.

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