

Discovering or Rediscovering THE PSALMS

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In 1940-1941 he was Director of the Quaker International Center in Berlin, Germany, and during World War II he was in ten camps and units of the Civilian Public Service, including work with mentally defective children and service in a human guinea pig experiment for hepatitis.

After three years as Director of the Division of Education for International Understanding of UNESCO in Paris, France, he returned to the United States, spending most of his professional life at Brooklyn College of the City University of New York, where he specialized in curriculum, social studies, and international education, speaking and writing widely in those fields.

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1. Introduction

What a glorious gift we have inherited from the past in the Psalms—and what a source of spiritual strength those poems and hymns can be for us in the present.

Martin Luther called the Psalms “a Bible in miniature” and John Calvin praised them as “the mirror of man.” In recent times Mary Ellen Chase characterized the Psalms as “the most perfect blending in all literature of poetry and religion.” And Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk, commented on them in his short volume on *Bread in the Wilderness*, in this fashion:

Actually the simplicity and universality of the Psalms as poetry makes them accessible to every mind, in every age, and in any tongue, and I believe that one’s poetic sense must be unusually deadened if one has never at any time understood the Psalms without being in some way moved by their deep and universal religious quality.

Over the centuries many of the world’s religious leaders have found inspiration in that miscellany.

As a lad and as a young man Jesus surely derived spiritual sustenance from the Psalms and just before the Crucifixion he drew upon Psalm 22 when he cried out, “My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me?”

According to Acts 16: 25, Paul and Silas chanted the Psalms as prayers at midnight in prison.

When John Huss, the Christian martyr, was led to the stake, he repeated words from Psalm 31 and when Thomas More awaited decapitation, he used the prayer from Psalm 51—“Have mercy upon me, O God.”

For centuries, also, many famous writers have drawn upon the Psalms as the basis for some of their outstanding creations. For example, it was Psalm 139 that Francis

Thompson used as the basis for his immortal poem *The Hound of Heaven* and it was Psalm 146 that Francis of Assisi turned to as the inspiration for his *Canticle to the Sun*.

Furthermore, scores of hymns have been derived from the various parts of the Psalms. One is Joseph Addison's *The Spacious Firmament on High*—based on Psalm 19. A second is Isaac Watt's *O God Our Help in Ages Past*—drawing upon Psalm 90. A third is Martin Luther's *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*, taken from Psalm 46. A fourth is the well-known professional—*Old Hundred*, patterned after Psalm 100.

The Wesley brothers, Charles and John, composed hundreds of hymns, basing many of them on parts of the Psalms.

For hundreds of years the Psalms have played a prominent part in the liturgy of Christian churches. In the Catholic Church the music attached to it goes under the name of *Gregorian Tones*; in the Church of England it is known as the *Anglican Chant*. Much of such music is sung antiphonally. In the Roman Catholic services it is rendered by the priest and the choir; in the Anglican services it is sung by the two sides of the choir. In other churches the Psalms are used regularly or frequently as responsive readings.

Individual psalms or groups of them have likewise been set to music by several composers. Among them are *The Seven Penitential Psalms*, by Lassus, and *The First Fifty Psalms*, by Marcello.

Individuals who have sung or listened to Handel's magnificent *Messiah* will no doubt realize that he was inspired in part by the Psalms and by some of the supposed prophecies in them about the life of Jesus.

In more recent times Stravinsky composed what he called *The Symphony of the Psalms* and Leonard Bernstein produced the music to what he called *The Chichester Psalms*, with the words in Hebrew.

Artists, too, have drawn inspiration from the Psalms, whether expressing their thoughts and feelings on canvas, in stained-glass windows, or in statues.

But it is not only conspicuous individuals who have found spiritual nourishment in the Psalms. Millions and millions of inconspicuous individuals have also been enriched by passages they have found in that treasure chest of religious poetry. Such persons have included the adherents of three of the major religions of the world-Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

The Origin and Organization of the Psalms

Unfortunately most of us read the Psalms with little or no background on those inspiring but sometimes baffling poems, prayers, and hymns. How much we would all gain from a better knowledge of their background; our understanding certainly would be deepened and our inspiration heightened. Hence a few comments on their origin and organization.

For hundreds of years most people assumed that all or almost all of the Psalms were written by King David. But nearly all biblical scholars maintain now that only a few of them were composed by him. Those who have delved into the origin of those remarkable poems usually attribute Psalms 3 to 41, 51 to 71, and 138 to 145 to David.

Actually the book of Psalms is an anthology or a compendium of separate collections. They were certainly written by many authors and over a long period of time. Many were created between the tenth and the third centuries and most of them seem to have been written between 400 B.C. and 100 B.C. Hence most of them belong to the Post-Exile Period of Jewish history, after that harassed group had returned to the Holy Land from their captivity in Egypt.

After exhaustive research, scholars have concluded that the Psalms were included in several collections and then combined into the present part of the Bible. Thus the Psalms is a collection of collections.

That fact helps us to explain the duplication of some verses in different psalms. For instance, similar passages appear in Psalm 14 and Psalm 53, parts of Psalm 70 repeat sections of Psalm 40, and Psalm 108 is similar to material in Psalms 57 and 60.

Thus some authorities divide our current collection into five parts: section one, ending with Psalm 41; section two, ending with Psalm 72; section three, ending with Psalm 89; section four, ending with Psalm 106; and section five, ending with Psalm 150.

The Meaning and Use of the Psalms

Have you ever wondered about the meaning of the word Psalms? For those who are curious, the explanation is relatively simple. That word comes from the Greek *psalms* or the playing of a stringed instrument, whereas the Hebrew word is *tehillim* or *tillim*, meaning praise. Thus the Psalms became a prayer book or a hymn book for the Hebrew people and is sometimes referred to as The Psalter.

Obviously there were (and are) many uses of those poems, prayers, and hymns. For example, several of them were thought to have been sung by pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem for the Passover or for other religious festivals. Thus Psalm 132 includes the words:

I was glad when they said unto me,
Let us go into the House of the Lord.
Our feet shall stand within thy gates, O Jerusalem. . . .
Peace be within thy walls, and prosperity within thy
palace.

Trudging along their varied routes to the Holy City, they may well have seen the hilly regions around Jerusalem and sung these now familiar words, found in Psalm 121:

I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills,
From whence cometh my help.

As they wended their way to Jerusalem, they undoubtedly caught glimpses of the walls and gates of that city and uttered or sang these words from Psalm 100:4

Come into his gates with thanksgiving
And into his courts with praise.

There are 15 such songs which are thought to have been used by the pilgrims; hence the reference to them as The Pilgrim Psalms. They constituted Psalms 120–134.

Many of the poems in the Psalms were used in the services in the Temple in Jerusalem as a part of the liturgy. Often they were accompanied by a variety of instruments—drums, horns, lutes, lyres, pipes, and strings. Occasionally the leader sang a line and a chorus of Levites (or the entire congregation) responded as in antiphonal singing. An example of that arrangement occurs in Psalm 136:

Give thanks to the Lord for he is good,
For his kindness is everlasting.

But the use of those poems as songs was not limited to the Temple. They were also used frequently in the various synagogues in which the Jews worshipped.

The Style of the Psalms

Despite the variety of themes, the many authors, and the different styles of the writers of those poems, there are a few characteristics of the Psalms which are worth noting.

First, although the Jews at that time did not know rhyme or meter, they had developed a type of rhythm, based on accented words. Usually there were three stresses in a line or three words which were accented.

Second, the Psalms were generally brief and concise. There are half dozen which are fairly long, notably Psalm 119, but most of them are short. For example, Psalm 117 is only five lines. It says:

Praise the Lord, all nations;
Extol him, all peoples;
For great is his kindness toward us;
And the faithfulness of the Lord is everlasting.
Hallelujah!

Likewise the final psalm, sometimes called The Closing Doxology, is only 13 lines. Hence several psalms are a little like English sonnets.

Third, they are simple in their wording although often profound in their content. Written primarily by shepherds and artisans, they are stated in the day-to-day speech of the common people of that time.

Fourth, they deal with universal themes. In them almost every human condition is portrayed. There is sin and punishment. There is turmoil of the spirit and suffering. There is repentance and the desire for forgiveness. There is praise and thanksgiving. There is adoration and glorification of God. And there is bitterness, hatred, and calls for vengeance.

Those and other themes are timeless and therefore timely. That is one of the chief reasons why the psalms have lasted for centuries and still speak to the human condition.

Fifth, they are sincere, intense, and worshipful. These poems, prayers and hymns were not written for the praise of kinsmen and compatriots. They were not composed for broad consumption and accolades. Instead, they seem to

have been written largely by untutored people pouring out their woes or gratitude, baring their souls.

They represent many moods but almost all of them are intense and worshipful. They are bold. They are compelling. They are powerful. They are eloquent. Sometimes they are passionate. Many of them are testaments of devotion, paeans of praise, affirmations of loyalty to a people, or calls for help.

Sixth, they are imaginative. They are beautiful in their construction and concrete in their imagery. Clearly they draw upon the everyday life of a pastoral people. Almost every psalm confirms that statement. Think, for example, of these phrases:

The Lord is my shepherd. Psalm 23:1

We are the people of his pasture,
And the sheep of his hand. Psalm 95: 6–7
As the deer lings for the water-courses,

So my whole being longs for thee, O God. Psalm 42:1

Or think of the portrayal of heaven as God's throne and the earth as his footstool.

No wonder, then, that we revel in such word-pictures and identify with such simple yet beautiful imagery.

Individuals interested in literary criticism can delight in various aspects of the Psalms. Here we will limit ourselves to three unique forms exhibited in that collection of poems.

One is called parallelism or the expression of the same idea twice, in different ways. Sometimes those ideas are similar. Often they are complementary. Occasionally they are antithetical. One commentator compared this characteristic to the two runners of a rocking chair.

An example of parallelism occurs in Psalm 19:1 in this familiar statement:

The heavens declare the glory of God,
And the firmament showeth his handiwork.

Another comes from Psalm 2:4 and says:

He that dwelleth in heaven shall laugh them to scorn,
The Lord shall have them in derision.

A sample of antithetical parallelism appears in Psalm 1:6 where the writer declares:

For the Lord knoweth the way of the righteous;
But the way of the ungodly shall perish.

A very special literary form is that of ancient acrostics. In the psalms which use that approach the first word of each line or verse is taken from a different letter in the Hebrew alphabet, in the regular order of those letters. Hence they are often 22 verses in such psalms. Examples of that style can be found in Psalms 9, 10, 25, 37, 111, 119, and 145.

Another form which is used more by the psalmists than other writers is the question. A quick glance through the Psalms will reveal many such examples. Here are a few:

Who may sojourn in thy pavilion, O Lord?
Who may dwell Upon thy holy hill? Psalm 15:1

Why are you downcast, O my spirit?
And why do you moan within me? Psalm 42:11

How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?
Psalm 137:4

Whither shall I go from thy spirit?
And whither shall I flee from thy presence?
Psalm 139:7

Some Negative Aspects of the Psalms

By now some readers may well have said—you have accented the positive aspects of these poems, why haven't you described the negative features of this part of the Bible?

To which I would like to reply that the major purpose of this pamphlet is to encourage people to read and enjoy the Psalms and to draw upon the best parts of it for spiritual sustenance.

However, I do not deny that there are passages to which I react negatively. Although all of us can revel in the beauty and advanced thinking of some choice selections, we are baffled and even repulsed by other sections.

One aspect from which we recoil is the self-righteousness of some of the writers. A prime example of that occurs in Psalm 52: 8a where the writer says:

I am like a green olive tree
In the House of God.

No humility there!

Then there are instances of pettiness and parochialism on the part of the poets who composed those verses.

But it is the portrayal of God as an avenging sovereign which probably disturbs us most.

There are several psalms that are devoted almost solely to such a deity. For example, Psalm 71 is a prayer for aid against the writer's foe. Psalm 94 calls vehemently for the destruction of the wicked. Psalm 137 is a plea for revenge and Psalm 140 is a prayer for vindication. Others could be cited as revealing the same spirit.

Over and over God is pictured as being angry daily, letting his arrows fly, burning chariots, and ruining cities. Entire tribes or nations perish by his hand.

One such passage occurs in Psalm 18:14 and 40-42:

He let fly his arrows and scattered them;
Lightnings he hurled and routed them.

Thou dost subdue my opponents under me;
And thou dost make my foes show me the back;
And those that hate me, I destroy.
They cry for help but there is none to deliver;
To the Lord, but he does not answer them.
Then I pulverize them like dust before the wind;
I crush them like the dirt of the streets.

One of the most blood-curdling passages is found in
Psalm 58:10 where the writer asserts that:

The righteous shall rejoice that he has seen vengeance,
He shall wash his footsteps in the blood of the wicked.

Often those early people had a difficult time learning that the lot of the righteous is not always easy; life is not always fair. They expected compensation for honoring God—and they were often disappointed. They were painfully aware that good people did not always gain economically. They were upset and disgruntled that the righteous did not always reap monetary rewards. Frequently they were incensed that the pious were sometimes punished.

But let us not err by being holier-than-thou, by criticizing too quickly or condemning too easily. It is important to remember that those poems were written approximately 2500 years ago and in a locality unknown to most of us. They were also composed by a wide range of individuals who defined their Deity in different terms—from that of a God of wrath to that of a God of love.

Placing those poems in historical perspective, we likewise need to realize that they were recorded by individuals who belonged to an oppressed minority. As a people they had

witnessed the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, endured exile in Egypt, served as slaves, and been subjected to oppression and even death. They had lived in troublous times and been in fiery furnances. Yet they had endured and returned to what they considered their Holy Land.

All this should not be considered an excuse; it should be considered an explanation.

Combining these negative factors with some positive ones, Thomas H. Troeger wrote this splendid summary in his book *Rage! Reflect! Rejoice!: Praying with the Psalmists*:

The psalmists have the same feelings we have. The psalmists rage against God. They storm. They plead. They weep. They explode in desperation. They call for vengeance. They exult over their enemies. They are overwhelmed by the grandeur of the universe. They keep silence. They give thanks. They praise God with every instrument in the orchestra.

Some of the Inspirational Themes in the Psalms

And what a wide range of human emotions and religious experiences are represented in the Psalms. No one has described that range better than Harry Emerson Fosdick. In his book on *A Guide to Understanding the Bible*, he wrote:

There are psalms of personal religion, craving inward fellowship with God and rejoicing in the experience of it, and there are patriotic psalms—pleas for national deliverance, praise for national success, songs of battle, and paeans of victory. There are private psalms, from the most intimate experiences of trust and fear, of joy and woe, and there are public psalms in which the

great congregation expressed the common need, hope, gratitude, and praise of all. There are royal psalms voicing the festival spirit of celebration. . .and there are psalms in which the common man poured out his hope and trust in God amid ordinary happiness, suffering, and drudgery of life. There are teaching psalms. . .and there are psalms of desperate petition and intercession, welling up out of profound need.

Laying aside those parts of the Psalms which bother and bewilder us, let us focus on those passages which can stimulate and strengthen us spiritually.

There are scores of such passages and they deal with a wide range of topics. Thus the Psalms may remind us of a kaleidoscope with its ever-changing patterns. Or it may make us think of a symphony with a few themes recurring. Further, it may be considered a pageant with many segments or scenes which are only remotely related.

Here we will concentrate on six broad themes: (1) The Goodness, Greatness, and Grandeur of God, (2) Gratitude to God: Praise and Thanksgiving, (3) The Beauty of Creation and of Nature, (4) The Greatness of Human Beings, (5) Personal and Penitential Pleas and Prayers, and (6) Social Justice.

1. The Goodness, Greatness, and Grandeur of God

Many portraits of God are painted in the Psalms by its various poets. He (and there is no reference to God as "she") is referred to as a shepherd, a shield, a refuge, a fortress, a rock, a tower, a deliverer, a healer, a just judge, a stronghold for the oppressed, and a dwelling place for all generations.

One verse (in Psalm 18:1) combines several of those characteristics, saying:

The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer;
My God, my rock in which I take refuge;
My shield, and the horn of my deliverance, my tower.

That is merely a start on such a list; it might be fascinating and helpful to compile a complete catalogue of the various ways in which God is described.

Similarly it might be interesting and revealing to ascertain what aspect of Hebrew life in the Holy Land each of those designations implies. Obviously some of them refer to the geography of that area. Others relate to the warfare which was so common in those days in that region (and still exists today). Still others reflect the need for protection and justice which the psalmists so passionately desired.

Yes, God is the chief actor in this play or pageant called the Psalms. In many places he appears center-stage, playing different roles.

Actually there are a few references to gods rather than one God, as monotheism—or the idea of a single God—had not been completely accepted in that period. But the God most of the poets described was a single deity-omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent, or possessing infinite knowledge, existing everywhere, and having unlimited power.

Let us cite several psalms to see how the poets of those days characterized him.

Singing his praises, the poet in Psalm 8:1 wrote:

O Lord, our Lord,
How glorious is thy name in all the earth.

Then, Psalm 46 is sometimes captioned The Mighty God. In it the Poet describes God in these terms (verses 1–3):

God is our refuge and strength,
A well-proved help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear though the earth totter
And the mountains topple into the heart of the sea.
Though the winds roar and foam,
Though the mountains quake at its uproar.

Psalm 96 is often given the title The Glory of God. In it the writer becomes exuberant, praising the Lord in these opening lines (verses 1–3):

Sing to the Lord a new song;
Sing to the Lord, all the earth;
Sing to the Lord, bless his name;
Publish his deliverance abroad from day to day.
Tell among the nations his glory.
Among all the peoples, his wonders.

A similar outpouring takes place in the opening verse of Psalm 104:1 where the writer attests to God as the creator and sustainer of the universe, saying:

Bless the Lord, O my spirit!
O Lord, my God, thou art very great;
Thou art robed with majesty and honor.

Goodness and kindness are praised by the poet of Psalm 106: 1–2 as he says:

Hallelujah!
O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
For his kindness is everlasting.
Who can tell the mighty deeds of the Lord?
Or publish all his praise?

Almost the exact words re-appear in Psalm 107, stressing the goodness and kindness of the most high.

Biblical scholars have captioned Psalm 111 as The Wonderful Works of God. This is a longer poem than many of the Psalms but some phrases can be taken from it to illustrate the feeling of the writer, such as these:

Great are the words of the Lord
To be studied by all who delight in them.

...
He has made his wonders an enduring memory.

...
The works of his hands are faithfulness and justice.

The Sustaining God is the caption given to Psalm 127 which opens with this assertion:

Unless the Lord build the house,
Its builders toil thereon in vain.
Unless the Lord keep the city,
The watchman keeps awake in vain.

Finally, the writer of Psalms 139 (called The Omnipresent and Omniscient God) blesses the Lord because of his nearness at all times and in all places, saying:

If I take up the wings of the dawn
And dwell at the back of the sea,
Even there thy hand will guide me
And thy right hand will hold me.

Such are some of the magnificent descriptions of God as expressed by simple poets hundreds of years ago.

2. Gratitude to God; Praise and Thanksgiving

A similar theme in the Psalms is gratitude to God, praise, and thanksgiving. In psalm after psalm the many poets express this emotion or cluster of emotions in a variety of ways.

Such thankfulness is understood even better when one realizes that the Jewish people felt isolated. Thus they found a friend, guide, and protector in God. Hence their paeans of praise.

For example, Psalm 8 opens with these words:

O Lord, our Lord,
How glorious is thy name in all the earth.

A similar thought is found in the first two verses of Psalm 21 where the poet says:

In thy strength the king rejoices, O Lord;
And in thy victory how greatly he exults!
Thou hast given him the desire of his heart;
And the petition of his lips thou hast not withheld.

Psalm 66 is often designated as A Hymn of Gratitude. It opens with the call:

Make a joyous shout to God, all the earth;
Praise the glory of his name.

A couple of verses later the poet asserts that:

All the earth worships thee
And sings praises to thee, singing the praises of thy
name.

And that psalm ends with these words:

Blessed be God
Who did not reject my prayer
Nor turn away his kindness from me.

In a similar way the creator of Psalms 115 recognized his debt to God saying:

Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us,
But to thy name give honor,
Because of thy kindness, because of thy faithfulness.

On an even more personal note, the writer of Psalm 116 testified in these words:

I love the Lord because he hears
The voice of my supplication;
Because he inclines his ear unto me;
And I will call upon him as long as I live.

Then there is the final psalm, sometimes called The Closing Doxology which in its entirety says:

Hallelujah!
Praise God in his sanctuary!
Praise God in his mighty firmament!
Praise him for his mighty deeds!
Praise him for his abundant greatness!
Praise him with the blast of the horn!
Praise him with lyre and lute!
Praise him with drum and dance!
Praise him with strings and pipe!
Praise him with clanging cymbals!
Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!
Hallelujah!

3. The Beauty of Creation and of Nature

Much of the charm of the Psalms comes from the vivid portrayal in them of nature. As one peruses those poems, there is a great deal of evidence of the fact that the Hebrews of that period were a pastoral people, whether as nomads or as settlers in small communities. They lived on the land and off the land; they lived close to nature.

They were utterly dependent on water so they sought out the rivers, streams, and oases. They were also dependent on animals for their survival. Trees and rocks were high on their priority list, too.

As the psalms record, they were filled with awe and wonder—and sometimes fear—by the sun and moon, the clouds, the thunder and lightning, and even the sand (despite the fact that it was often a hazard to them). By day they sought out the oases and at night they often sat around their campfires and marvelled at the sky. It was their television set and they were adept at creating stories about the stars. Likewise the starry sky was their giant and reliable guide book.

There are lingering signs of pantheism in those poems and prayers but for the most part it was God rather than nature which dominated their lives and explained their existence. As Samuel Terrien wrote in his volume on *The Psalms and Their Meaning for Today*:

They did not believe in him (God) because they looked at creation. They affirmed creation because they believed in him. For this reason the motif of nature in their hymns is always subordinated to the motif of God's activity and purpose.

At this point let us thumb through this part of the Bible and find some of the many references to the beauty of creation and of nature as expressed by the psalmists.

Often captioned God's Praise in the Physical and Moral Universe, Psalm 19 is one of the most sublime pieces of literature in existence. It opens with these glorious words:

The heavens are telling the glory of God,
And the sky shows forth the work of his hands.
Day unto day pours forth speech,
And night unto night declares knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words;
Their voice is not heard;
Yet their voice goes forth through all the earth,
And their words unto the ends of the world.

Even better known and loved are the thoughts and words of Psalm 23, with the familiar opening:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
In green pastures he makes me lie down.
Beside refreshing waters he leads me.
He gives me new life.

The next Psalm, the 24th, also begins with these magnificent words:

The earth is the Lord's and its fullness,
The world and those who dwell therein.
For he founded it upon the seas,
And established it upon the ocean currents.

In Psalm 29 appear these thoughts:

The voice of the Lord is above the waters;
The God of glory thunders.
The Lord is over the great waters;
The voice of the Lord is mighty.
The voice of the Lord is majestic.

Then, is Psalm 65 God's gifts to man through nature are extolled in these (and other) verses:

Thou makest the dawn and the sunset to shout with joy,
Thou visitest the land and makest it overflow;
Thou greatly enrichest it.
Through the brook of God, which is full of water,
Thou preparest their grain. . .
Thou dost saturate its furrows; thou dost settle its
ridges,
With showers thou dost soften it;
Its young growth thou dost bless.
. . .
The pastures are clothed with flocks;
And the valleys are covered with grain.
They shout for joy, yea they sing.

Now let us look at Psalm 104 which is often described as The Creator and Sustainer of the Universe. In it there are two passages which depict graphically the closeness of God and Nature. The first is from verses one to five and reads:

Thou veilest thyself in light as in a garment;
Who stretches out the heavens like a tent;
Who lays the beams of his upper chambers in the
waters;
Who makes the clouds his chariot;
Who walks upon the wings of the wind;
Who makes the wind his messengers;
His ministers, flames of fire;
He founded the earth upon its pillars,
That it might not be moved forever and ever.

In the second passage, from verse 14 through 23, the psalmist asserts that:

He makes grass grow for the cattle,
And fodder for the working animals of man,
So that bread may come forth from the earth;
And wine may cheer man's heart.
Making his face brighter than oil;
And bread to stay man's heart.

The trees of the Lord have their fill.
The cedars of Lebanon which he planted;
Wherein the birds build their nests.
And the stork, whose home is in the cypress.
The high mountains are for the wild goats;
The rocks are a refuge for the marmots.
He made the moon for fixed times;
The sun knows its time for setting.
Thou makest darkness and it becomes night,
In which all the beasts of the forest prowl.

...
When the sun rises, they withdraw,
And crouch in their dens.
Man goes forth to his work
And to his labor until evening.

How many are thy works, O Lord.
In wisdom thou hast made them all;
The earth is full of thy creations.

A delightful passage appears in Psalm 114 where the poet maintains that:

The mountains skipped like rams,
And the little hills like lambs.

And there are other verses of a similar nature.

4. The Greatness of Human Beings

Many of the psalms picture God sitting on a throne in heaven, expressing little concern with the affairs of human beings. He was somewhere in the clouds and they lived far away on earth. The distance between them was great and the communication between them was always, or almost always, one-way.

That is an understandable picture for the times in which those poems, prayers, or hymns were written. The gods—or the one God—were not thought of as close companions, fellow journeymen, friends. The gods—or God—were mighty, and men and women were lowly.

Yet there is another picture of God and his relations with human beings in a few places in the Psalms. It is the portrait of a kind, compassionate, just figure who was interested in the human beings he had created. He heard their supplications. He judged them fairly. He calmed and stilled their spirits. He healed their afflictions.

That was an advanced concept of God—far ahead of the times. Human beings were not only created by God; he continued his interest in them. In fact, they were created in his image and their position in the total scheme of the world was a little lower than that of God or of the angels.

How much we owe a few of the psalmists for this growing concept of the Almighty and of human beings. It was a giant leap into a broader, richer, and finer interpretation of God and his people.

Nowhere were these expanded concepts expressed more beautifully than in Psalm 8, often designated as a poem on The Dignity of Man and the Glory of God. Here is what that psalmist had to say:

When I see the heavens, the work of thy fingers,
The moon and the stars which thou hast formed;
What is man that thou shouldst think of him,
And the son of men that thou shouldst care for him?

Then comes that powerful, mind-boggling reply:

Yet thou hast made him but little lower than God,
And dost crown him with glory and honor!
Thou makest him ruler over the works of thy hands,
Thou hast put all things under his feet.
All sheep and oxen,
And also the beasts of the field,
The birds of the heaven and the fish of the sea,
That traverse the paths of the seas.

In recognition of that divine dispensation the psalmist proclaims:

O Lord, our Lord,
How glorious is thy name in all the earth.

A statement of that type which is almost as staggering appears in Psalm 139: a large part of which is reproduced here. In part it declares:

Thou hast searched me and known me, O Lord,
Thou knowest when I sit down and when I stand up;
Thou discernest my thoughts from afar.
Thou dost measure out my course and my camp.
And art intimately acquainted with all my ways.
For there is not a word on my tongue,
But, Lord, thou knowest it all.
Thou dost enfold me behind and before,
And dost put thy hand upon me;

. . . .

Whither shall I go from thy spirit?
And whither shall I flee from thy presence?
If I ascend to the heavens, thou art there!
If I make Sheol my bed, thou art there also!
If I take up the wings of the dawn,
And dwell at the back of the sea,
Even there thy hand will guide me,
And thy right hand will hold me.

. . .
Thine eyes saw the sum total of my days,
And in thy book they were all written.

. . .
How precious are thy thoughts to me, O God!
How great the sum of them.
If I were to count them—they would outnumber the
sands
Were I to come to the end of them, my life-span must
be like thine!

Similar in tone is the brief statement in Psalm 145:18:

The Lord is near to all who call upon him,
To all who call upon him sincerely.

Aren't those statements magnificent, enriching, inspiring,
great?

5. Personal and Penitential Pleas and Prayers

It is important for us to recall or realize that life of the Hebrews at the time of the composition of the Psalms was harsh and distressing. Individuals, families, and tribes were often lonely and frustrated.

Frequently they were baffled by their situation and bewildered by their lot in life.

Hence it must have been easy for them to become discouraged, disillusioned, and despondent.

Consequently many of the psalms reflect those conditions. In their distress they often called upon God through personal prayers and penitential pleas for his help. Save us, protect us, bless us, they pleaded.

Often they expressed their bewilderment. Sometimes their sorrows. Occasionally they went so far as to express their anger against God for forgetting or forsaking them.

The more pious of the writers sometimes considered themselves rather than God as responsible for their fate. They had transgressed or even sinned (a word which meant in both Hebrew and Greek “missing the mark”). Hence they asked for forgiveness and/or purification.

Such prayers or pleas are scattered throughout the Psalms. Sometimes they occur in a verse or two; often they are the theme of an entire psalm.

Here, then, are some examples of the psalmists pouring out their woes. One of the earliest pleas appears in Psalm 6:2 where it says:

Pity me, O Lord, for I am faint;
Heal me, O Lord, for my bones are shaken,
And my spirit is greatly shaken.

Then, in Psalm 17: 6–7 the writer calls upon God in these words:

Incline thine ear to me; hear my speech;
Show thy wonderful kindness, O Savior, of those who
seek shelter.

Then, in Psalm 22, sometimes referred to as The Cry of a Desolate Spirit, the psalmist utters this lament:

My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?
And why art thou far from helping me, at the words of
my wailing?
My God, I cry by day, but thou dost not answer;
And by night, and get no rest.

In a far more subdued tone and in a powerful sentence
prayer, the author implores God:

Teach me thy way, O Lord.

Striking is the imagery in Psalm 42 (already cited in
another context) where the poet prays:

As a deer longs for the watercourse,
So my whole being longs for thee, O God.

Psalm 51 is often titled The Plea of a Penitent. Its
opening lines are these:

Have pity on me, O God, in accordance with thy
kindness;
In thine abundant mercy wipe out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my guilt,
And cleanse me from sin.

Further, in Psalm 69, a deeply troubled penitent cries out
in desperation:

Save me, O God for the water mounts to my chin.
I am sunk in deep mire, where there is no foothold.
I have got into deep water, and the flood overwhelms
me.
I am worn out by crying, my throat is parched.
My eyes fail with waiting for my God

And in self-pity he adds:

More numerous than the hairs of my head are they that
hate me without cause.

Many are they that would destroy me. . .

In a more tender mood the writer of Psalm 86 pleads for
God's help in these words:

Incline thine ear, O Lord, answer me.

. . .

Be gracious unto me, O Lord;
For unto thee do I call all day long.
Gadden the heart of thy servant,
For I lift up my heart unto thee.

Psalm 130, known as De Profundis, is a powerful poem
or prayer. In its entirety it says:

Out of the depths I cry to thee, O Lord;
O Lord, hear my voice!
Let thine ears be attentive
To my supplicating voice.

If thou, O Lord, shouldst record iniquities,
O Lord, who could stand?
But with thee there is forgiveness,
That thou mayest be revered.

I wait for the Lord, my whole being waits;
And for his word I hope;
I wait for the Lord,
More than the watchman for the dawn,
Watchman for the dawn.

Hope, O Israel, in the Lord,
For with the Lord is kindness,
And with him plenteous redemption.
For he will redeem Israel
From all its guilt.

We close this section with four lines from Psalm 13, parts of which have already been quoted. In it the psalmist prays:

Search me, O God, and know my heart;
Try me and know my thoughts;
And see if there be any false way in me;
And lead me in the way everlasting.

6. Social Justice

When we think of social justice in the Old Testament, many of us think immediately of such prophets as Amos, Hosea, and Jeremiah. To us they represent the evolving concept of social justice. Few of us are likely to think of the Psalms in that regard.

However, there are several passages in that part of the Bible which refer to this broad and important theme. Some of them are concerned with the poor, the meek, and the oppressed. Others deal with the role of God as a judge. Some pertain to larger groups and broader interpretations of that central theme of humanity.

Of course there are many passages which picture God as an all-powerful deity who resorts to anger, death, revenge, retaliation, and wrath in his dealings with the earth's people. He is portrayed as crushing people, destroying cities, slaying adversaries, and wreaking havoc.

But here and there the psalmists describe him as a kind, gentle, understanding, and loving being. Let us turn to the Psalms and cite some of the verses or sections which present this type of Supreme Being.

In Psalm 1: 4-6 God is pictured as fully aware of evil doers but nevertheless protective of the righteous. Here is what the poet says:

The wicked are not so,
But are like the chaff which the wind drives away.
Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgement,
Nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.
For the Lord knows the way of the righteous.
But the way of the wicked will perish.

Then there are several passages which refer to God's awareness and concern for the meek, the poor, and the oppressed. One such passage appears in Psalm 9:18:

For the poor shall not be always forgotten,
Nor shall the hope of the meek perish forever.

In that same psalm, verse 11, the poet maintains that:

Thus the Lord is a stronghold for the oppressed,
A stronghold in times of need.
And those who know thy name trust in thee,
For thou hast not forsaken those who seek thee, O
Lord.

A somewhat similar picture of God is given in Psalm 34:18–19 where it is asserted that:

The Lord is near to the broken-hearted,
And he delivers those who are crushed in spirit.
Many are the ills of the righteous,
But from them all the Lord delivers him.

Further, in Psalm 103: 2–7, the writer praises God for his nearness and sympathetic care:

Bless the Lord, O my spirit,
And forget not all his benefits,
Who forgives all my guilt,
Who heals all my sicknesses,

Who rescues me from the Pit,
Who crowns me with kindness and mercy,
Who satisfies my desires with good,
So that my youth renews itself like an eagle.

The Lord executes righteousness
And justice for all that are oppressed.

Of the poor and needy the poet says in Psalm 113:7:

He lifts up the poor from the dust,
He raises the needy from the refuse heap.

Frequently, too, God is delineated as a just judge. One such brief reference is in Psalm 7:11 where those exact words are used. Then, in Psalm 9: 7–8 the same idea is enunciated:

He has established his throne for judgement;
And he judges the world in righteousness;
He passes sentence on peoples with equity.

And in a further line he is mentioned as “a stronghold for the oppressed.”

Then, with picturesque imagery, the poet of Psalm 9: 12 asserts that:

The righteous will flourish like the palm tree;
He will grow high like a cedar in Lebanon.

Some Favorite Psalms

Do you have your own favorite psalm or psalms? Many people do. Some individuals have reacted favorably to one or more of them at first reading; others have developed a

preference or preferences for certain poems over a longer period of time.

Undoubtedly the 23rd Psalm is the favorite of most people. Over the millenia millions of people have committed it to memory—more than any such passage in western literature, with the possible exception of the Lord's Prayer. And it had been used in private devotions as well as in public worship.

Of Psalm 118, Martin Luther wrote:

This is my psalm, my chosen psalm. I love them all; I love all Holy Scriptures, which is my consolation and my life. But this psalm is nearest my heart and I have a familiar right to call it mine. It has saved me from many a pressing danger, from which no emperor, nor kings, nor sages, nor saints could have saved me. It is my friend; dearer to me than all the honors and power of the earth.

In recent times a few people have made public their favorite psalms. For instance, in her volume on *The Bible and the Common Reader*, Mary Ellen Chase limits herself to 10. They are Psalms 15, 19, 23, 41, 90, 91, 104, 107, 125, and 130. For beginners in the enjoyment of this part of the Bible, that list might prove a good starting point.

In the section of the Psalms in his book on *How to Read the Bible*, Edgar J. Goodspeed does not point to any particular psalms which he prefers but he does mention 15 which he thinks are notable. As one of the translators of the Bible into modern language, his list is worth noting. The 15 he cites are Psalms 1, 8, 19, 23, 24, 42, 84, 90, 91, 98, 121, 122, 125, 126, and 130.

Buckner Trawick, the author of the volume on *The Bible as Literature*, has a more extensive list. It includes these 24 psalms: 1, 2, 3, 8, 19, 23, 24, 32, 37, 46, 51, 73, 78, 90, 91, 100, 105, 113, 119, 121, 136, 137, 139, and 150.

In his short book on *Reflections on the Psalms*, C. S. Lewis refers to the 119th Psalm in these words, "I take this to be the greatest poem in the Psalter and one of the greatest lyrics in the world."

It is interesting and important to note that Deitrich Bonhoeffer struggled with the meaning of that long, involved, and yet marvellous Psalm just before he was imprisoned in Germany by the Nazis, giving up his life for his faith. Many consider his meditative commentary on that psalm as the climax of his theological pursuits. Fortunately that meditation, although never completed, is available for us in a recent short volume on *Meditating on the Word*, published in 1986. Of the 119th Psalm he wrote:

Perhaps Psalm 119 will be especially difficult for us, perhaps because of its length and its uniformity. Here a very slow, quiet, patient advance from word to word, from sentence to sentence, will help us. Then we will recognize that the apparent repetitions are ever new variations on a single theme—love for God's Word. As this love can never end, neither can the words which confess it. They are to accompany us through an entire lifetime and, in their simplicity, become the prayer of the child, the adult, and the old person.

Thus a few persons have commented publicly on their favorites among the 150 Psalms. Perhaps at this point—or sometime later—you might like to jot down your own list, possibly adding a brief comment on why each of them appeals to you. Some space is provided here for such a task.

Suggestions for Studying the Psalms

Many people were exposed to the Psalms when they were children and were repulsed by them. Others read them later in life and were not captivated by their contents. Still others have been turned off by the literal and dogmatic interpretations of the Psalms and other parts of the Bible by fundamentalist preachers, especially some of them who preach on television. Some have read the Psalms once or occasionally but have not returned to them recently.

It is unfortunate that so many people have rejected the Psalms for in that part of the Bible is a rich vein of history, religious experience and poetry. Of course there is considerable dross in them but that is true of every vein of valuable ore. Nevertheless, open-minded readers should find the study of the Psalms richly rewarding.

Such a study can be a valuable means of personal enrichment as readers reflect on its answers to the meaning of life, to the concept of God and the relations of the Deity with human beings, to the idea of suffering, to the place of thanksgiving and praise in our lives, plus many other aspects of a spiritually-centered life.

For some it can be a fascinating and productive study of the Hebrew people, especially when linked to other parts of the Bible. For example, Samuel Terrien says in his volume on *The Psalms and Their Meaning for Today* that:

Alone in the Bible the psalmists have succeeded in unifying the prophetic and the priestly approaches to religion. . . More humanly than the prophets and more rigidly than the priests, the psalmists understood man's inability to win his own salvation by obedience to a law or the use of a hallowed technique.

And in his book on *How to Read the Bible*, Edgar Goodspeed comments thus:

In the Psalms, Jewish religion which had been so largely national and official, becomes personal; we may also say democratic.

For many the Psalms can be a source of sheer enjoyment for their aesthetic qualities. In world literature they are seldom, if ever, surpassed, and only infrequently equalled. Many of its passages can excite us, thrill us, stimulate us, and inspire us.

For Friends or Quakers there is still another reason for reading the Psalms. In addition to serving as a source of personal spiritual enrichment, they can provide the background for thoughts in the periods of quiet meditation and prayer of group worship on the basis of expectant silence—and possibly for occasional vocal messages shared with fellow worshippers.

Of course there are many ways in which people can read the Psalms. Very orderly persons may find it necessary to start at the beginning and read the Psalms chapter by chapter. If so, fine. But this approach is not recommended for most people, especially those who have earlier rejected this part of the Bible or those who are approaching it for the first time.

It seems to this writer far better to be selective under such circumstances, beginning with those psalms which are likely to be easily understood and quickly assimilated. For example, individuals or groups might well start with the 10 psalms cited earlier by Mary Ellen Chase as favorites or the 15 mentioned by Edgar Goodspeed as most notable (see p. 31 of this pamphlet).

Many individuals will want to read the Psalms alone. Others may prefer to read them with a spouse or friend. Some will find the reading and discussion of this part of the Bible helpful in a group, with the fellowship and sharing of thoughts such a process provides, especially under the leadership of an informed and capable individual.

Whether the reading of the Psalms is done alone or in a group, it will probably be enhanced if short selections are used and time is provided for thought and/or discussion.

Then readers are urged to pause for a short period of meditation and prayer.

Some individuals may want to write their reactions in a journal, pen a prayer, paint a picture, or decide upon some action based on their reaction.

A few individuals and/or groups may want to seek help on the background of the Psalms in general or of a particular chapter or verse. The books listed at the end of this pamphlet may prove helpful for those unfamiliar with the Bible. For those with considerable background, such a commentary as *The Interpreter's Bible* may prove useful, although beginners will probably find the comments there far too extensive and theological.

No matter how you procede, we wish you well in your endeavor. May you be enriched by your reading of this incomparable book and in turn enrich others.

Some Books for Further Reading on the Psalms

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich *Meditating on the Word*. New York, Walker, 1986. 217 pp. Includes a long section on Psalm 119.

Brueffemann, Walter *Praying the Psalms*. Winona, Minnesota, 1986, 168 pp. Includes a reproduction of all the psalms.

Chase, Mary Ellen *The Bible and the Common Reader*. New York, Macmillan, 1952 (revised edition). 325 pp.

Chase, Mary Ellen *The Psalms for the Common Reader*. New York, Norton, 1961. 208 pp.

Forbush, Bliss *With Cymbals and Harp: A Study of the Book of Psalms*. Philadelphia, Friends General Conference, 1940, 251 pp.

Goodspeed, Edgar J. *How to Read the Bible*. Philadelphia, Winston, 1946. 244 pp.

Lewis, C. S. *Reflections on the Psalms*. New York, Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1958. 151 pp.

Merton, Thomas *Bread in the Wilderness*. Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1953. 179 pp. From the famous Trappist monk, with a strong Catholic interpretation of the psalms.

Terrien, Samuel *The Psalms and Their Meaning for Today*. Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, 1952. 278 pp.

Trawick, Buckner B. *The Bible as Literature: The Old Testament and the Apocrypha*. New York, Barnes and Noble, 1970. 410 pp.

Troeger, Thomas H. *Rage! Reflect! Rejoice! Praying with the Psalmists*. Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1977. 96 pp.

Westermann, Claus *The Psalms: Structure, Content, and Message*. Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1977. 96 pp.