

Year of the Bible Series
Ignorance of the Scriptures is Ignorance of Christ (St. Jerome)

Series IV: The Book of the Psalms

Dear Holy People of God,

On a personal note, the Book of Psalms (that Psalter) is my most favorite prayer. Only the Rosary can rival the Psalms, for me. Perhaps it is no accident that the Holy Rosary, in its historical form of development, was closely related to the Psalter as prayed by the Monks. Throughout this Year of the Bible, all the daily readings have had a portion of the Psalms, which I consider to be the “praying section” of the daily readings. The presence of the Psalms on a daily basis reminds us that our Year of the Bible is, besides deepening our knowledge of the Bible, a year of prayer, of entering the prayer of Israel and the Church, which is what the Psalter is. Till date, the Psalms form the center of the Church’s prayer, especially the Liturgy of the Hours.

The title “Psalms” stems from the Greek *psalmos* which means **song**. The Greek psalmos was often used to translate the Hebrew *mizmor*, meaning song or melody. From the title, we can deduce that the Psalms were primarily meant for liturgical purposes, to be sung during worship, often with stringed instruments. In this light, therefore, the Book of Psalms is a collection of 150 sacred songs, which were the prayers of Israel. All of the Psalms are Hebrew poetry. The Church Fathers considered the Psalms to be the summary of all the books and teachings of the Old Testament. Even more, the Psalms are a description of every man and woman before God. The Psalms tell the story of human joy, peace, love, growth, community, friendship, and worship. They also tell the story of human pain, betrayal, misery, distrust, and apostasy before God. Beyond the human condition, the Psalms tell us about God’s irremovable commitment to the good of the human person, a God whose love endures forever (Psalm 118).

The 150 Psalms, as intimated above by allusion to the various states or human experiences, do display a great diversity of subject matter and style, in the sense that the Psalms can be grouped under different categories that need not be rigidly held. Some of the categories of the Psalms will include the following:

1. **Psalms of Praise or Thanksgiving:** These are the *todah* (**Hebrew for praise**) Psalms. These are Psalms prayed by Israel in gratitude to God, often after events of God’s liberation or deliverance. They often begin by praising God, and in the course of the praise, will narrate the tragedy or distress from which God has liberated Israel, a liberation based on God’s fidelity to God’s promises. Psalms of Praise or Thanksgiving could be prayed by the **individual or by the community**. Examples will be the *Great Hallel* Psalms, that is, from Psalm 113-118: Jesus prayed these Psalms while celebrating the Passover meals. The chief refrain is: **O Give thanks to the Lord for He is good, for his love endures forever.**
2. **Psalms of Lament:** These are Psalms in which the psalmist cries out to God from the experience of great distress, calling on God to liberate the psalmist either from physical illness, false accusation, persecution from enemies and detractors. Like the Psalms of Praise, the Psalms of lament are likewise individual, when an individual cries out to God for deliverance from life-threatening situations (notable, Psalms 1-41); and communal

laments, when Israel as a community cries to God for liberation from enemy nations, chiefly, Psalms 73-89. The Psalms of Lament show that God is capable of delivering justice to the weak and the crushed. They reveal that the innocent person will eventually be vindicated by God. They show that evil will never have the last word, and that we should not be envious of the prosperity of the wicked of the world, for their end will certainly be fatal: Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning (Psalm 30:5). Psalm 73 is the classic example of how the wicked who prosper will end (I recommend that you reread and meditate on this Psalm, whenever you feel discouraged).

3. **Hymns Psalms:** While all the Psalms were meant to be sung, some, as stated above, were prayers, cries to God from the place of pain, while others were composed as songs, meant to be rendered exclusively as hymns for the assembly gathered in worship. The hymns generally were of thanksgiving to God on very broad themes, such as God as creator, God as sustainer of the universe, God as provider, God as a forgiver, et. cetera. Five hymns conclude the book of the Psalms, specifically, from Psalm 146-150: Let everything that breathes, praise the Lord.
4. **Royal Psalms:** These are the Psalms whose subject matter is the king, precisely, David, offering prayers of praise or petition to God. Examples of Royal Psalms are Psalms 2, 45, and 72. Taken together, the book of Psalms is a very Davidic book, that is, the Psalms are really about the royal son of David, and Christianity interpreted these Psalms as pointing to Jesus, the Son of David. This does not imply a negation of the fact that the Psalms talk about the actual King David and his heirs on the throne of Israel. It simply means that the Psalms point beyond the historical King David to the Messiah, the Son of David, who is to come: Jesus, Son of David, Have mercy on me (Luke 18:38).
5. **Mount Zion Psalms:** These are Psalms that are closely related to the Royal Psalms, for they celebrate the city of Jerusalem established by David as the seat of Israel's government, and the Holy Temple of Jerusalem (Psalms 46, 48, 68, 84, 125, 132). The focus is on Zion, the holy city of David: Mount Zion rejoices, the villages of Judah are glad, because of your judgements. Walk about Zion, go around her, count the number of her towers... (Psalm 48:11-12). Zion, as the Holy City of Jerusalem, is the new hope for Israel. Later on, in the theology of the Fathers, Zion becomes much more than a geographical location. Zion is the embodiment of all of worship, with the Church as the Daughter of Zion.
6. **Wisdom Psalms:** These are Psalms of instruction on righteous living, Psalms that exalt God's law, such as Psalms 1, 19 and 119. These Psalms teach that obedience to God's law results in a blessed life.

By way of conclusion, I will like to remind us that Jesus prayed the Psalms throughout his earthly life. Even at the point of death, the cry of Jesus, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me (Matthew 27:45-50), is taken from Psalm 22. In fact, Psalm 22 could easily be read as describing the Passion, the entire Passion of Jesus. I am preparing a **Ste. Anne's Parish Prayer Book** which will include Psalms for morning and evening prayer. I hope that we will make good use of this parish prayer book in praying with the Psalms. God bless you as you pray the Psalms daily. (Fr. Maurice)