

MY FATHER'S HOUSE

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25 LESSONS FROM THE PSALMS

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Andrew Fletcher, who devoted himself to protecting the civil and religious liberties of 17th century Scotland, said: "Give me the making of the songs of a nation, and I care not who makes its laws." The Book of Psalms is the song book of the Hebrew people. It is in large measure a song book of humanity.

Worship in synagogue or church without the use of a Psalm is almost unthinkable. Copies of the New Testament are often bound up with the Psalms. In the daily public prayer of the Roman Catholic Church, particular psalms are recited at certain hours of the day, and the entire book is covered in the course of a week. The Psalms are associated with the name of David. 1 Samuel 16:23 tells how, when melancholia came upon King Saul, the youthful "David took the lyre and played it with his hand; so Saul was refreshed, and was well, and the evil spirit departed from him: 2 Samuel 23:1 refers to David as "the sweet psalmist of Israel."

As the name of Moses personified law and that of Solomon personified wisdom, so the name of David was synonymous with song. As later ages paid tribute to Solomon by naming wisdom works for him, so psalms, whenever they originated, would be spoken of as "Psalms of David." That David himself did not write all the psalms is clear, for example, from Psalm 30, which carried the title, "A Psalm of David, a song at the Dedication of the Temple." David not only did not live to see the dedication of the Temple, but was specifically forbidden to build it. Rabbinic tradition identifies this psalm with the rebuilding of the Temple under Ezra.

The psalms were written by many men in many ages. titles at Psalms 1, 42, 73, 90 and 107 reveal that the Psalter is a collection of books. The second book concludes with the words, "The prayers of David ... are ended" (Psalm 72:20). Materials within the psalms themselves suggest that some were composed in the time of Israel's first confrontation with the Canaanites, others as late as the Maccabean ear, a span of nearly a thousand years. Whenever and by whomever composed, the Psalms run the gamut of human emotions and recapitulate the human story.

Jesus was fond of the Psalms. His ministry began with Psalm 2:7, and he died with Psalm 22 on his lips. Of Old Testament quotations found in the new, 40 percent are from the Psalms.

Some Psalms are of a personal character. Psalm 4 is the song of a troubled man laying down to rest at night. Psalm 5 is the prayer of the same man arising in the morning to face another day. Psalm 30 sings the gratitude of one who is recovering from serious illness. Psalms 42 and 43 express the feelings of the homesick man. Psalm 91 is often on the lips of those facing separation from loved one. Psalm 103 is pure thanksgiving for joys already received.

Some of the Psalms (8, 19, 29, 65, 104, 107, and 148) celebrate God's sovereignty over the natural world; some (78, 105, 106, 114, 136) interpret the history of Israel. Psalm 2 may be a wedding or coronation hymn for a king. Psalms 35, 59, 83 and 109 denounce foes, not personal enemies but those who would destroy the nation and its witness to the living God.

The Psalms follow Hebrew literary style in that the words do not rhyme and metered measure is found only occasionally. Their poetic form is free verse with a generous and creative use of parallelisms. A Psalm is generally a series of couplets with each phrase in the couplet restating the thesis or antithetical to it. Sometimes the couplets are climaxed by an extra verse, and there are multiple variations on this form. An example:

- (a) What is man that you are mindful of him?
- (b) and the son of man that you do care for him?
- (c) Yet you have made him little less than God,
- (d) and do crown him with glory and honor. (8:4-5)

Or an antithetical parallelism:

- (a) For the Lord knows the way of the righteous:
- (b) but the way of the wicked will perish. (1:6)

It was customary in the Temple worship for the Psalms to be chanted by cantor and priestly chorus. Rabbinic tradition recalls that twelve adult Levites constituted the minimum membership of the chorus. Boys were later included in order to extend the vocal range of the choir. Members of the chorus accompanied their chanting by playing on musical instruments: nine played a *kinor* – according to Josephus, a ten-stringed instrument (see Psalm 112:3); two played on the *nebel* – a twelve-note stringed instrument with a membranous diaphragm attached to provide a resonant effect; one played the cymbals. The sounding of the flute was added to the orchestration on holy days.

Scholars also suggest that the Psalms used in the early synagogue were changed antiphonally. Reciting the word "Halleluyah" – praise God – the cantor invited the congregation to respond as the chorus sang verses from this book. Since the changing of Psalms is such a central part of religious worship, many composers of note have set the psalms to music. Among the well-known works are Honegger's "King David," Stravinsky's "Symphony of Psalms," and Dello Joio's choral rendering "Psalm of David." Ernest Bloch's setting of Psalms 22, 114, 137 are frequently performed in American synagogues.

The Psalms have had a conspicuous place in the life of America. The first book published in the new world was *The Whole Book of Psalms Faithfully Translated into English*. When President Nathan A. Pusey was installed at Harvard, the assembled company sang Jeremy Belknap's metrical version of Psalm 78, always used on ceremonial occasions at Harvard. During World War II a member of the U.S. Signal Corps carried with him a pocket edition of the Psalms. He spent his leisure turning them into blank verse. His title, "The Unquenched Cup," is derived from Psalm 23:5. The brimming cup there referred to, he says, "'must continue to flow in all ages for those who seek its source.'"

The Appeal of the Book of Psalms

Though all Scripture is fragrant with God's grace, the Book of Psalms has a special attractiveness.

Moses wrote the history of Israel's forefathers in prose, but after leading the people through the Red Sea – a wonder that remained in their memory – he broke into a song of triumph in praise of God when he saw King Pharaoh drowned along with his forces. His genius soared to a higher level, to match an accomplishment beyond his own powers.

Miriam too raised her timbrel and sang encouragement for the rest of the women, saying: *Let us sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; he has cast horse and rider into the sea.*

In the Book of Psalms there is profit for all, with healing power for our salvation. There is instruction from history, teaching from the law, prediction from prophecy, chastisement from denunciation, persuasion from moral preaching. All who read it may find the cure for their own individual failings. All with eyes to see can discover in it a complete gymnasium for the soul, a stadium for all the virtues, equipped for every kind of exercise; it is for each to choose the kind he judges best to help him gain the prize.

If you wish to read and imitate the deed of the past, you will find the whole history of the Israelites in a single psalm: in one short reading you can amass a treasure for the memory. If you want to study the power of the law, which is summed up in the bond of charity (*Whoever loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law*), you may read in the psalms of the great love with which one man faced serious dangers single-handedly in order to remove the shame of the whole people. You will find the glory of charity more than a match for the parade of power.

In the psalms, then, not only is Jesus born for us, he also undergoes his saving passion in his body, he lies in death, he rises again, he ascends into heaven, he sits at the right hand of the Father. What no man would have dared to say was foretold by the psalmist alone, and afterward proclaimed by the Lord himself in the Gospel.

First Principle: A person who meditates on God's Word and law will prosper not only in spirit but in life and in work.

“Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked nor stands in the way of sinners nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the Lord and on His law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers” (*Ps* 1:1-3).

The fruit of meditation is wisdom and the fruit of wisdom is a successful life. The more we fill our mind with inspired thoughts – loving, kind, sensitive and holy thoughts – the more happy, healthy and holy we will be. Jesus spent much of His teaching stressing proper mental attitudes. We call them the be-attitudes.

Second Principle: We are created a little less than the angels and are given dominion over the earth.

“What is man, that you are mindful of him? And the Son of Man that you visit him? You made him a little lower than the angels, to crown him with glory and worship. You made him to have dominion over the works of your hands; and you have put all things in subjection under his feet” (*Ps* 8:3-6).

This is an amazing spiritual truth that we have been given a share in the divine nature (cf *2 Pet* 1:4). St. Thomas says that God became man so that we could become children of God. The new catechism states in paragraph 1692, "Coming to see in the faith their new dignity (as partakers in the divine nature), Christians are called to lead henceforth a life "worthy of the gospel of Christ" (*Phil* 1:27). Or, as St. Leo the Great said, "Christians recognize your dignity and know that you share in God's own nature. Remember who is your head and of whose body you are a member" (*Ser* 21).

To Co-Create the Earth With God. Because we share God's own life, God has chosen to share His creative power-with us. With Him, we have dominion over the earth. Work for the Christian is a share in God's creative power.

Third Principle: The good will suffer at the hands of the wicked, yet God will deliver them from all their afflictions.

"Have they no knowledge all the evildoers who eat up all my people. When the Lord restores the fortunes of His people, Jacob shall rejoice, Israel shall be glad" (*Pss* 14:4,7). "Be not far from me for I am in distress; be near for I have no one to help me. They open their mouths against me like roaring lions. But you O Lord, be not far from me; O my help, hasten to aid me. Rescue my soul from the sword, save me from the lion's mouth" (*Pss* 22:).

There is a special protection that God gives to the just. Even though evil comes against them, He promises to see them through. Although they may suffer for awhile, in the end He will deliver them. For as Jesus said, He leads us not into temptation, but delivers us from evil.

Fourth Principle: "The law of the Lord is perfect reviving the soul" (*Pss* 19:7).

As one meditates upon the Word and law of the Lord, there is a certain quickening of his spirit. His mind is enlightened with supernatural insights, and his heart is inflamed with God's love. For those who wait upon the Lord and meditate upon His law shall renew their strength. They shall ride as if on wings of eagles. They shall run but not grow weary, and walk but not grow faint. Despite hardship and trouble, their souls shall be at rest and their hearts shall possess the joy of the Lord.

Fifth Principle: "The Lord is my shepherd there is nothing I shall want" (*Pss* 23:1).

This is one of the most famous verses and principles in all Scripture. Jesus applies the title as the Good Shepherd to Himself, who calls His sheep by name and gives His life for them. Like a good shepherd, He makes us lie down in green pastures; that is, He provides for all of our needs. And He restores our souls when we have gone astray. Even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we shall fear no evil for He is with us. With His rod and staff He comforts us and allows us to dwell in the House of the Lord all the days of our life.

Sixth Principle: Goodness and mercy flow from a holy life.

"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life" (*Pss* 23:6).

Jesus stated this principle when He said that everyone reaps what they sow. And the world states it in this way, "What goes around, comes around." If a person is loving, love mostly will return to them. If a person is kind, the fruits of kindness will be theirs.

Seventh Principle: The pure of heart shall clearly see God and His ways.

“Who shall ascend the mountain of the Lord? Who shall stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands, and a pure heart; who has not taken my name in vain, and has not sworn deceitfully. He shall receive a blessing from the Lord, and righteousness from his God of salvation” (*Ps 24:3-4*).

Jesus states it this way when He said “Blessed are the pure of heart for they shall see God.” And the world states it this way, “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.”

Eighth Principle: The Lord vindicates the just.

“Vindicate me, O Lord, for I have walked in my integrity, and I have trusted in the Lord without wavering. Prove me, O Lord, and try me; test my heart and my mind. For thy steadfast love is before my eyes, and I walk in faithfulness to thee” (*Ps 26:1-3*).

The Lord has promised us that if we follow in His ways, He will make the rough ways smooth and will even make our enemies to be at peace with us.

Ninth Principle: If we listen to the voice of the Lord, our prayers will be answered for the voice of the Lord is mighty, and is able to divide spirit from flesh.

“The voice of the Lord is upon the waters; the God of glory thunders, even the Lord upon many waters. The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is full of majesty. The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars; Yes, the Lord breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon. He makes them also to skip like a calf; Lebanon and Sirion like a young wild-ox. The voice of the Lord hews out flames of fire. The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness; the Lord shakes the wilderness of Kadesh. The voice of the Lord makes the hinds to calve, and strips the forests bare; and in His temple all say: ‘Glory’” (*Ps 29:3-9*).

As we learn to listen to the voice of the Lord, we will follow in His footsteps and allow Him to lead us each step of the way. Jesus said, “If you abide in me and my word abides in you then you can ask for anything you wish and you shall have it.” This is a very powerful principle of spirituality, that we are to listen to, discern and obey the voice of the Lord. Jesus said, “The wise man who build his house upon the rock is he who listens to the word of the Lord and obeys him.”

Tenth Principle: Make praise a way of life.

“Give thanks to the Lord with a lyre; sing praises to Him with a ten stringed harp. Sing to Him a new song” (*Ps 33:2-3*).

Jesus teaches us in the Our Father that the most important principle of prayer is praise and adoration. We are to praise and adore Him above all. In Psalm 135 we read, “Praise the Lord, praise the name of the Lord, praise Him O servants of the Lord. Praise the Lord for the Lord is good. Sing praises to His name for it is lovely (v 2-3). And in Psalm 145 we praise the Lord for 15 different attributes: he is gracious, merciful, slow to anger, great in loving kindness, good to all, all powerful, all majestic, sustains all who fall, raises up all who are bowed down, gives everyone their food in due season, satisfies the desire of every living person, righteous in all His ways, kind in all

His deeds, near to all who call upon Him, fulfills the desires of all who fear Him, and hears the cry of all who call Him and saves them. For all these and so many more reasons, we ought to praise Him. In Psalm 146 we read, "Praise the Lord, O my soul. I will praise the Lord while I live. I will sing praises to the Lord while I have my being" (v 1-2). In Psalm 147 we read, "Praise the Lord O Jerusalem, Praise the Lord O Zion. For it is good to sing praises to our God" (v 12,1). Psalm 148, 149 and 150 are filled with praises to our God.

Eleventh Principle: Seek and you shall find.

"I sought the Lord and He answered me" (*Ps* 34:4).

We read in Psalm 9, "For you O Lord have not forsaken those who seek you" (v 10). And in Matthew 7:7, Jesus says, "Seek and you shall find." Jeremiah foretells, "When we seek the Lord with all our hearts we shall find Him." In 2 Chronicles 15:2 we read, "If you seek Him, He will let you find Him; but if you forsake Him, He will forsake you."

Twelfth Principle: Trust in the Lord and He will bring you into the promised land.

In Psalm 37:2 we read, "Trust in the Lord and do good, and you will dwell in the land." There is a special realm of holiness called the Kingdom of God that can only be entered into by men and women of faith. Only God can bring you into His Kingdom, though we must learn to trust Him and walk by faith. The promised land also can be heaven that we enter at the end of our days only by trusting in the Lord.

Thirteenth Principle: Delight in the Lord and He will give you the deepest desires of your heart.

In Psalm 37:4 we read, "Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart." Without special enlightenment, we do not even know what our heart really desires. The more we delight in God and in His ways, the more we see that our hearts are made for the Lord and will not rest until they rest in Him. We do not really want the material possessions of this world, but really only Him who is the pearl of great price. We do not really want all the carnal pleasures of this world but really only Him who is our heart's desire. And we really do not want all the crooked ways of man, but only Him who is our Lord. The more we delight in Him, the more He first of all reveals the desires of our heart, and, secondly, fulfills them.

Fourteenth Principle: Commit your ways unto the Lord and He will make your holiness shine as the noon day sun.

We read in Psalm 37:5-6, "Commit your way to the Lord, trust also in Him and He will bring forth your righteousness as the light of noon day." All the saints encourage us to surrender everything to God and commit our time, talent and treasure to Him. In exchange for our paltry human insights, He gives us His wisdom. In exchange for our paltry desires, He gives us His joy and peace.

Fifteenth Principle: God is our refuge and our strength.

In Psalm 46:1 we read, "God is our refuge and our strength, our very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth shall change and though the mountains slip into the

heart of the sea." In Psalm 14:6 we read, "The Lord is his refuge." In Psalm 9:9 we read, "He is a stronghold in times of trouble." And in Psalm 40:17, "He is our help and deliverer."

Sixteenth Principle: The Lord forgives all who repent.

In Psalm 32 we read, "How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered; how blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity." And of course there is David's great psalm of forgiveness, Psalm 51: "Be gracious to me O God, according to your loving kindness, according to the greatness of your compassion. Blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin." Jesus, of course, is the Lamb of God who takes away our sins and who has given to His priests in the Sacrament of Reconciliation the power to forgive all sin and guilt. How blessed are they who turn to the Lord for mercy, for mercy shall be theirs!

Seventeenth Principle: Happy are those who dwell in the house of the Lord.

In Psalm 84 we read, "How lovely is your dwelling place O Lord of hosts; my soul yearns and pines for the courts of the Lord." In verse 4 we read, "How blessed are those who dwell in your house. They are ever praising." And in Psalm 65:4 we read, "How blessed is the one whom you chose and bring near to you to dwell in your courts. We will be satisfied with the goodness of your house, your holy temple."

Eighteenth Principle: God surrounds His chosen with steadfast love.

The two great attributes of God are His overwhelming mercy as we have seen in Psalm 51, and His steadfast love, which we see in Psalms 89, 59 and 101. In Psalm 89:1 we read, "I will sing of your loving kindness" (that is your steadfast love). In Psalm 59 we read, "I shall joyfully sing of your loving kindness." In Psalm 101 we read, "I will sing of loving kindness and justice to you O Lord." In Psalm 86:13 we read, "For your loving kindness toward me is great." And over and over, David sings, "For your love is without end" (Ps 136). And in Psalm 90:14 we read, "Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love that we may rejoice and be glad all our days."

Nineteenth Principle: If you make praise your way of life you will gain victory.

In Psalm 98:1 we read, "I will sing to the Lord a new song for He has done wonderful things. His right hand and His holy arm have gained victory for Him." Just as there is power in the name of the Lord so also is there victory in His name. The name of Jesus is powerful over all the forces of evil. Calling upon the name of the Lord we gain victory and power.

Twentieth Principle: The eyes of the Lord search to and fro searching for one who He can bless.

God will open the floodgates of heaven to those who are obedient. In Psalm 101:6 we read, "My eyes shall be upon the faithful of the land that they may dwell with me; he who walks in a blameless way is the one who will minister to me."

Twenty-first Principle: "Unless the Lord builds a house, they labor in vain that build it" (Ps 127:1).

St. Augustine comments on this saying, "Thus it is the Lord who builds the house; it is the Lord Jesus who builds His own dwelling. Many may toil on its building, but unless He builds it, in vain have the builders labored on it. And who are those who labor on it? All those who preach God's word in the church, who are ministers of His sacraments. All of us now rush, work and build, and before us other men rushed, worked and built; still, unless the Lord builds the house, in vain have builders labored on it. The apostles and Paul specifically saw some of them fail and said, 'you observed the day, the years, the months, and the seasons; I fear that I may have toiled for you to no purpose'."

Twenty-second Principle: We must always remember our roots.

God has given us both roots and wings. The roots are our family and heritage. The wings are the wings of spirit. The psalmist says, "If I forget you O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her skill, may my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you O Jerusalem." Those who will not remember the past are doomed to repeat its mistakes. And those who forget where they came from cannot stand on the shoulders of our ancestors. Those who do not appreciate that they are sons and daughters have nothing to pass on to their children. For the life that we receive by grace is the only life we can pass on.

Twenty-third Principle: Prayer will always make a way.

In Psalm 142 we read, "I cry aloud with my voice to the Lord; I make supplication with my voice to the Lord. I declare my trouble before Him. Deliver me from my persecutors. Bring my soul out of prison for you who will deal bountifully with me." In Psalm 143:9 we read, "Deliver me O Lord from my enemies, I take refuge in you." In verse 11 we read, "In my righteousness bring my soul out of trouble." In Psalm 144, David calls God his fortress, his stronghold, his deliverer, and his shield in whom he takes refuge.

Twenty-fourth Principle: We should trust in the Lord more than in human beings.

We read in Psalm 146:3-5, "Do not trust in princes, in mortal man, in whom there is no salvation. How blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, who hope is in the Lord his God." We read in Psalm 118:9, "It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in princes." In Psalm 144:15 we read, "How blessed are the people whose God is the Lord."

Twenty-fifth Principle: We shall be praising God forever in heaven, so let us begin now.

In Psalm 148 we read, "Praise the Lord, praise the Lord from the heavens; praise the Lord in the heights! Praise Him all his angels. Praise Him all His hosts. Praise Him highest heavens." St. Augustine in commenting on this psalm says, "Our thoughts in this present life should turn on the praise of God, because it is in praising God that we shall rejoice forever in the life to come; for no one can be ready for the next life unless he trains himself for it now. So we praise God in our earthly life. We urge you to praise God now. That is what we are telling each other when we say, 'Alleluia.' We are all urging one another to praise the Lord. We are praising God now assembled as we are now here in church. Provided that we do not cease to live a good life, we shall always be praising God."