

Adoration

Prayer Tool: How to Pray the Psalms

What?

The Bible's 150 Psalms can be used to help us pray in many different ways. This prayer tool outlines how to use the Psalms each day to worship.

Why?

"Prayers train us in conversation with the God who seeks us out – the God who speaks and we must answer." Eugene Peterson

Bible reference:

"From east to west, from dawn to dusk, keep lifting all your praises to God!" - Psalm 113:3

A quick introduction to praying the Psalms

The most mature and proven way we can learn to worship consistently is to use the Bible's 150 Psalms – the Prayer Book of Jesus – for the purposes that they were originally intended: to train us in a 'conversion of language' where instead of talking about God, we talk to Him.

One of the most powerful things about actually praying the Book of Psalms (as opposed to merely reading them), is that they can hijack your day in a really good way. Instead of just praying out of the emotional overflow of your own personal circumstances, the Psalms bring your feelings into line with the reality of faith experienced by countless people down thousands of years; including Jesus Himself who memorised and recited these prayers even from the cross.

For the Psalmists, all of human emotion – indeed all of life itself – was brought under the rule of God in prayer.

Do it: How to pray the Psalms

Systematic Reading

The simplest approach to the Psalms is to work through them systematically, and there is great benefit in this approach. You could start by praying two Psalms a day – out loud – allowing the ancient, sacred words to become your prayer.

The Psalms equip us to bring our total selves and truest conditions before God: every emotion ‘under the sun’ is included in the Psalms, and we can incorporate them into our lives.

- Monastic communities pray five Psalms a day, covering the whole Psalter every month.
- The ‘Daily Office’, of which there are a number of forms, model their reading of the Psalms on the daily rhythms of sunrise and sunset, and usually follow the church’s annual calendar from Advent to Pentecost and beyond.
- If you are just starting off, aim for just one Psalm a day. If you split a few of the longer ones up over several days, you will cover the whole Psalter twice each year.

Thematic Reading

Alternatively, it can also be helpful to pray the Psalms thematically. A helpful schematic for a thematic approach to the Psalms is suggested by Walter Brueggemann in his book *Spirituality of the Psalms*. He suggests 3 categories: **orientation – disorientation – new orientation**.

Brueggemann suggests that understanding the Psalms within these three categories can guide our prayer life as it helps us find a prayer language that corresponds with the different seasons of our soul:

1. Psalms of Orientation describe those seasons that evoke gratitude for God’s faithfulness and steadfastness. They therefore speak about God’s character, creation, and the unchangeable nature of God’s love and favour.

Examples of Psalms of orientation include Psalm 1, 8, 19, 33, 119.¹

¹ Other Psalms of Orientation include 14, 15, 104, 131, 133 and 145.

2. Psalms of Disorientation are a response to seasons of the soul that involve heartache, pain, grief, complaint, disappointment, loneliness and suffering. Psalms of disorientation are plentiful and while many of these laments are personal, interestingly quite a few are also communal. (You can read more about Psalms of Lament in the Prayer Tool “How to Lament”)

Examples of personal Psalms of complaint include Psalm 3, 6, 55, 88.²

Examples of communal Psalms of Lament include Psalm 60, 74, 126, 137.³

3. Psalms of New Orientation express a type of surprised joy which has broken through the season of pain and despair; we have become aware of a ‘fresh intrusion’ – a gift of God’s grace and healing that has brought us into a new place.

Examples of Psalms of new orientation include Psalm 18, 30, 40, 138.⁴

Dusk and Dawn

The rhythm of morning and evening prayers is a common and enriching way to read the Psalms, and many of them seem to be written with the intention of being read at these two ends of our days.

Dawn Psalms prepare us for action, waking us up to what God is doing in the world and how we can join in with Him, allowing His will to work its way in us for His purposes.

Examples of Dawn Psalms include Psalm 5, 46, 90, 139, 143.

Dusk Psalms mark the transition from daylight to the sleep of darkness where in our passive state of sleep we relinquish control of ourselves and others, trusting our whole lives (not to mention the running of the world!) to our Heavenly Father who ‘gives His beloved sleep.’

Examples of Dusk Psalms include Psalm 4, 42, 63, 77, 91, 141.

Whatever type or rhythm of reading the Psalms you chose, the main point is to allow these words to shape your own praying life, giving you permission to pray not what you think God wants to hear, but what is inside of you.

² Other Psalms of personal Complaint, (Disorientation) include 5, 7, 13, 17, 22, 25, 26, 27, 28, 35, 39, 41, 42, 51, 54, 56, 57, 59, 61, 63, 64, 69, 71, 86, 102, 109, 130, 140, 141 and 143.

³ Other Psalms of Communal Lament (Disorientation) include 79, 80, 83, 90 and 124.

⁴ Other Psalms of New Orientation include 34, 65, 66, 124 and 129.

Books on How to Pray the Psalms

- Praying the Psalms - Thomas Merton
- Praying with the Psalms - Eugene Peterson