

## **Entrust Your Cares to the Lord<sup>1</sup>** (An Introduction to the Psalms)

**M**y purpose here isn't to write yet a commentary on the psalms – there are already a considerable number of those around. What I wanted to try to do was simply introduce the book of psalms to those who may not be familiar with them as an aid to prayer. Indeed the psalms form the central core of the “Office”, the five-times-a-day prayer that priests and religious say, to which many lay people have also been introduced through Morning and Evening Prayer.

**H**ave you ever been angry with God? Ever wanted to shout at the heavens and demand to know what is going on? Ever felt alone and rejected? Ever felt overly burdened and badly done by? On the other hand have you ever wanted to cry out with joy, praising God for his creation, wondering how you deserve all the many gifts and blessings he has given you? I'd say the answer is probably “yes” to all of the above for all of us just as it clearly also was for the writer of the Book of Psalms.

**I**n the Introduction to *The Grail Psalms*<sup>2</sup> it says: “The psalms are a series of shouts: shouts of love and hatred; shouts of suffering or rejoicing; shouts of faith or hope”. Just who is doing the shouting? Tradition attributes the psalms to King David who is referred to in the second book of Samuel as “the singer of the songs of Israel”. But, the Introduction continues, “It is no longer possible to attach a date or author to each psalm [but] this is less important than the fact that Israel has preserved these poems because it has recognised in them the expression of its unique religious destiny. [They were] compiled after the return from the Babylonian captivity [around 537BC] and were completed by the third century before Christ”.

**T**he book of psalms was originally the hymn book of the Temple, a collection of poems to be sung to the accompaniment of a *psalter*, a stringed instrument specifically for this purpose. We use the word psalter to refer to the book of psalms set to music. The psalms were recited to a simple chant and this can be seen in the structure of the verses which are written with the sort of rhythm and balance that we use in reading poetry. When the psalms are read out loud – a point for ministers of the word to remember - it is both helpful and important to read them in a way that reflects that rhythm and structure. Because the psalms were originally intended to be sung, ideally in the Mass they should be led by a cantor (or the choir) with the people at least joining in the response to each verse, again in song.

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<sup>1</sup> ..and he will support you [Psalm 54(55)]

<sup>2</sup> published by Collins (1963/1987)

There are one hundred and fifty hymns or poems that make up the book of psalms, listed in numerical order, but that's where it gets a little bit complicated because the numbers can be different depending on which bible or psalter you are using. As the *Jerusalem Bible* explains, from psalm 10 to psalm 148, the numbering used in the Hebrew bible [which the *Jerusalem* uses] is one figure ahead of the Greek and Vulgate translations. These join psalms 9 & 10 together and also 114 & 115, but divide both 116 and 147 into two. So, for example, what we popularly know as the "twenty-third psalm" ("The Lord is my shepherd...") is more commonly the twenty-second psalm in many bibles and psalters. The alternative number is often included in brackets: Psalm 22(23).

What I would like to do is list the individual psalms along with a summary of the theme of each so that you can see how they may be a help to your prayer, especially if they put into words exactly how you are feeling – and it will be hard not to find at least one of the psalms that wouldn't do that. There is, one source suggests<sup>3</sup>, an intimacy with God which is reflected in many of the psalms: the writer speaks to God as to a friend, unloading his troubles, rejoicing in his well-being, pondering on the mysteries of life. It might help to quote what the *Jerusalem Bible* says on this subject in its introduction to the book of psalms:

*The spiritual riches of the psalter need no commendation. The psalms were the prayers of the Old Testament in which God inspired the feeling that his children ought to have towards him and the words they ought to use when speaking to him. The Christian Church has adopted them unchanged for her official prayer. Unchanged: the cries of praise, entreaty and thanksgiving, wrung from the psalmist by events of their own times and by their personal experiences, have a universal note, expressing as they do the attitude that every person should have towards God.*

There is really only one way to discover for oneself the theme of each of the psalms and that is to read them or to pray with them. Gradually work your way through them perhaps one psalm at a time and see what the writer is saying, how he is feeling, what he is telling God, what he is perhaps hoping for from God. If any strikes a chord with you at that particular time, or you feel it might be helpful on a future occasion, then mark it in your bible so you can find it again. Over time certain of the psalms will become familiar and you will know where to find them and the circumstances in which they may be of help to you in your prayers. But just as rough guide, let me list the psalms with the theme of each as given in *The Grail Psalms* and/or the *Jerusalem Bible*.

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| 1: Two ways of living                              | 2: A warning to rulers and nations |
| 3: A morning prayer – confidence under persecution | 4: An evening/night prayer         |
| 5: A morning prayer                                | 6: Prayer in time of distress      |
| 7: An appeal to God's justice                      | 8: The providence of God           |

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<sup>3</sup> The introduction to the psalms in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*

9&10: Thanksgiving and an appeal	10(11): A prayer of confidence in God
11(12): Truth in a deceitful world	12(13): Prayer in anxiety
13(14): The godless men	14(15): The moral code of a good man
15(16): True happiness – God my heritage	16(17): Appeal of an innocent man
17(18): David’s song of victory	18(19): Praise of God the creator
19(20): Prayer for a king	20(21): Thanksgiving after victory
21(22): Sufferings and hope of the virtuous man	22(23): The Good Shepherd Psalm
23(24): The Lord enters his chosen dwelling place	24(25): Prayer in danger
25(26): Prayer of the blameless	26(27): No fear in God’s company
27(28): Prayer in time of danger	28(29): God’s power in the storm
29(30): Thanksgiving for recovery from sickness	30(31): Confident prayer in distress
31(32): The joy of being forgiven	32(33): A joyful song to the Creator
33(34): In praise of God’s justice	34(35): A virtuous man under oppression
35(36): The wickedness of man; the goodness of God	
36(37): Reflections on good and evil	37(38): An acknowledgement of guilt
38(39): The insignificance of man before God	39(40): Thanksgiving and a prayer for help
40(41): Prayer in sickness	41(42): Lament of a man in exile
42(43): Longing for God’s dwelling place	43(44): National lament in time of disaster
44(45): Royal wedding song	45(46): God is on our side
46(47): To God, king of the world	47(48): The invincible city of God
48(49): The problem of justice, pain and death	49(50): Worship in spirit and truth
50(51): Prayer of contrition	51(52): The fate of the deceitful
52(53): The godless man	53(54): A cry for God’s help
54(55): Distress of a man betrayed by his friend	55(56): Reliance on God
56(57): In time of danger	57(58): Condemnation of injustice
58(59): Against the wicked	59(60): National prayer after defeat
60(61): Prayer of an exile	61(62): Confidence and hope in God alone
62(63): Longing for God	63(64): The punishment for God’s enemies
64(65): Thanksgiving hymn	65(66): A people’s thanksgiving
66(67): Harvest song	67(68): National song of triumph and thanks
68(69): Cry from the depths of sorrow	69(70): A cry of distress
70(71): Prayer in old age	71(72): The kingdom of peace
72(73): The triumph of justice	73(74): Lament over the destruction of the temple
74(75): To the divine judge	75(76): Song after victory
76(77): God’s dealings with Israel	77(78): The lessons of Israel’s history
78(79): National lament of the destruction of Jerusalem	
79(80): Prayer for God’s favour	80(81): Song in harvest time
81(82): Against corrupt authority	82(83): For help against destruction
83(84): Love and longing for God’s temple	84(85): Prayer for peace and justice
85(86): Loyalty in God’s service	86(87): Zion, mother of nations
87(88): Prayer in desolation	88(89): Hymn to God’s faithfulness
89(90): Pondering the human condition	90(91): Under God’s protection
91(92): Song of a happy man	92(93): The majesty of God
93(94): The justice of God	94(95): Call to praise and worship
95(96): The universal reign of God	96(97): The triumph of God
97(98): God, king of the world	98(99): The power and holiness of God
99(100): Praise to God, creator and shepherd	100(101): The ideal ruler
101(102): Prayer in misfortune	102(103): Praise of God’s love
103(104): The glories of creation	104(105): The wonderful history of Israel
105(106): The ingratitude of man	106(107): God, a refuge in all dangers

107(108): Prayer for victory	108(109): An appeal against enemies
109(110): The Messiah: king and priest	110(111): In praise of God's works
111(112): In praise of the virtuous	112(113): To the God of glory and mercy
113(114&115): The wonders of the Exodus	114(116a): Prayer of a man saved from death
115(116b): Promise in gratitude to God	116(117): Summons to praise
117(118): Processional song of praise	118(119): Love of God's law
119(120): The enemies of peace	120(121): God the protector of Israel
121(122): Hail, Jerusalem!	122(123): Prayer of the distressed for help
123(124): Thanksgiving for help in crisis	124(125): God protects his faithful
125(126): Song of the returning exiles	126(127): Trust in Providence
127(128): The blessings of home	128(129): The fate of Israel's enemies
129(130): Prayer of repentance and trust	130(131): Childlike trust in God
131(132): The ark is taken to Zion	132(133): The blessings of unity
133(134): Prayer at night-time	134(135): Hymn of praise
135(136): Litany of praise	136(137): Homesickness in exile
137(138): Thanksgiving to a faithful God	138(139): God knows everything <sup>4</sup>
139(140): Prayer under persecution	140(141): Evening prayer for protection
141(142): Prayer of a man deserted by his friends	142(143): Prayer in desolation
143(144): Appeal for victory and peace	144(145): Hymn to the praise of God the king
145(146): In praise of God's fidelity	146(147a): Hymn to the Almighty
147(147b): Praise of God's personal care for Israel	
148: Cosmic hymn of praise	149: Praise to the God of victories
150: Final summons to praise God	

When we read the psalms, and especially when we say the “Office”, the “Prayer of the Church”, and are therefore saying psalms that are assigned rather than ones chosen personally, it may strike us that at the time we don't feel the way the writer does, that the prayer and petition contained in the psalm isn't an expression of our needs. Importantly the introduction to *The Grail Psalms* points out: “Some don't want to pray in terms of an anguish they have not experienced, or give thanks with a jubilation they have never felt. But do such people think that the prayers they use are merely their own prayers? Do they not realise that they stand before God in the company of the whole of mankind? Their prayer is that of the whole Church.” In other words within the body of Christ there are members who are in need, desolate, grieving, lonely, without hope, etc, and so a particular psalm should cause us to remember the needs of others even if they are not our own needs at the time. A time will surely come when they will be, and then we might gain encouragement and support from knowing that fellow members of the body of Christ are praying for us (even though they may not realise it) through the psalms that they are praying.

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<sup>4</sup> It is usually recommended to omit verses 19-22 which seem to have been accidentally imported into the psalm but are clearly out-of-keeping with the rest of the theme.