



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Singing with the Psalter
(*Singing Our Lives*,
pp. 19-27)

Suggested Articles:

📖 Make a Joyful Noise
(*Singing Our Lives*,
pp. 36-37)

📖 Exuberant Praise
(*Singing Our Lives*,
pp. 38-42)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu

Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics
Baylor University
One Bear Place #97361
Waco, TX 76798-7361
Phone 1-866-298-2325
www.ChristianEthics.ws

© 2006 The Center for Christian Ethics

Singing with the Psalter

What sets the book of Psalms apart from other Scripture is the sacramental nature of its songs, their ability to mold and transform the believer. Reading or singing the psalms, we lift them to God as our prayers, as though we are speaking our own words rather than recalling an ancient litany.

Prayer

Scripture Readings: Psalms 100, 22, and 30

Silent Meditation

Keep praising God with hymns, and meditating continually, and so lighten the burden of the temptations that attack you. A traveler carrying a heavy burden stops from time to time to take deep breaths, and so makes the journey easier and the burden light.

Sayings of the Desert Christians (fourth century)†

Reflection

Scripture resounds with singing. Moses sings to the people of Israel (Exodus 15:1-18), and his song echoes through the courts of heaven (Revelation 15:3-4). Job mournfully laments being forsaken by God, but an angel joyfully proclaims the Savior's birth to Bethlehem shepherds. Although biblical songs have inspired the Church's singing over the centuries, the inexhaustible muse has been the Psalter, the worship and prayer book of Israel.

"Psalm singing chases fiends, excites angels to our help, removes sin, pleases God," Richard Rolle wrote admiringly in the fourteenth century. "It shapes perfection, removes and destroys annoyance and anguish of soul. As a lamp lighting our life, healing of a sick heart, honey to a bitter soul, this book is called a garden enclosed, well sealed, a paradise full of apples!"

In the sixteenth century, John Calvin said that biblical psalms were the only songs worthy to be used in worship. Yet, "being a lover of music, Calvin stretched the point a bit to allow metrical paraphrases of the prose psalms, which could be sung to old and new melodies," Michael Morgan notes. "He recognized the power of music, beyond the inspiration of the words alone, to move the human spirits of those who make the music or hear it." English hymn writing really took off when Isaac Watts (1674-1748) paraphrased most of the psalms in metrical form (with meter and rhyme to fit the music of his day). He believed that "when we read a prose psalm from the Bible, God speaks to us; but when we sing a metrical psalm, we speak to God."

The Psalter can teach us to pray and sing in all the seasons of life, Morgan says, because "the psalms reveal every imaginable condition of our human experience, but never without the illumination of who God is and where we stand in relation to that wonderful Presence." In this vein Walter Brueggemann grouped the psalms into songs of orientation, disorientation, and new orientation. Morgan illustrates with these examples:

- ▶ *Psalm 100 – a psalm of orientation.* When "we are at peace with ourselves, our neighbors, and God," psalms of orientation call us to worship God and to give thanks for these seasons of



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, directs The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

© 2006 The Center for Christian Ethics

well-being. After introducing the One whom we are to praise (vv. 1-2), Psalm 100 describes our relationship with God (v. 3), offers thanks for God's goodness (v. 4), and confidently rejoices that God's love will endure forever (v. 5).

Among the other psalms of orientation, Brueggemann suggests, are the songs of creation (8, 33, 104, and 145), songs of Torah (1, 15, 19, 24, and 119), wisdom psalms (14 and 37), and songs for occasions of well-being (131 and 133).

▶ *Psalm 22 – a psalm of disorientation.* The psalms of disorientation "lament the ragged, painful disarray we inevitably encounter in our...anguished seasons of hurt, alienation, suffering, and death." Thus Psalm 22, the song that Jesus uttered from the cross (Mark 15:34; Matthew 27:46), voices our ultimate anxiety—being abandoned by God (vv. 1-2, 11). Yet even when we blame God for our grief-stricken condition (vv. 6-9a), we entreat God to rescue us and promise that "in the midst of the congregation I will praise you" (v. 22).

Psalms of disorientation may lift either personal (13, 35, and 86) or communal complaints (74, 79, and 137) to God.

▶ *Psalm 30 – a psalm of new orientation.* When God hears our lament, "reconciliation, redemption, rebirth, and resurrection are the themes we sing about in the psalms of *new orientation*." We welcome God's rescue and healing (vv. 1-2), and though we acknowledge both God's anger and grace, we can "see beyond the conflict to its sure resolution at the hand of God" (vv. 4-5). In the end, we can thank God for removing our grieving garments and clothing us with joy (vv. 11-12).

The Psalter brims with songs of restoration, from the personal and communal thanksgiving songs (34, 40, and 138; or 65, 66, 124, and 129, respectively) to the songs to the once and future king (29, 47, 93, 97, 98, 99, and 114) and hymns of praise (100, 103, 113, 117, 135, 146, 147, 148, 149, and 150).

Study Questions

1. Are the psalms always "praise songs"? What does the Psalter teach us about the range of experience that we should reflect on and express to God in our personal and communal songs?
2. How do you employ the psalms in personal worship? How are they used in your congregation's worship?
3. Have certain psalms been, in the words of the desert Christians, "deep breaths" that lighten your burdens in life?
4. What are the advantages of paraphrasing a psalm in metrical form? What are the dangers? (As an example, compare these metrical paraphrases of Psalm 23: Isaac Watts' "My Shepherd Will Supply My Need," George Herbert's "The God of Love My Shepherd Is," James Montgomery's "The Lord is My Shepherd," and Joseph Gilmore's "He Leadeth Me.")
5. Consider how Luca della Robbia and Donatello depict Psalm 150 in competing *cantoria*, or choir galleries, for the cathedral of Florence. What is the charm of each artist's interpretation?

Departing Hymn: "We Sing!"

† Benedicta Ward, trans., *The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 65.

Singing with the Psalter

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Psalms 23 and 150
Silent Meditation	Silent Meditation	Silent Meditation	Silent Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (skim all)	Discuss interpretations in art and poetry
Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)	Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions 4 and 5
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To appreciate the Psalter's remarkable role in shaping Christian prayer and song.
2. To interpret representative psalms of orientation, disorientation, and new orientation.
3. To consider how the wide range of psalms can become our prayers.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Singing Our Lives (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting.

Begin with a Comment

"When I was a young child, the first book of Scripture I learned to find with ease was the Psalter because it is at the very middle of the Bible," Michael Morgan recounts. "All I had to do was let the Bible fall open at its heart and there it was, ready to 'sing' to me of a mighty God, a loving and caring Shepherd, a Lord of righteousness and repentance and redemption. Of course, it took some years of living before I knew that if I opened my own heart, as I opened the Bible, the book of Psalms would become a source of personal dialogue between that same faithful God and a grown-up, more complicated me" (*Singing Our Lives*, p. 19).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by praying that in every season of life members will be assured of who God is and where we stand in relation to that wonderful Presence.

Scripture Reading

Ask three group members to read Psalms 100, 22, and 30 from a modern translation. They might (1) read the psalms in sequence now or (2) read each psalm as it is discussed in the reflection.

Silent Meditation

Provide a period of silence for members to reflect on the saying from the desert Christians.

Reflection

When we discuss "singing our lives" before God, let us emphasize our continuity with and tremendous debt over the centuries to the book of Psalms, the worship book of ancient Israel. Michael Morgan urges us to pray and sing the entire range of psalms. Scholars categorize the psalms in various ways by their structure and content, but among the most helpful for modern readers is Walter Brueggemann's way of relating the psalms to seasons of life—times of "orientation," "disorientation," and "new orientation." An accessible introduction is Brueggemann's *Spirituality of the Psalms* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2002, 86 pp., \$6.00).

Morgan is an avid and talented proponent of *singing* the psalms in worship today. In his *Psalter for Christian Worship* (Louisville, KY: Witherspoon Press, 1999, 186 pp., \$14.95), he provides a metrical setting for each psalm and pairs it with a familiar hymn tune. Briefly, “meter” refers to a pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables. “Amazing Grace,” to take a familiar example, repeats an unstressed-stressed (or, iambic) pattern for eight, six, eight, and six syllables: “A-ma-zing grace! How *sweet* the *sound* / that *saved* a *wretch* like *me*! / I *once* was *lost*, but *now* am *found*, / was *blind*, but *now* I *see*.” This 8686 pattern (called “common meter”) fits tunes like NEW BRITAIN, MCKEE, or AZMON, which highlights different facets of John Newton’s text.

You might extend this discussion to two sessions. In one, discuss how we can use the full range of psalms in worship. In the other, examine the interpretation of psalms in art and hymns.

Study Questions

1. Not all of the psalms praise God (especially some of the songs of disorientation like Psalm 137), and many of them are in no way “upbeat” or “cheerful.” Yet even the psalms that are the most full of pain and disappointment show us how to seek God with our complaints, petitions, and requests for comfort.
2. In personal worship, members may read aloud or chant portions of the psalms that are edited for devotional use. Or they may meditate on a single verse or short passage in the manner of *lectio divina*. Some may memorize entire psalms; choir members may remember the paraphrase of a psalm in a hymn or choral anthem. Some members may read straight through the book of Psalms every few weeks, or follow a daily schedule of reading psalms.

Congregations that follow a lectionary will read a prescribed psalm, or portion of a psalm, every Sunday on a three year cycle. Responsive reading of psalms can highlight the poetic repetitions in them. A choral anthem or congregational hymn might be based on a psalm. Should every worship service include the reading or singing of at least one psalm?

3. Recall the meditative reading from the desert Christians: singing hymns can “lighten the burden of the temptations that attack you.” The psalms of orientation and new orientation remind us of God’s guidance and salvation. The psalms of disorientation help us share our frustrations with God, confess our sin, petition God for the correction of evil, and seek God’s comfort in our despair. All of these can “lighten” our load of burdens and give us hope for the moral struggle. Encourage members to share why a specific psalm, or phrase from a psalm, is especially meaningful to them.
4. Metrical psalms may be sung to familiar tunes and are easier to memorize. If it is sensitive poetry, the metrical version of a psalm may highlight certain imagery in the psalm or give a devotional interpretation to the original. Morgan suggests that singing a metrical psalm, unlike the responsive reading of the original, “can be done not only in the company of other believers, but also when we find ourselves alone in the company of God.” A danger is that the metrical psalm will not be faithful to the biblical text. When we read only devotional and sanitized versions of psalms, we will miss the raw emotion and power of the original songs.

The four hymns are in many hymnals and at www.cyberhymnal.org. Though Gilmore departs from the biblical text, he best captures the theme of discipleship implied in the psalm (“his faithful follower I would be”). Herbert’s text is the least singable, but it wonderfully highlights that the psalm’s focus is on God, not us: “And all this not for my desert, / but for his holy Name” and “And as it [i.e., God’s love] never shall remove / so neither shall my praise.” Montgomery stays close to the original, yet I love his interpretation of the final image (“I seek, by the path which my forefathers trod, / through land of their sojourn, thy Kingdom of love”). Watts’ hymn is packed full of rich images, especially this one: “O may thy house be my abode, / and all my work be praise. / There would I find a settled rest, / while others go and come; / no more a stranger, nor a guest, / but like a child at home.”

5. Heidi Hornik thinks that “Luca more accurately represents the narrative” by depicting children playing the various instruments mentioned in Psalm 150, but “Donatello conveys the joy in the souls of those who hear and take to heart the call to worship in the final psalm.”

Departing Hymn

“We Sing!” is on pp. 49-51 of *Singing Our Lives*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.