

Praying the Psalms

Bonhoeffer called the Psalms “the prayer book of the Bible”. In these readings, we will read not only to understand but to shape and lift our prayers towards God. Could there be a better way to start the new year? (If you find this practice helpful, you can also check out *Praying the Bible* by Donald Whitney.)

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**BIBLE
SOCIETY**

Live light

Scripture taken from The Holy Bible: NIV

Day	Readings	Reference	Reflection/Question	Prayer
1	<p>Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither— whatever they do prospers.</p>	Psalm 1:1-3	<p>In Psalm 1, we begin in the way we always must: not with any brand of unbelief, but with a delight in the Word of God itself, content that it alone is God’s Word, and that in it alone we will find the growth and maturity that will yield fruit.</p> <p>What are you tempted to delight in, apart from the word of the Lord?</p>	<p>Almighty Lord, help us not to walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the way of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers. But help us to delight in your word, in everything that proceeds from you. Help us bring ourselves to your feet, again and again, in the humble knowledge that it is your word that saves. Help us attend to your word, to be patient in waiting for the fruit that your word brings, trusting in the water of life that cleanses us anew.</p>
2	<p>Answer me when I call to you, my righteous God. Give me relief from my distress; have mercy on me and hear my prayer.</p> <p>How long will you people turn my glory into shame? How long will you love delusions and seek false gods? Know that the Lord has set apart his faithful servant for himself; the Lord hears when I call to him.</p> <p>Tremble and do not sin; when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent.</p>	Psalm 4:1-4	<p>When we turn to the Psalms, and pray them back to God, we come across Psalms like this— Psalms which commemorate distress and wrap mourning into song. However, they remind us of this too: that when we call to God and feel him to be silent, that the answer is not to turn to falsehoods for comfort, but to continue to call on him, in contriteness and humility, knowing that the Lord <i>does</i> hear.</p> <p>What will it take for you to call on the Lord, as he wants you to?</p>	<p>Merciful Father, answer us as we call upon you. Turn your face upon us when we plead. We pray for those who are in distress, that you will give them mercy, and hear their cries. Forgive us and our frustration when we turn from your glory to seek out shame; when we turn our eyes from the truth towards the lustre of false things. Thank you that in Jesus, your faithful servant, you hear us. Help us now to search out our hearts, and bring any sin before you, knowing the full forgiveness that lies in Jesus Christ.</p>

Praying the Psalms (continued)

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3	<p>Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!</p> <p>You have set your glory in the heavens. Through the praise of children and infants you have established a stronghold against your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger. When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?</p>	Psalm 8:1-4	<p>As we pray the Psalms, one thing that keeps happening is that our focus is turned away from our usual rote and self-centred prayers towards a bigger scope, a scope that is vaster than our usual myopic view. This Psalm urges us to consider—and pray—for a creation that is grander than we can understand, and to worship a Creator that has it all in the palm of his hands.</p> <p>And that same Creator has a hold of you.</p> <p>Consider your place in the creation, and in relation with the Creator. How does this make you feel?</p>	<p>Creator God, we worship you—we proclaim the majesty of your name in all the earth. In tune with the heavens, we declare your glory. We say amen even with the children who praise your name, that the victory of Jesus on the Cross should be for us, and not against us. We consider the heavens and the stars, we consider the works of your hands in creation, and we rest in humble awe of who you are, and the awesome, gentle love that you have for us. And we thank you.</p>
4	<p>The fool says in his heart, “There is no God.” They are corrupt, their deeds are vile; there is no one who does good.</p> <p>The Lord looks down from heaven on all mankind to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God. All have turned away, all have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one.</p>	Psalm 14:1-3	<p>Politically correct and tolerant, this Psalm is not. But the Psalms—and God’s Word—has a way of piercing through our usual ways of perceiving this world, and bringing us up close and personal with big R Reality. This Psalm reminds us that the big truth that God is Real is not compatible with atheism. However, this is not a time for triumphal finger-pointing—for this Psalm quickly reminds us that without God’s action in loving us, we would be in the same boat: there but for the grace of God go I.</p> <p>Consider your own journey to believing in the living God. Who do you know who needs to come into that same journey?</p>	<p>Loving Father, although we despised you, and rejected you, you loved us and sent your son to die for us. And so now we pray for those who hate you, who don’t believe that you are real, who don’t believe in your love. And Lord, for those we love who have turned away, who don’t understand: we ask for your grace, evernew, to become real for them. We pray for those who do not know you, that you will bring them from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light.</p>

Praying the Psalms (continued)

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5	<p>The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.</p>	Psalm 23:1-4	<p>This Psalm is rightly famous for the beauty of its words, the image it conjures up of peace within and without. However, we should not forget that the image is not one of cross-stitch and green valleys, but of the shepherd as a fierce protector; that the shepherd's staff was not a symbol but a weapon. This should not take away from our image of peace, but reinforce it: the Lord gives us not a sentimental peace, but a peace that is hard-won, a peace that is despite the evil one and his attacks, a peace that is despite the sin that clings desperately to us.</p> <p>Think of when you've last been stressed, busy, tired or anxious. What would it mean for you to bring the words of this Psalm into that moment?</p>	<p>Lord, with you as our shepherd, we lack for nothing. We pause to rest in your kindness, we lie down in your providence, we refresh our soul in your love. For the sake of your name, guide us in where we go. Help us not to fear even death, for we know the One who defeated death. Help us to cling in the darkness to the victory that you have won, to find comfort in your strength, and to find our rest in you.</p>
6	<p>The Lord is my light and my salvation— whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life— of whom shall I be afraid?</p> <p>When the wicked advance against me to devour me, it is my enemies and my foes who will stumble and fall.</p> <p>One thing I ask from the Lord, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple.</p>	Psalm 27:1-2, 4	<p>This Psalm continues the theme from Psalm 23 of finding rest and security in the strength and goodness of the Lord. But there is a different end here: "one thing I ask from the Lord". In a world of complexity, of endless things demanding our time and attention, it can be refreshing to be reminded that there is a certain simplicity to the Christian life. If we were to do this one thing—to gaze on the beauty of the Lord—that would be enough, to keep us until the end of our days, and beyond.</p> <p>I wonder if "beauty" is something you think of, when you think of considering who God is. What does it mean for you "to gaze on the beauty of the Lord"?</p>	<p>Lord, you are our light and our salvation, so who should I fear? You are the stronghold of my life, so who shall I fear? Help me then not to fear persecution or blame. But help me to seek one thing instead: to live in the security of your love for all of my days, to know that the Spirit dwells with me forever, to gaze on the beauty of who you are, what you have done, and that you consider me your child.</p>

Praying the Psalms (continued)

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7	<p>Since you are my rock and my fortress, for the sake of your name lead and guide me. Keep me free from the trap that is set for me, for you are my refuge. Into your hands I commit my spirit; deliver me, Lord, my faithful God.</p>	Psalm 31:3-5	<p>We should be reminded here that “for the sake of your name” is not a meaningless phrase, and refers not to the name ‘God’, but who God declared himself to be—merciful and just—and all that he has done. Thus, Jesus himself quotes this Psalm in Luke 23:46, echoing that trust in the mercy and justice of God. If Jesus himself did that, then who are we to do otherwise?</p> <p>What would you do for the sake of his name?</p>	<p>Lord, you are my rock and my fortress, and so, for the sake of your name, because you are just and merciful, lead me, protect me, and guide me in all I do. Keep me safe from the trap of temptation, and help me to find refuge in the storm. Whatever happens in this life, I commit myself, my present and my future to you, knowing that you will deliver me, knowing that even death itself does not stand in your way.</p>
8	<p>Do not fret because of those who are evil or be envious of those who do wrong; for like the grass they will soon wither, like green plants they will soon die away.</p> <p>Trust in the Lord and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.</p>	Psalm 37:1-4	<p>Context is important, such that we can make considerable mistakes of judgement when we get the context wrong. Here, the Psalm lifts us to remind us to put all of life in the context of judgement of the Lord—doing so puts an end to fantasies of revenge, or power plays, because we know the Lord. As such, we should not read prosperity into the last verse here, because the meaning here is greater: when we delight in the Lord, we realise that he is the desire of our heart.</p> <p>Do you trust in the Lord, that he is the judge of all, right and wrong—and that it is not for you to take revenge?</p>	<p>Father, help me not to worry about those who do evil, or to be jealous of those who do wrong around me. Help me to remember that life is in your hands, and not mine, and that judgement is yours and not mine. Instead, help me to remember your goodness—to live in the safety of your love. Help me instead to delight in you—to make you the desire of my heart, so that my petty longings for this world fade away in comparison.</p>

Praying the Psalms (continued)

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9	As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God? My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me all day long, “Where is your God?”	Psalms 42:1-3	<p>This is another Psalm that reflects on the reality of suffering and sadness for the people of God. When we pray such Psalms, they may not reflect the reality of our current situation, but it is worth reminding ourselves that they do reflect the reality of what many people we know and love experience day by day. Once again, the Psalms point us beyond ourselves, to pray even into situations that are not our own.</p> <p>Who do you know, whom you can pray this Psalm on behalf of?</p>	My God, I long for you, and so I cry out from my heart for your comfort, that my spiritual thirst would be met in the streams of living water that flow from you. For those in distress and sadness, in mourning or depression, for those who despair, Lord, I pray that this would be true of them: that they would put their hope in you, and be able to praise you once again.
10	Shout for joy to God, all the earth! Sing the glory of his name; make his praise glorious. Say to God, “How awesome are your deeds! So great is your power that your enemies cringe before you. All the earth bows down to you; they sing praise to you, they sing the praises of your name.”	Psalms 66:1-4	<p>When we pray the Psalms, we find that our responses are, bit by bit, shaped to be those of the Psalmist’s. Here, we are shaped to rejoice—to shout! To sing! To praise! Even those of us who are most unemotional are reminded that it is good to take hold of joy, to bring it down and cling to it within our hearts. And in doing so, we become in tune with what all the saints will do in the world to come.</p> <p>What would it mean for you to shout for joy to God?</p>	Lord God, I praise you! I praise the glory of your name! Thank you for those who—week by week—help me to praise you! For how awesome are your deeds, and how great is your power, how wonderful the victory that Christ has won! Together with the earth, I sing your praise, and bow down to you.

Praying the Psalms (continued)

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11	Praise the Lord, my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the Lord, my soul, and forget not all his benefits— who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion.	Psalm 103:1-4	<p>Again, we are reminded to praise the Lord. But this praise is not only for who God is, but an enfolding all-encompassing praise: it involves all of who we are, and all of what God has done for us. It reminds us, as so many of the Psalms do, that praise is not just for those of whom life is well, but it is necessary no matter how situation, no matter how much we ‘feel like it’, no matter who we are. For if we know God, then we know he is worthy of praise.</p> <p>What has God done for you that is worthy of praise?</p>	Lord, help me to praise you, to worship you with all of my being. Help me consider how to praise you with all that you have given me. I praise you for your goodness in so many things, for life and health, for grace and forgiveness, for redemption and glory, for creation and heaven, for my Lord Jesus Christ, I praise you.
12	You have searched me, Lord, and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you, Lord, know it completely.	Psalm 139:1-4	<p>We can be fooled, I think, into thinking that God does not know us completely. For this is the way the world works: there are things we do in public—that the world knows about—and there are things that we do in private—that we keep hidden from most, or all. But the Lord God knows us—knows us any person on earth, and knows every wrinkled secret of our hearts. And, knowing that, he loves us still.</p> <p>What do you fool yourself into thinking that you have hidden from God?</p>	Lord, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise, you know my every thought. You know what I do before I do it, you know the ways that I go. You know the words upon my tongue, and that I bury in my heart. And yet Lord, despite knowing that, you offer forgiveness to me. Thank you. Help me to live in a way that is pleasing to you, to speak the words that you would have me say, to live in worship of who you are and who you have made me to be.

Praying the Psalms (continued)

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13	<p>Praise be to the Lord my Rock, who trains my hands for war, my fingers for battle. He is my loving God and my fortress, my stronghold and my deliverer, my shield, in whom I take refuge, who subdues peoples under me.</p> <p>Lord, what are human beings that you care for them, mere mortals that you think of them? They are like a breath; their days are like a fleeting shadow.</p>	Psalm 144:1-4	<p>It's beyond tempting to think that we're important. That we're the ones who are going to change the world. That if we had the right idea, if we had the right business, if we had the right job that we could change everything. But this Psalm brings us against the stark reality: compared to the everlasting Lord, we are nothing but a breath. And yet the Lord cares for us, who are made of dust and bone, flesh and blood—by sending his Son into our likeness.</p> <p>What does it mean for the priorities in our life, when are days are “like a fleeting shadow”?</p>	<p>My Lord and redeemer, I praise you and the works of your hands. You are my God and fortress, stronghold and deliverer, my shield and refuge. Even though you are from everlasting to everlasting, you care for me, and sent your son to die for me. Help us to number our days, to consider ourselves in wisdom, and commit our time to you.</p>
14	<p>Praise the Lord. Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens. Praise him for his acts of power; praise him for his surpassing greatness.</p> <p>Let everything that has breath praise the Lord.</p>	Psalm 150:1-2,6	<p>The Psalms end with this not-subtle reminder: Praise the Lord. As this series end, it is a reminder that praying the Psalms back to God is not rocket science, but as simple as taking these words upon your lips, and in this case, to praise the Lord. For as long as we have the Psalms, they will remind us to pray and praise the Lord, and for as long as we praise the Lord, he will remain worthy of praise.</p> <p>How will you continue to pray the Psalms back to the Lord?</p>	<p>Lord, I praise you. I praise you in your sanctuary, I praise you in your mighty heavens. I praise you for your acts of power, I praise you for your surpassing greatness. While I have breath, I will yet praise you, for you are the Lord.</p>