

Praying with the Psalms



For Reflection

If you were being sent into exile and could take only a few things with you, what would you take? If you could not have a whole bible, which passages would you choose? Most Christians say they would take the Gospels, and the Psalms and if possible some chapters of Paul's writings. Mostly people choose the passages that mean the most.

Psalms are prayers and hymns, many of which date from early in Hebrew history. Many traditions have a *Psalter* in which the Psalms have been put to music. One of the hymnals I have from the early 20th century has the words of the Psalm at the top of the page and the tune at the bottom. It is cut in the middle, so if you want a different tune, you simply turn the page. One such hymn which appears in most hymnals is a setting of the 100th Psalm, All People That on Earth Do Dwell.

The Psalms were gathered from private prayers and public liturgies. Some are laments, some are praise, some are both. Some point to the wonder of creation, some repeat the history of God's saving acts in Israel's history. Some are very short, some are lengthy. Some appear to be the words of people who have been in trouble or recovering from illness or surrounded by enemies, slandered or threatened with war. Some are penitential, a confession of sin seeking God's forgiveness.

The Psalms were intended to be as words of the community, but over the last two thousand years they have often been regarded as focused prayers to be used in private. They may be used both ways.

Ways of writing:

- Use repetition as Mae did.
- Doesn't have to rhyme, but may.
- Common ways of rhyming include pairing lines, such as line 1 and 4 or line 1-2,3-4.
- Focus on what you want to say to God.
- Put it in a set form.

A tool for writing:

Feed My Sheep

F _____

E _____

E _____

D _____

M _____

Y _____

S _____

H _____

E _____

E _____

P _____

Writing a Psalm

Occasionally a new psalm shows up; it is usually written as a hymn and we don't see it until after it has been set to a hymn tune. Brian Wren, a contemporary hymn or psalm writer, says that we miss a lot by never stopping to simply read the words of our hymns. He may be right.

We also miss something when we leave all of the writing to other people. Until the twentieth century many people wrote hymns and psalms. Most of them were not saved, probably weren't worth saving, but they blessed the hearts and minds of the writers. I suspect that most contemporary people think that only a few people can write or that writing a song or hymn is something the professionals do. Not Necessarily.

In **The Seeking Heart**, Mae Yoho Ward's letters to God which her son collected, there are occasional psalms.

Great God
 Almighty God
 God the Lover
 God the Creator
 God the keeper of my soul,

Look upon me this morning
 Bringing thanksgiving to You
 Calling upon you
 for strength and guidance.

God of the Universe
 God of all People
 God of little children and
 God of sinners,

Here me as I call to you for courage to endure.

Mae

Or another one

May I keep listening...
 Keeping my eye and ear open
 To the least whispers
 Of Your will as to
 What I should do.

