

SING *a* NEW PSALM

**COMMUNICATING WITH GOD
THROUGH THE PRAYERS
OF THE CHURCH**

VOLUME I: LAUDS & VESPERS

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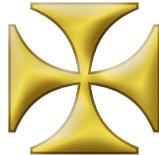
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UNLIKE OTHER PRAYERS IN SACRED SCRIPTURE,
the prayers contained in the *Book of the Psalms*
are not inserted into a narrative story
that specifies their meaning and function.
Instead, the psalms are given to the believer
precisely as a text of prayer.
Since they are the Word of God,
the believer who prays the psalms
speaks to God using the very words
that God himself has given to us.
Thus, in praying the psalms we learn to pray.
The psalms are a school of prayer.

—POPE EMERITUS BENEDICT XVI



FOREWORD

With *Sing a New Psalm: Communicating with God Through the Prayers of the Church*, Jennifer McGaw Phelps provides an insightful and useful tool for coming to know the psalms, helping readers to make these ancient prayers of both synagogue and church a familiar source of prayer and reflection for us today. She accomplishes this by providing the psalm texts in a special context, *Liturgy of the Hours* as prayed at Conception Abbey. To foster the reader's efforts to make these psalms a fruitful source of personal prayer, Ms. Phelps provides brief comments on various verses, along with historical background material and questions for personal reflection. These questions help to take us from merely reading ancient texts to making them applicable to our own lives and experience. This two-volume book is a wonderful gift for anyone who wishes to know the psalms better, to pray the Church's *Liturgy of the Hours* more fully, or to become more familiar with these ancient prayers so fundamental to our Christian tradition.

Many people who are informed by the values of contemporary society find the psalms difficult to read and understand. The language and imagery can be quite foreign to our own present-day context, where violent actions and passionate expressions of political or social beliefs are widely regarded as dangerous or threatening to the stability of the modern world. As a means of helping the reader to a better understanding of the sometimes challenging and complex language and imagery of the *Psalter*, Ms. Phelps provides textual sidebars with explanations of various terms and ideas in the psalms that may at first be unfamiliar or even disturbing to today's reader, clarifying the prayers' historical context and meaning while expounding them in such a way that they remain accessible to our own understanding and appreciation. In addition to these instructive elements, she draws from the Church's tradition in dealing with the psalms, providing illustrative and informative quotations from recent Church teaching, especially that of Pope St. John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI, whose homilies and elocutions make such frequent reference to the psalms as they bear on contemporary experience. She thus illuminates a path by which the reader may see firsthand how rich a tradition the Church possesses with regard to the psalms, both in their liturgical use and in personal prayer and reflection.

For anyone who desires to understand and appreciate the psalms more fully, who wants to make them more applicable to his or her own life, or who seeks to unite personal prayer to the rich traditions of the Church, *Sing a New Psalm: Communicating with God Through the Prayers of the Church* will be a wonderful resource. It will certainly deepen the reader's appreciation for these prayers of the Church, texts that have been called "the prayer book of the Bible," and which St. Augustine so aptly describes as "ever ancient, ever new."

Gregory Polan, OSB
24 June 2015—the Solemnity of the Birth of John the Baptist

PSALMS STUDY BASICS

Link to free supplemental materials at www.turningtogodsword.com.

Sing a New Psalm: Communicating with God Through the Prayers of the Church—Volume I: Lauds & Vespers is the first volume of a Turning to God’s Word study focusing on the rich tradition of prayer present in the psalms. The basic human emotions expressed in these biblical hymns ensure that they remain ever-new, eloquently speaking for men and women in many situations. A number of the psalms quoted by Jesus in the *Gospels* address royal kingship—*Psalms* 110 and 118—or they deal with suffering—*Psalms* 51. All are addressed in this first volume.

Psalms

prayers to be sung as part of liturgical worship

The Hebrew title for the ***Psalms***—Sēpher Tēhillīm—means “Book of Praises” and probably came about because of the use of these hymns in Temple worship. The English title of ***Psalms*** is derived from the Greek word ψαλμοί (*psalmoi*), meaning “instrumental music” and emphasizing that the words are intended to be set to music.

A NEW TRANSLATION WITH A TIMELESS MESSAGE

This Turning to God’s Word Catholic Bible study is based on *The Abbey Psalms and Canticles* prepared by the Benedictine monks of Conception Abbey and published by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). *The Abbey Psalms and Canticles* is a 2020 revision of the monks’ 2010 translation, *The Revised Grail Psalms*; it contains a handful of minor corrections suggested by American bishops. Lessons are organized according to the two-week prayer cursus followed at Conception Abbey, reprinted on page 133. The Roman cursus followed in *Liturgy of the Hours* books can be found online. That cursus covers four weeks of prayers instead of two, and it leaves out *Psalms* 58, 83, and 109 and verses that its editors deemed potentially problematic in 20 other psalms. Both volumes of this study address all of the omitted material.



ABOUT DIFFERENT NUMBERING SYSTEMS

Depending on translation, the psalms follow one of two numbering systems—either Hebrew or Greek. Most modern translations follow the Hebrew Masoretic text, including *The Abbey Psalms and Canticles*, which lists the Masoretic numbers first; the numbers in parentheses in the page gutters of that translation indicate the corresponding Greek system. (The Latin Vulgate and the Douay-Rheims translations both follow the Greek system.)

To limit confusion, this study refers only to the Hebrew system, which is consistent with the way that the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) treats the psalms. It is expected that

the Hebrew Masoretic numbering, which already is predominant in the Church, eventually will become the only system used in Catholic publications.

Individual verses also may be numbered differently. *The Abbey Psalms and Canticles* verse numbering matches that in the New American Bible Revised Edition (NABRE). This study also follows that system for the psalms. The Revised Standard Version Catholic Editions (RSVCE and RSV2CE) occasionally vary. Differences occur because a few translations number the explanatory note—called a superscription—at the beginning of some of the psalms; others leave those notes unnumbered.



CHRISTIAN CONNECTION

ADDRESSING SOME CHALLENGES

A major difficulty for Christians who wish to incorporate the psalms into their prayer lives is that in some of these ancient hymns blatantly curses the Psalmist's enemies and asks the LORD to deal harshly with them. This is disturbing enough that the editors compiling the *Liturgy of the Hours* books chose to leave out a few problematic verses from 20 of the psalms; three other *Psalms*—58, 83, and 109—are omitted altogether.

This Turning to God's Word study addresses all of these omissions, which are pointed out when they occur. The omissions may indeed pose what the general instructions for the *Liturgy of the Hours* refer to as "a certain psychological difficulty," and in no way should be considered an endorsement of cursing. The New Testament book of *Revelation* 6:10, for example, includes this prayer by souls asking God to deal with those who harmed them:

"O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell upon the earth?"

Apparently it is permissible to plead with God to avenge the wicked people in our lives, but it probably is wise not to enjoy the idea too much. In the *Gospel According to Matthew* 5:43–45 and the *Gospel According to Luke* 6:27–36, Jesus is clear that he expects us to love our enemies. As much as we may want to avoid expending energy praying for the well-being of those who oppose us, this is what Jesus expects of his followers.

Another problem with studying the psalms is that we expect to learn the meaning of words such as "maskil" and "miktam," which derive from pre-Christian Jewish tradition and appear in some superscriptions. Scholars continue to debate the liturgical significance of these words.

DAVID MAY HAVE WRITTEN UP TO HALF OF THE PSALMS

Most scholars believe that David wrote the 73 psalms that bear his name—and possibly even more than those. David also is seen as a powerful Old Testament type of Jesus. In the *First Book of Samuel* 13:14, when Saul must be replaced as king, the prophet Samuel says of David: "... the LORD has sought out a man after his own heart; and the LORD has appointed him to be prince over his people ..."

Despite David's love for God, the *Second Book of Samuel* 11:1–27 records the manner in which David piles sin upon sin when he commits adultery with Bathsheba and then conspires to have her husband killed. *Psalms* 51, often called "the *Miserere*," is covered in Lesson 12, "Have Mercy on Me, O God," in this volume of this study. It is set against the backdrop of David's sin.

David's immediate reaction to having his sins pointed out to him is recorded by a third person in the *Second Book of Samuel* 12:1–23. *Psalms* 51 claims to be David's own penitential prayer and is written as a first-person account. It offers the biblical evidence of David's humble contrition that

inspires Christians to cling to the hope that God will show merciful love to sinners who repent.

David's highly personal response to being called out for his sins by the prophet Nathan greatly differs from the response we would expect from political leaders. It is worthwhile to consider how many times we rely on excuses or attempt to shift blame in order to try to diminish the seriousness of our transgressions.



Lesson 11, "The Suffering Servant" in the second volume, looks at *Psalms* 22, a frequent focus of Lenten reflections. It records David's vision of the crucified Christ—about a thousand years before the birth of Jesus. This prophetic psalm was written long before current understanding of the role that suffering would play in the life of the Messiah, a descendant of David promised by God to rule over an eternal kingdom.

Besides David, Asaph, the sons of Korah, and Solomon are thought to have written some psalms, and *Psalms* 90 is attributed to Moses.

SET A GUARD ON MY MOUTH

LESSON 1 – PSALMS 119:105-112, 141 & 142

Link to free supplemental materials at www.turningtogodsword.com.

Two of the psalms prayed for Sunday First Vespers Week I are laments attributed to David; *Psalm 119* is classified as wisdom poetry with an unknown composer. *Psalm 141:3* points out that some of the most serious stumbling blocks occur when we give in to the temptation to speak words that are evil or displeasing to God. Once a word has been spoken, it is impossible to call it back. How often have you said things that you wish had remained unsaid?

1 Read *Psalm 119:105–107*. An unidentified Psalmist likens the LORD’S word to a lamp lighting his way. What path has he chosen? How might the LORD’S word illuminate his way?

2 Read *Psalm 119:108–110*. According to the Psalmist, how are the LORD’S decrees learned? What is the Psalmist’s response to knowing the wicked have set a snare for him? What might be a way to avoid falling into traps that harm our relationship with God? List the precepts of the Church. What purpose do they serve? If necessary, refer to paragraphs 2042 and 2043 in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

3 Read *Psalm 119:111–112*. What does the Psalmist gain by following the LORD’S decrees? Consider whether the same benefits accrue to Christians who obey God’s word.

4 Read *Psalm 141:1–2*. *Psalm 141* also is prayed at Sunday First Vespers Week II (pages 64–67). What makes this psalm appropriate for introducing each week’s prayers?

5 Read *Psalm 141:3–5*. What is David asking in this lament? What behaviors does he hope to avoid? What special assistance does David seek in regard to his heart? Who are the upright? What does David ask in regard to them?

Ves•pers evening prayer service

The prayers of **Vespers** are chanted at sunset. The word **Vespers** comes from the Greek ἑσπέρα (*hespera*) and the Latin *vesper*, meaning “evening.” Following the Hebrew tradition of the sabbath, Christians celebrate the Lord’s Day beginning at sunset on Saturday, and that is when the Church prays Sunday First **Vespers**. Second **Vespers** are prayed at dusk on Sunday; there are no Saturday **Vespers**. *Psalm 141:2* expresses the primary purpose of **Vespers**, which is to offer praise at the close of the day.

EVIL ENTICEMENTS

“Above all else, the person praying *Psalm 141* [David] calls upon the LORD not to permit his lips and the motions of his heart to be attracted and enticed by evil, and thus to incline him to commit wicked deeds. In fact, a person’s words and actions express his or her moral choices. Evil exercises such an attraction that it easily provokes even the faithful to taste the delights that sin can offer. At this point, however, [David] bursts out with a passionate declaration that he will not associate with the evildoer. To express his downright disassociation from the wicked with greater vehemence, [David] then declares an indignant condemnation in his regard, in vivid images of vehement judgment. It is one of the typical imprecations of the psalms, whose purpose is to affirm, in a realistic and even picturesque way, hostility toward evil, and the certainty that God intervenes in history with his judgment of severe condemnation of injustice.”

—Pope St. John Paul II
5 November 2003



IMPRISONED

In *Psalms* 142, David laments that his soul is in a prison from which he can see no escape. Those who pursue him are stronger than he is. No one cares about his soul, and his only refuge is the LORD.

Christian tradition interprets *Psalms* 142 to be about the persecuted and suffering Jesus. The reference to an imprisoned soul in *Psalms* 142:8 is seen as a foreshadowing of Jesus' burial. The soldiers' action at Jesus' tomb is recorded in the *Gospel According to Matthew* 27:66: "So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard." In the Christian perspective, the conclusion of *Psalms* 142 represents the glorious outcome of Jesus' Resurrection—making possible a human destiny of eternal life.



ON THE PATH OF CHRISTIAN LIFE

Christian life as a journey is a prevalent theme in the Scriptures. In the Old Testament, the Exodus—literally the “road out” of slavery in Egypt—is a defining event for God’s people. The Promised Land of Canaan foreshadows the new Promised Land of heaven. In the New Testament, Jesus is an itinerant preacher. He and his disciples constantly are on the move. Spiritually speaking, this suggests that any disciples of Jesus should not expect to stay long in one place. To follow Jesus, Christians must be prepared to go where he goes.

In the *Gospel According to John* 14:6, Jesus identifies himself as “the way, and the truth, and the life.” It is Jesus as the way that is especially

visible in a Christian interpretation of the psalms for Sunday First Vespers Week I.

In *Psalms* 142:4, David has chosen to walk in a way known to the LORD. All three psalms are concerned about snares that might prevent one from following the LORD’s way. In *Psalms* 141:10, David entreats God to allow him to pursue his way unharmed. In *Psalms* 119:105, an anonymous Psalmist relies on the LORD’s word to illuminate the path of righteousness.

Christians also must rely on God’s Word. We follow God by honoring his commandment, spelled out by Jesus in the *Gospel According to John* 15:12: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”



A PRAYING COMMUNITY

“ In *Psalm* 142, the LORD is called upon to provide security. The journey of David’s life is a route marked by the choice of justice. On that path, however, the wicked have set a hidden snare, an image that indicates the dangers and threats to which the just are subjected. Facing this nightmare, David sounds the alarm so that the LORD may see his situation and intervene. The only protection is to be found in God. The LORD now remains the last and only foundation to depend on, the only possibility of life, the supreme hope.

As in other psalms of petition, the final prospect is the thanksgiving that will be offered to the LORD once the LORD has answered prayer. The faithful one will thank the LORD in the midst of the liturgical assembly. The righteous will surround him and will see the salvation of their brother as a gift that is offered to them as well.

This atmosphere also must pervade Christian celebrations. The suffering of the individual must echo in the hearts of all; likewise, the joy of each one must be vibrant in the whole of the praying community. How good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity. ”

—Pope St. John Paul II
12 November 2003

6 Read *Psalm* 141:6–10. What could cause the wicked to recognize that David’s words about sin have been spoken in kindness? Think about whether it is likely someone who has placed a trap for another could fall into it instead. What “way” does David wish to pursue? Consider why *Psalm* 141:10 is omitted from *Liturgy of the Hours* books.

7 Read *Psalm* 142:1–4. Here David pours out his heart to the LORD. Think about what David hopes to gain. What evidence is there to indicate that the LORD might have some stake in what happens to David? If the LORD knows what is in human hearts, what might be motivating David to tell the LORD about all of his distress?

THE LONGEST PSALM

Psalm 119 is the longest psalm, consisting of 176 verses—more verses than are found in 13 Old Testament books or in 17 books of the New Testament. Written in the form of acrostic poetry, *Psalm* 119 is divided into 22 stanzas organized after the Hebrew alphabet. Within each stanza, each of eight verses begins with the same Hebrew letter. At Conception Abbey, these stanzas are prayed during Day Prayer Week II, but *Psalm* 119:105–112 is prayed as part of Sunday First Vespers Week I. In this elaborate prayer, the Torah—the law of the LORD—is praised as the source of the LORD’s blessing. Correct moral conduct is determined by following divine law, which the anonymous Psalmist pledges to uphold despite persistent opposition.

pre•cepts rules to regulate behavior

In *Psalm* 119:110, an unnamed Psalmist writes that he does not stray from the LORD’s **precepts**. His heart is inclined to remember the LORD’s law. Paragraphs 2042–2043 in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* list the five **precepts** of the Church. The obligatory character of these positive laws, which have been decreed by pastoral authorities, is meant to guarantee to Catholics the necessary minimum in the spirit of prayer and moral effort that will lead to growth in love of God and neighbor.

ST. FRANCIS’ PRAYER WHEN DYING St. Bonaventure recalled that on the evening of October 3, 1226, as Francis of Assisi lay dying, the last prayer uttered by the saint was *Psalm* 142, which St. Francis recited from its beginning through its final verse.

8 Read *Psalm 142:5*. The reference in this passage to no one being present on David’s right indicates that he has no protection in battle or in court. In battle, a bodyguard would stand at David’s right, while in court that position would be taken by a favorable witness. Think about what it is that David seems to be most concerned about protecting?

9 Read *Psalm 142:6–7*. In the Old Testament, a portion usually refers to God’s gift of property in the Promised Land. Since the land of Canaan already has been divided among the descendants of Jacob, consider what portion David hopes to receive. How can Christians interpret this passage about receiving a portion located in the land of the living?

10 Read *Psalm 142:8*. What deal does David offer to tempt the LORD to aid in his escape? Think about what David fears. Reflect on whether there are any circumstances in which it is permissible for Christians to barter with God.

NAMES FOR THE DEITY

LORD (in small caps) indicates the sacred name of God (I AM WHO I AM) revealed to Moses in the book of *Exodus* 3:14. Lord (regular type) indicates a title of respect usually given to a human person. In a few psalms, both LORD and Lord refer to God (Elohim). This study uses LORD in Old Testament references to God but not in quotations from psalms that refer to the Lord in regular type, or to God..

A DARK IMAGE

“A dark image pervades *Psalm 119:110*: “For me the wicked have set a snare,” the person prays, making use of a hunting image common in the *Psalter*. The faithful know that they are advancing on the highways of the world amid danger, anxiety, and persecution. They know that trials are lying in wait. Christians know that every day they must carry the cross up the hill of their Calvary, as Jesus instructs in the *Gospel According to Luke 9:23*. However, the just keep their fidelity intact. They have sworn to obey God’s laws. A conscience at peace is the strength of believers. Constancy in obeying the divine commandments is the source of their serenity.”

—Pope St. John Paul II
21 July 2004



A PORTION IN THE LAND OF THE LIVING

In *Psalm 142:6*, David redefines his “portion,” which in the Old Testament usually refers to God’s gift of the Promised Land (the land of Canaan) to the descendants of Jacob. This biblical portion of the Promised Land sometimes is referred to as an “inheritance.” Instead of land, David considers that the LORD is to be his portion.

There is good reason for this. David has made the LORD his only refuge in times of trouble. That much is clear from the tone of his prayer. It seems apparent that he is in the habit of regularly telling his troubles to the LORD. David also appears to be committed to walking on the path that the LORD has shown to him.

It is significant that David expects to find his portion in the land of the living. Even though he is utterly alone, beset by many difficulties—and with no visible means of escape—David is not intending to die in prison. He counts on the LORD to rescue him from isolation and from the hostility of those who have brought him so far down. Because he has placed his hope in the living God, David is confident that he is not doomed to enter the abode of the dead.

Christians interpret this to mean that as inhabitants of the land of the living, they already have received a share in eternal life. This “portion” is a participation in the Most Holy Trinity.

