

SING *a* NEW PSALM

COMMUNICATING WITH GOD THROUGH THE PRAYERS OF THE CHURCH

VOLUME II: VIGILS, DAY PRAYER & COMPLINE

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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 II: Vigils, Day Prayer & Compline continues where Volume I left off, 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. Themes are varied, but a number of the psalms quoted by Jesus in the Gospels deal with suffering—*Psalm 22* and *Psalm 31*—or address royal kingship—*Psalm 2* and *Psalm 46*. All are addressed in this second 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; the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) now holds the copyright. *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 (schedule) followed at Conception Abbey, reprinted on page 122. The Roman cursus followed in *Liturgy of the Hours* books can be found online. That Roman schedule covers four weeks of prayers instead of two, and it leaves out *Psalm 58*, *Psalm 83*, and *Psalm 109*, as well as verses deemed potentially problematic in 20 other psalms. This study addresses 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 superscript—at the beginning of some of the psalms; others leave those notes unnumbered.



FIVE BOOKS IN ONE

The psalms are divided into five “books” (*Psalms* 1–41, *Psalms* 42–72, *Psalms* 73–89, *Psalms* 90–106, and *Psalms* 107–150). All five “books” end with psalms that function as concluding doxologies. “Book one” shares a theme of Creation with the book of *Genesis*; “book two” corresponds to the book of *Exodus* and the redemption of Israel; “book three” to the book of *Leviticus* and Temple worship; “book four” to the book of *Numbers* and humanity’s sojourn on earth; and “book five” to the book of *Deuteronomy* and offering suitable praise to God.

NAMES FOR THE DEITY

LORD (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. This study uses LORD in Old Testament references to God but not in quotations from psalms that refer to the Lord in regular type.

ty•pol•o•gy

Old Testament people, places & events viewed as types or prefigurations of Christianity

Paragraph 128 in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches: “The Church, as early as apostolic times, and then constantly in her Tradition, has illuminated the unity of the divine plan in the two Testaments through **typology**, which discerns in God’s works of the Old Covenant prefigurations of what he accomplished in the fullness of time in the person of his incarnate Son.”

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 *Volume I* 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 response to being called out for his sins differs from what would be expected from most people. It is worthwhile to consider how often we try to shift blame in order to diminish the seriousness of our transgressions.



Lesson 11 in this volume, “The Suffering Servant,” 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 psalm was written long before current understanding of the role that suffering would play in the life of the Messiah.

Besides David, others thought to have written some of the psalms are Solomon, Asaph, and descendants of Korah; one psalm is credited to Moses. Chapter 16 in the book of *Numbers* identifies Korah as a Levite who was killed by God for attempting a revolt against Moses and Aaron; Korah’s sons, who did not participate, were spared.

A SACRIFICE OF PRAYER

Throughout the psalms it is suggested that the very act of prayer constitutes a sacrifice and is a gift to God.

For Christians, the obvious daily sacrifice of prayer is *Liturgy of the Hours*, also called the Divine Office or the Breviary. Monastic life revolves around these prayers, and ordained clergy are required to pray *Liturgy of the Hours* every day. Anyone can pray the psalms, however, and the Church encourages Christians to pray these ancient hymns whenever they are able.

When praying *Liturgy of the Hours*, it is helpful to keep in mind that these prayers developed as a type of sacrifice. Christians who pray the psalms join the universal Church in offering prayers on behalf of the world.



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 the Psalmist blatantly curses his enemies and asks the LORD to deal harshly with them. This is disturbing enough that editors compiling *Liturgy of the Hours* books chose to leave out a few problematic verses from 20 of the psalms; three other hymns—*Psalms* 58, *Psalms* 83, and *Psalms* 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 *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; it may be unwise to enjoy the idea too much. In the *Gospel According to Matthew* 5:43–45 and the *Gospel According to Luke* 6:37, Jesus clearly expects us to love our enemies.

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

HE WHO SITS IN THE HEAVENS LAUGHS

LESSON 1 – PSALM 95 (INVITATORY) & PSALMS 1, 2, 23, 76 & 103

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

The psalms prayed for Sunday Vigils Week I combine to present a strong contrast between the LORD's kingdom and that of worldly rulers. Christians interpret *Psalm 2* as a royal announcement of Jesus as God's divine Son, and the Church commemorates the solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe, on the last Sunday in Ordinary Time. What might God find amusing about the various political systems in the world today? Think about ways in which your allegiance to Christ the King governs your everyday life.

1 Read *Psalm 95:1–11*, the Invitatory that begins Sunday Vigils for Weeks I and II. What invitation is this unknown Psalmist extending, and to whom? What attitude are God's people to have toward the LORD? Consider why the Psalmist urges a physical response to being in God's presence. What physical actions accompany present-day worship practices?

2 Read *Psalm 1:1–6*, classified as unattributed wisdom poetry. This psalm compares blessed people and those who are wicked. Contemplate how the blessed show that the law of the LORD delights them. What might explain why the blessed must wait until due season before yielding their fruit? What might that fruit be? What fate awaits the wicked?

3 Read *Psalm 2:1–7*. In this royal psalm with an unidentified author, who is plotting against whom? Whom might the Psalmist have had in mind when referring to "the LORD's Anointed"? How might that differ from Christian understanding of *Psalm 2*? Consider what might be somewhat surprising about the description of the LORD in *Psalm 2:4*. What attitude of the LORD is designed to terrify the conspiring nations?

coun•sel

advice or guidance

Psalm 1:1 opens the psalms by stating that a blessed person refuses the **counsel** and advice of the wicked, who apparently are unfamiliar with the kind of **counsel** that is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Christians see the third person of the Blessed Trinity as a type of legal **counselor**, providing protection as well as advice. The book of *Revelation 12:10* suggests that humanity needs such a **counselor** to defend against the one who accuses men and women "day and night before our God."

O COME, LET US BOW & BEND LOW

PSALM 95—INVITATORY

Psalm 95 is an enthusiastic call to prayer, encouraging faithful worship of the LORD. Scholars have found it difficult to classify *Psalm 95*, and its composer is unknown. The first part focuses on specific liturgical actions.

There is singing, of course. All of the hymns in the collection of the psalms originally were intended to be sung. *Psalm 95* also prompts other physical actions—bowing, bending low, and kneeling. All three are postures that express an attitude of humility before God.

The Psalmist is not content merely to urge people to go through the motions of praying: He insists on correct motivation. Men and women are to sing with joy, entering the LORD's presence with an attitude of thanksgiving. In the Psalmist's eyes, there is a very good reason for human beings to worship with joyful, thankful, and humble spirits: The LORD has created the world and everything in it.

Also see "O That Today You Would Listen to His Voice!" on *page 57*.

CHRISTIAN CONNECTION

PSALMS FOR FUNERALS

Because many of the psalms deal so expressively with personal feelings of suffering and pain and also offer affirmations of hope, they are particularly suited to be prayed by those mourning the death of a loved one. The Church considers a handful of psalms especially appropriate for funeral liturgies. These include *Psalm 23* and *Psalm 103* in this lesson, and *Psalm 25*, covered in Lesson 7, “The LORD Remembers His Holy Word” on page 29. All three psalms are attributed to David. *Psalm 27*, *Psalm 42*, *Psalm 43*, *Psalm 63*, *Psalm 116*, *Psalm 122*, *Psalm 130*, and *Psalm 143* are eight other psalms also recommended by the Church for funerals. These latter eight psalms are covered in *Volume I: Lauds & Vespers*.

WHAT CAN CHRISTIANS DO?

Christians, though far removed from the time in which the psalms were composed, are able to pray the same prayers as Jesus, who continues to intercede on behalf of all humanity. Read through the 11 psalms considered to be appropriate for funerals. Think about which seems to be the most comforting, and why. Consider whether one would be fitting for your own funeral liturgy. Is there another psalm that you would prefer?

4 Read *Psalm 2:8–12*. What inheritance does the LORD intend to give to his Son? Think about how Christians view the way in which Jesus, as the Son of God, will rule over his inheritance from God the Father. What warning does the unknown Psalmist urge the rulers of the earth to heed? What fate awaits kings who do not heed this warning? Who does the Psalmist indicate will escape such a fate, and why?

THE INVITATORY PSALMS

The prayer that begins the Office of Vigils each day is called an Invitatory because it invites the faithful to pray. These invitations vary from day to day but are repeated each week. Invitatories encourage men and women to enter into deeper relationship with God.

Conception Abbey’s Invitatory psalms for Vigils are: *Psalm 95* on Sundays, *Psalm 29* on Mondays, *Psalm 100* on Tuesdays and Thursdays, *Psalm 24* on Wednesdays, *Psalm 67* on Fridays, and *Psalm 46* on Saturdays. David is thought to be the author of *Psalm 24* and *Psalm 29*.

DWELLING
IN GOD’S HOUSE

“ In *Psalm 23*, the Psalmist [David] sees himself as a wayfarer who finds shelter in a hospitable tent. His enemies are unable to intervene, since the one they considered to be their prey has been led to safety and has become a sacred guest who cannot be touched. [David] is us, if we truly are believers in communion with Christ. When God opens his tent to receive us, nothing can harm us. Then when the traveler [David] sets out afresh, the divine protection is extended and accompanies him on his journey: ‘Surely, goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.’

[That same] goodness and mercy of God continue to escort [David], whose journey becomes a pilgrimage to the Temple of the LORD, the holy place. It is in this sanctuary that the praying person wants to dwell forever, and to which he also longs to return.

The Hebrew verb has the meaning of ‘to return’ but with a small vowel change also can be understood as ‘to dwell.’ Moreover, this is how it is rendered by the ancient versions and by the majority of modern translations. Both meanings may be retained—to return to the Temple as every Israelite desires, and to dwell near God, close to him and to goodness. This is what every believer yearns and longs for, to be able to live where God is. ”

—Pope Benedict XVI
5 October 2011

A FATHER WHO LOVES HIS FAMILY

“It is in the Lord Jesus that the benevolent face of the Father, who is in heaven, is fully revealed. In the *Gospel According to John* 14:7–11, Jesus teaches that it is in knowing him that we also may know the Father.

It is in seeing Jesus that we can see the Father, because he is ‘the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation,’ as the hymn of the *Letter of Paul to the Colossians* 1:15 describes him.

Faith in God the Father asks for belief in the Son—under the action of the Spirit—recognizing the definitive revelation of divine love. God is our Father, giving us his Son. God is our Father, pardoning our sin and bringing us to joy in everlasting life. God is our Father, giving us the Spirit that makes us his children.

Consequently God’s fatherhood is infinite love, a paternal tenderness that bends over us, frail children, who are so in need of everything. *Psalm* 103, the great hymn of divine mercy, proclaims: ‘As a father has compassion on his children, the LORD’s compassion is on those who fear him. For he knows of what we are made; he remembers that we are dust.’

It is our smallness, our frail human nature that becomes an appeal to the LORD’s mercy, that he may show his greatness and tenderness as a Father, forgiving us and saving us.”

—Pope Benedict XVI
30 January 2013

5 Read *Psalm* 23:1–4, a psalm about individual trust attributed to David. What is the practical result of belonging to the LORD’s flock? According to David, why does the LORD guide his faithful along the right path? What might the LORD’s crook and staff symbolize for Christians?

6 Read *Psalm* 23:5–6. Think about the purpose of this passage describing a table being prepared in the sight of David’s foes. What is implied by the word “anointing”? If necessary, refer to paragraph 695 in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Contemplate ways that goodness and mercy might follow those who are numbered among the LORD’s flock.

7 Read *Psalm* 76:1–7. Consider why two groups with knowledge of the one Hebrew God are named in this song praising Zion and attributed to Asaph. What is notable about God’s tent being set in Salem? If necessary, refer to the book of *Genesis* 14:18–20. Think about why Asaph uses military images to describe the actions of the God of Jacob.

8 Read *Psalm* 76:8–13. Who is terror-stricken at the sentence God utters from the heavens? What might a Christian expect that sentence to be? According to Asaph, what group may have nothing to fear from God’s judgment?

GOD REMEMBERS WE ARE DUST

Psalm 103:14 offers a surprising explanation for the LORD’s compassion—God knows of what humans are made. The book of *Genesis* 2:7 records that “... the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground...” A traditional Ash Wednesday injunction from the book of *Genesis* 3:19 calls Christians to remember their origins as they reflect on death: “... you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” In *Psalm* 103:17, God’s faithful people are reminded that the mercy of the LORD is everlasting (eternal). Despite God’s knowledge of how humanity came into being, the LORD remains loving and merciful through all generations.

hom•age

reverence, acknowledgment of allegiance

In some translations of *Psalm* 2, the LORD’s people are exhorted to pay **homage** to God—that is, to publicly recognize the LORD as superior to earthly kings. The word **homage** carries with it the idea of “allegiance” or “loyalty.” The faithful are to honor the LORD above all human rulers.

9 Read *Psalm 103:1–12*, a hymn attributed to David. List actions in this passage ascribed to the LORD. Which point to Jesus? What *Gospel* passages support a Christian reading? What are some situations in the life of David that might have prompted him to write *Psalm 103*? If necessary, refer to the *First Book of Samuel 16:1—Second Book of Samuel 24:25*.

10 Read *Psalm 103:13–22*, a passage praising the LORD's compassion and mercy. For what reason or reasons does God show compassion to those who fear him? According to this psalm, what is there about those who fear the LORD that allows God to recognize them? How long does the LORD's mercy last? How might mercy be related to God's kingdom?

wick•ed evil or morally wrong

Throughout the psalms, the **wicked** are contrasted with the righteous. This begins with the first verse in *Psalm 1*: "Blessed indeed is the man who follows not the counsel of the **wicked** . . ." The Canticle of Mary calls to mind a similar contrast. The Blessed Virgin Mary's words are found in the *Gospel According to Luke 1:52*: "... he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree . . ." First among the lowly exalted by God is the Blessed Virgin herself. The Mother of Jesus is elevated precisely because she stands in direct opposition to **wickedness** and all that is evil.

GOD'S LAUGHTER

Many verses in Scripture assign anthropomorphic or human characteristics to the LORD, but depictions of God laughing are rare. One is to be found in *Psalm 2:4*. A spontaneous reaction to finding a situation amusing, laughter also can indicate derision. That may or may not be the case with the LORD's laughter in *Psalm 2*.

Some people find the thought of God laughing at humanity for either reason deeply disturbing. Controversy surrounds the idea of whether Jesus ever laughed. G.K. Chesterton, himself no stranger to mirth, implied that pride is an underlying reason behind why some Christians refuse to accept the idea of God laughing at his creatures: "There is no limit to the lunacy of men when they think themselves superior both to humility and laughter."



ALL OF GOD'S REALM: BLESS THE LORD

At the close of *Psalm 103*, attributed to David, several groups are summoned to bless the LORD as ruler. A similar call is issued in *Psalm 135:19–20*, but those groups are significantly different than the ones mentioned in *Psalm 103:20–22*.

Psalm 135—with an unknown composer—calls entirely on Israelites. Singled out are the tribe of Levi (ordained to maintain the tent-sanctuary that was the LORD's dwelling with the Israelites in the wilderness), and the house of Aaron within the tribe of Levi (the descendants of Aaron inherited the Old Testament priesthood).

In *Psalm 103*, David entreats a much larger group to bless the LORD—a group that is not

limited to God's chosen people or even to humanity. The first division to be named in *Psalm 103* consists of the LORD's angels who heed the voice of God. These are followed by the hosts of the LORD, a term that usually refers to armies in heaven. David then goes on to explain that these hosts are the LORD's servants.

The third group called upon to bless the LORD consists of all of the LORD's works, which David defines as anything that the LORD has created existing anywhere within Creation.

Finally, David repeats the intention that his own soul bless the LORD, an intention previously expressed in *Psalm 103:1–2*.

