

SING *a* NEW PSALM

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

**VOLUME II: VIGILS, DAY PRAYER
& COMPLINE**

JENNIFER MCGAW PHELPS

FOREWORD BY GREGORY POLAN, OSB



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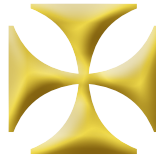
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UNLIKE OTHER PRAYERS IN SACRED SCRIPTURE,
the prayers contained in the *Book of the Psalms*
are not inserted into a narrative story
that specifies their meaning and function.
Instead, the *Psalms* are given to the believer
precisely as a text of prayer.
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 BENEDICT XVI



IN PEACE I WILL LIE DOWN

LESSON 29 – PSALM 91 (SUNDAY, TUESDAY, WEDNESDAY & FRIDAY)

PSALMS 4, 134 (MONDAY, THURSDAY & SATURDAY)

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

Compline psalms pair with an examination of conscience to allow those praying to focus on successes and difficulties they have faced each day. This encourages restful sleep and renews enthusiasm for facing the next day. *Psalm 91*—prayed on Sundays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Fridays—portrays God as a safe refuge. *Psalm 4* and *Psalm 134* continue the theme of peaceful repose on Mondays, Thursdays, and Saturdays.

What other benefits might the faithful expect from praying Compline every evening?

1 Read *Psalm 91:1–2*. Who is being addressed in this psalm of trust by an unidentified author? What might constitute dwelling “in the shelter of the Most High” and abiding “in the shade of the Almighty”? How does a person who practices these things go about relating to the LORD?

2 Read *Psalm 91:3–7*. Here the unnamed Psalmist lists benefits that accrue to a person who trusts in the LORD. Think about whether any of these benefits are something that Christians would find desirable. Reflect on which benefit or benefits might be most appealing to Christians.

3 Read *Psalm 91:8–9*. In this passage, the Psalmist contrasts the fate of the wicked with that of a person who dwells in the shelter of the Most High. Contemplate whether such fate of the wicked can be seen in the present day.

a•bide to remain; to continue in company with

Psalm 91:1 offers a sure way to identify who is eligible for the blessings of the LORD: the person who “**abides** in the shade of the Almighty.” The Greek verb μένω (*meno*) is translated as **abide**, and is picked up in the *Gospel According to John* to describe the way that Christians are able to **abide** in Jesus.



THE SHELTER OF THE MOST HIGH

For men and women—who always seem to be asking “What’s in it for me?”—the most important thing about the psalms chosen to be prayed at Compline is that they promise divine protection. What is not instantly obvious is that this protection is based on relationship with the LORD.

Psalm 91 clearly addresses this in the first verse when the Psalmist identifies those people who are going to be able to find refuge in the LORD. It should come as no surprise that this group includes those who have sought such refuge. These souls already are dwelling in the shelter of the Most High.

It is telling that the Psalmist describes a person committed to dwelling in God’s shelter as someone who already considers God a trustworthy stronghold. Such a person is not turning to the LORD in desperation; rather, he or she is seeking greater intimacy with God and is motivated entirely by love for the LORD.

All of the psalms prayed at Compline express this idea. If men and women want to be on good terms with the LORD in order to receive his protection, that will require some work. Humanity’s relationship with the LORD is a two-way street—and it involves both give and take.



LENGTH OF DAYS

To most people, attaining a longer life is an appealing idea. In *Psalms* 91:16, the Psalmist suggests that the LORD can grant length of days to those who cling to him in love. This blessing provides evidence of God's saving power.

According to the Psalmist, the other reason the LORD intends to protect the one who loves him is because that person also knows God's name. This suggests an intimate relationship.

Not many people in the Old Testament had such a close bond with the LORD. In the New Testament, Jesus makes an intimate relationship with God much easier.

Of note is that time and space are gifts given by the LORD out of love for the men and women that he created.

CHRISTIAN CONNECTION

MAY THE LORD BLESS YOU

The idea of receiving the LORD's blessings permeates the psalms. This is especially apparent in the Compline prayers that close each day. Although the word "blessing" does not appear in *Psalms* 4 or *Psalms* 91, both of these prayers describe in detail the benefits that a person who loves and honors God can expect. *Psalms* 134 is more explicit. The word "bless" appears in all three of that short psalm's verses. In the first verse, servants of God are urged to bless the LORD. The second verse repeats this exhortation, while in the third verse the Psalmist asks the LORD to bless his people from Zion.

WHAT CAN CHRISTIANS DO?

What does it mean to be blessed? What does it mean to bless the LORD? The word "bless" carries a number of meanings, and these can make it difficult to understand the word in Scripture. For a person to be blessed means that he or she has obtained the LORD's favor in a tangible way. Often described in material terms, blessing primarily is spiritual in nature. It can become problematic to identify how humanity can bless the LORD, but blessing always is related to consecration or setting apart time and space to be with God, and to speaking well of the LORD.

4 Read *Psalms* 91:10–13. In this passage, what promises does the Psalmist make to those who seek refuge in the LORD? Do these seem like realistic promises? Why or why not? Consider how likely it is that Christians you know might encounter lions, vipers, or serpents. What are some things that pose a danger to faith? How might trust in God ease those threats?

YOU WILL NOT FEAR THE TERROR OF THE NIGHT

PSALM 91

Psalms 91 contains an amazing promise: The person who has God as a refuge or stronghold, who trusts the LORD, will not need to fear the terror of the night. He or she is safe from the world's darkness.

Throughout Scripture, darkness describes that which is unknown and evil. In the first chapter in the book of *Genesis*, the LORD begins creating the world and everything in it by introducing Light into the existing darkness.

In the prologue in the *Gospel According to John*, which appears to bear an intentional

similarity to the start of the first book in the Old Testament, Jesus is established as the Light present with God at the beginning of Creation.

In *Psalms* 91, the unidentified Psalmist lists a number of ways that evil will bypass a person who loves the LORD. The Psalmist also points out that the way in which the wicked are repaid for their bad behavior should be obvious to anyone who is paying attention.

Being unafraid in the face of darkness and evil is a theme that is emphasized when *Psalms* 91 is regularly prayed as evening approaches.

UPON YOU NO EVIL WILL FALL

Psalm 91:10 promises that the one who trusts in the LORD never will have to worry about evil. This reinforces other Scripture that stresses the only power Satan has over humanity is the power granted to him when men and women sin.

This idea flies in the face of the common notion that God and Satan are locked in conflict over control of the world. The LORD and Satan are not equals. God is the Creator of Satan and already has won any conflict that Satan ever may attempt. God also created humanity.

The battle with Satan, while very real, does not directly involve God; the battle is between Satan and each individual. Causing humanity to sin, which brings about the death of men and women, is the only power Satan has.

Because humanity has been given the will to freely choose to love the LORD, men and women can instead choose to love themselves. Choosing God brings a person protection; no evil can destroy his or her eternal soul. All bets are off if people choose themselves over God.

5 Read *Psalm 91:14–16*. It can seem unclear who has been speaking in this psalm of trust, but the passage clearly represents God. What two reasons does the LORD give to explain why he intends to protect the Psalmist's audience?

6 Read *Psalm 4:1–4*, an individual lament attributed to David. Here David pleads with the LORD. Think about what David wants from God. What words in this passage might be attributed to the LORD? What complaint does David think the LORD might have about humanity's behavior? What words does David use that indicate his trust in God?

7 Read *Psalm 4:5–7*. In this passage, David offers advice to his audience. What is that advice? Reflect on what constitutes "right sacrifice." What parts of this passage seem practical for Christians? Are there any parts that seem difficult? In *Psalm 4:7*, why might seeing better times be paired with seeing the light of the LORD's face?

glo•ry

splendor; light; brilliance

In *Psalm 91:15*, the LORD promises that he will be with the Psalmist to deliver him, and to give him **glory**. The Greek noun δόξα (*doxa*), often translated as **glory**, means "expectation" or "appearance" and is associated with visualization. The same root also comes to mean "a judgment" based on how things look to an observer. The English word "orthodox" comes from this same Greek root.

O THAT WE MIGHT SEE BETTER TIMES

PSALM 4

Psalm 4 expresses a common human refrain—to see better times. There are few men and women who have not at one time or another longed for change in the world.

While David acknowledges the universality of the desire to see better times, he links the solution—an improved personal situation—to an intimate enough relationship with God to be able to see the light of the LORD's face.

In case there is any doubt, David goes on to address God as the source of his own joy. David does not seek an abundance of "stuff"—

specifically, grain and wine. Note that David chooses basic food items that in the Catholic sacrament of the Eucharist are changed into the Body and Blood of Christ.

The end result of David's spiritual trust, he writes, is that he is able to lie down and fall asleep in peace. Any number of men and women might envy David this gift.

David acknowledges that complete credit belongs to the LORD. In *Psalm 4:9*, he writes: "In peace I will lie down and fall asleep, for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety."

8 Read *Psalm 4:8–9*. How does David describe his attitude toward the LORD? How might David's mood at the end of *Psalm 4* be described in the present day? What evidence in *Psalm 4* indicates whether the LORD has responded to David's plea? What is allowing David to fall peacefully asleep? To whom does David attribute this cessation of anxiety?

9 Read *Psalm 134:1*, the last of 15 consecutive psalms referred to as Songs of Ascent. (*Psalm 120*, *Psalm 121*, and *Psalm 123* are prayed for Sunday Vigils Week I; the remaining Songs of Ascent are covered in *Volume I* of this study.) What is the call to action in *Psalm 134:1*? Who is called? Where are they located? Think about whether the unidentified Psalmist expects those being called to remain in their current location.

10 Read *Psalm 134:2–3*. Reflect on what might be the location of the “holy place” mentioned in *Psalm 134:2*. How does the final verse of *Psalm 134* reverse the call to action in the first verse? What reason might the Psalmist have had for ending *Psalm 134* on this note?

fu•tile

pointless; useless

In *Psalm 4:3*, David records God asking: “O you people, how long will my glory be dishonored, will you love what is **futile** and seek what is false?” The word **futile** in this verse points to the spiritual emptiness and sense of uselessness that men and women experience when their lives are centered on things of the world instead of on responding in love to the will of God.

TREMBLE, DO NOT SIN

An aversion to sin is one of the defining characteristics of the saints. In *Psalm 4:5–6*, the Psalmist (identified in the superscript to this psalm as David) offers some solid advice about the best approaches to avoid sin: “Tremble, do not sin; ponder on your bed and be still. Offer right sacrifice, and trust in the LORD.”

Anyone who has been tempted knows sin can pose a difficult physical challenge. Trembling is not unexpected, but David urges his audience to think carefully about their situation, then to do the opposite of trembling—“be still.”

David also advises offering “right sacrifice.” God has much to say in Scripture about the nature of pleasing sacrifices, but having a correct attitude clearly is key.

Finally, David urges “trust in the LORD,” or turning over to God troubles that are most concerning to men and women.

O COME & BLESS THE LORD

PSALM 134

Psalm 134, though only three verses long, contains the Psalmist's instructions for establishing a close, meaningful relationship with the LORD. The key to this short prayer is to practice blessing as something one can give as well as something one can receive.

The idea of being materially blessed by God is a popular one, and it has led to a branch of “health and wealth” Christian ministries. While God certainly can bless humanity in this sense, the evidence provided by Christian saints throughout the centuries indicates that

being blessed by God often entails suffering and sacrifice along with joy.

In *Psalm 134*, the Psalmist suggests the best way to approach the woes of life is to regularly offer blessing to the LORD. By “bless the LORD,” he seems to mean “thank the LORD” and “speak well of God in all circumstances.”

Anyone who has attempted to do this knows that it is much easier said than done. In *Psalm 134:3*, the Psalmist also entreats God to bless the servant who is making a sincere effort to honor the LORD.

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**Psalms* reflect the numbering system followed in *The Abbey Psalms and Canticles*. Numbering in other translations may vary.

***Genesis* 32:28 (RSV2CE) = *Genesis* 32:29 (NABRE)

***Genesis* 32:22—32 (RSV2CE) = *Genesis* 32:23—33 (NABRE)

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All Scripture is inspired by God
and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,
that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

—the Second Letter of Paul to Timothy 3:16–17

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RELATED CHURCH TEACHING

CCC 128 (page 6): How typology in the Old Testament points to the New Testament.

CCC 144 (pages 21, 57 & 105): An explanation of the link between listening and the obedience of faith.

CCC 282 (page 98): Church teaching about the importance of Creation.

CCC 285 (page 96): How to deal with questions about Creation that differ from Church teaching.

CCC 336 (page 60): That humans always are surrounded by the watchful care of the angels.

CCC 339 (page 14): That every creature possesses its own particular goodness and perfection.

RELATED CHURCH TEACHING CONTINUED

CCC 404: How the sin of Adam is transmitted as original sin to all men and women.

CCC 441: Various ways that the term son of God is used in the Old Testament.

CCC 457–460: The four positive effects for humanity that result from Jesus' Incarnation.

CCC 618 (page 79): That through Jesus' suffering humanity enters into a partnership with God.

CCC 679 (page 75): That Christ is Lord of eternity and his job description includes judgment.

CCC 683–747 (page 60): An entire section—based on the Creed—that regards the Holy Spirit.

CCC 695 (page 10): Anointing with oil as a symbol of the coming of the Holy Spirit.

CCC 699: The symbolism connected with the laying on of hands.

CCC 760 (page 59): The teaching that the world was created for the sake of the Church.

CCC 783 (page 34): That Jesus has been anointed by God as priest, prophet, and king.

CCC 811 (page 90): The four marks of the Catholic Church—one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.

CCC 901 (page 79): Lay participation in Christ's priestly office and in consecration of the world.

CCC 1008: The covenant with God that stipulates death as a consequence of sin.

CCC 1010 (page 54): A discussion of how death takes on positive meaning for Christians.

CCC 1019 (page 17): That Jesus conquers death in order to make salvation possible for humanity.

CCC 1038–1041 (page 72): That resurrection of the dead will precede the Final Judgment.

CCC 1041 (page 55): That humanity is urgently called to conversion right now.

CCC 1363 (page 32): Church teaching about the meaning of the word "memorial" in Scripture.

CCC 1451 (page 26): Church teaching about the importance of contrition.

CCC 1452 (page 26): Church teaching about what it is that makes contrition perfect.

CCC 1452–1453 (page 27): Paragraphs that focus on the two types of contrition.

CCC 1681 (page 83): That the Christian meaning of death is revealed in the Pascal Mystery.

CCC 1734 (page 105): The link between God's gift of freedom and the necessity to act responsibly.

CCC 1813 (page 70): That the theological virtues are the foundation of Christian moral activity.

CCC 1818 (page 75): The relationship between hope and happiness.

CCC 1831 (pages 55 & 96): A listing of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit.

CCC 1866 (pages 18 & 81): A listing of the traditional seven capital sins (also called capital vices).

CCC 1954: That natural law and moral ability enable humanity to discern good from evil.

CCC 2040 (page 68): A link between mercy and the sacrament of reconciliation.

CCC 2042–2043 (pages 69 & 97): A listing of the five obligatory precepts of the Church.

CCC 2055 (page 83): Jesus' key to interpreting the Ten Commandments.

CCC 2072 (pages 86 & 87): That the Ten Commandments must be followed by Christians.

CCC 2089 (page 98): The definitions of incredulity, heresy, and apostasy.

CCC 2090 (page 70): The necessity of God's help in responding to God's call.

CCC 2100 (page 33): What determines whether a sacrifice is acceptable to God.

CCC 2267: Updated Church teaching opposed to the use of the death penalty.

CCC 2273 (page 81): Church teaching about the right to life as an inalienable human right.

CCC 2330: The teaching that cultivating peace in all things is essential to holiness.

CCC 2443–2449 (page 15): Teaching supporting the Church's preferential love for the poor.

CCC 2465 (pages 70): The Old Testament call to live in truth because God is the source of all truth.

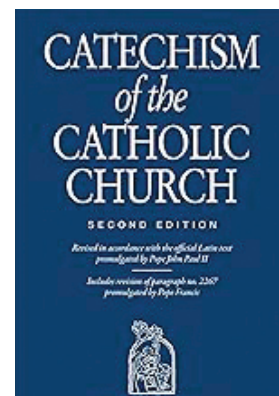
CCC 2468 (page 84): A description of truth as a virtue associated with upright behavior.

CCC 2469 (page 84): The necessity of truth as a foundation of all human interactions.

CCC 2470 (page 84): A disciple of Christ is called to live in the truth.

CCC 2559 (page 82): Church teaching that prayer is a gift from God to humanity.

CCC 2563 (page 35): The heart as a place where life-and-death decisions are made.



TWO-WEEK PRAYER CURSUS (SCHEDULE)

FOLLOWED BY THE BENEDICTINE MONKS AT CONCEPTION ABBEY

WEEK I

SUNDAY

First Vespers: *Psalms* 119:105–112; 141; 142
Philippians 2:6–11
Compline after First Vespers: *Psalms* 4, 134
Vigils: *Psalms* 95, 1, 2, 23, 76, 103
Isaiah 40:28–31
Isaiah 42:10–16
Lauds: *Psalms* 63, 93, 149, *Daniel* 3:57–88, 56
Day Prayer: *Psalms* 120, 121, 123
Second Vespers: *Psalms* 110, 111, 112
Revelation 19:1–7
Compline: *Psalms* 91

MONDAY

Vigils: *Psalms* 29, 3, 9, 10, 31
Lauds: *Psalms* 5, 19
Day Prayer: *Psalms* 26, 28, 39
Vespers: *Psalms* 11, 15, 20, 21
Compline: *Psalms* 4, 134

TUESDAY

Vigils: *Psalms* 100, 40, 44, 59, 60
Lauds: *Psalms* 30, 42, 43
Day Prayer: *Psalms* 38, 53
Vespers: *Psalms* 27, 33
Compline: *Psalms* 91

WEDNESDAY

Vigils: *Psalms* 24, 17, 25, 105
Lauds: *Psalms* 36, 47, 48
Day Prayer: *Psalms* 54, 55
Vespers: *Psalms* 32, 45, 62
Compline: *Psalms* 91

THURSDAY

Vigils: *Psalms* 100, 6, 7, 18
Lauds: *Psalms* 57, 80, 81
Day Prayer: *Psalms* 58, 61, 64
Vespers: *Psalms* 49, 72
Compline: *Psalms* 4, 134

FRIDAY

Vigils: *Psalms* 67, 22, 69
Lauds: *Psalms* 51, 117, 146
Day Prayer: *Psalms* 70, 75, 82
Vespers: *Psalms* 41, 124, 129, 130
Compline: *Psalms* 91

SATURDAY

Vigils: *Psalms* 46, 68, 89
Lauds: *Psalms* 8, 65
Day Prayer: *Psalms* 86, 88

WEEK II

SUNDAY

First Vespers: *Psalms* 16; 116:10–19; 141
Philippians 2:6–11
Compline after First Vespers: *Psalms* 4, 134
Vigils: *Psalms* 95, 34, 66, 104
1 Samuel 2:1–10
Wisdom 9:11–16
Lauds: *Psalms* 118, 148, 150, *Daniel* 3:52–57
Day Prayer: *Psalms* 119:1–8, 9–16, 17–24
Second Vespers: *Psalms* 110, 113, 114
Revelation 19:1–7
Compline: *Psalms* 91

MONDAY

Vigils: *Psalms* 29, 37, 52, 71
Lauds: *Psalms* 77, 87, 96
Day Prayer: *Psalms* 119:25–32, 33–40, 41–48
Vespers: *Psalms* 122, 125, 126, 127
Compline: *Psalms* 4, 134

TUESDAY

Vigils: *Psalms* 100, 74, 79, 83, 102
Lauds: *Psalms* 84, 85, 97
Day Prayer: *Psalms* 119:49–56, 57–64, 65–72
Vespers: *Psalms* 128, 131, 132, 133
Compline: *Psalms* 91

WEDNESDAY

Vigils: *Psalms* 24, 50, 73, 106
Lauds: *Psalms* 90, 98, 99
Day Prayer: *Psalms* 119:73–80, 81–88, 89–96
Vespers: *Psalms* 136, 137, 138
Compline: *Psalms* 91

THURSDAY

Vigils: *Psalms* 100, 12, 13, 14, 78
Lauds: *Psalms* 101, 143, 147:1–11
Day Prayer: *Psalms* 119:97–104, 113–120, 121–128
Vespers: *Psalms* 144, 145
Compline: *Psalms* 4, 134

FRIDAY

Vigils: *Psalms* 67, 35, 107
Lauds: *Psalms* 51, 108, 147:12–20
Day Prayer: *Psalms* 119:129–136, 137–144, 145–152
Vespers: *Psalms* 115; 116:1–9; 139
Compline: *Psalms* 91

SATURDAY

Vigils: *Psalms* 46, 56, 94, 109, 140
Lauds: *Psalms* 92, 135
Day Prayer: *Psalms* 119:153–160, 161–168, 169–176

WRITE YOUR OWN PSALM



The *Psalms* represent communication with God that expresses a broad range of feelings, life circumstances, and purposes. It is perhaps because of how broadly applicable they are that the *Psalms* have remained such an enduring part of our worship of God through the centuries.

One exercise that can help us become more aware of our relationship with God in any situation is to write a *Psalm* of our own. Such a *Psalm* can express joy, sorrow, excitement, anxiety, or any other feeling we have. It can call on God to help others, to provide us with strength, or even to give us justice in difficult or trying situations.

Most importantly, however, writing a *Psalm* allows us to focus on who God is, on who we are, and on the nature of the relationship between us. These general realities are at the heart of every *Psalm*, and it is the Psalmist's incredible insights that make each of these prayers so powerful and instructive.

WHERE SHOULD YOU BEGIN?

- 1** Choose one of God's many attributes by which you would like to identify the LORD in your *Psalm*.
- 2** Be honest when considering what you would like to tell God. You might want to ask for help with a personal problem, offer praise to the LORD, or ask God to ease the pain of someone else.
- 3** Rely on your memory. If your *Psalm* includes a request for help, be specific about how God has helped you in the past and as well as about how he can help now. In a *Psalm* of praise or thanksgiving, list the things for which you are most grateful.
- 4** Do not be afraid to be creative. Think of your *Psalm* as a poem or as lyrics to a song. What kind of music would be most compatible with your words?
- 5** Be sure to include what you intend to do to follow up on your prayer. Be specific about telling God what you will do and when you plan to do it.