



The Psalter for the Formation of Souls

How to Repent; How to Give Thanks; What One Must Say when Being Pursued

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THERE EXISTS VIRTUALLY NO SEMINARY PROGRAM THAT DOES NOT INCLUDE training in pastoral work. Although seminaries may approach the issue differently, all agree, it seems, that the one ordained to word and sacrament is also entrusted with the care of souls. And yet, not a few of those facing this task, armed with a course or two in “Marriage and Family” or “Death and Dying,” feel overwhelmed by the work before them. For those just beginning ministry, of course, this apprehension springs in part from inexperience, but even for more seasoned pastors there are larger dynamics at work. One factor that must be taken into account is the sense that the realities with which all church members in some way deal—anger, envy, despair, vengefulness—are private matters. For many, in fact, these painful, embarrassing aspects of life are kept entirely disconnected from their church involvement. For others, they are thus hidden only until a full-fledged crisis presents itself in the form of marital disintegration or divorce, depression, substance abuse, or some other tangible “problem” that must be “solved.” As they come to understand the histories behind these crises, pastors often sense the magnitude of the destructive cycles that have preceded them and the enormous task of “catch-up” required even to make the first steps toward healing. And yet they

The Psalter not only mirrors the experience of every human life, it offers the pattern by which the soul may be reordered and healed.

themselves may lack any strong conviction as to how the situation could have been addressed earlier, especially in a way that was connected organically with worship and the congregation's communal life.

I. ATHANASIUS ON THE PSALMS

The set of concerns described here is a large one, and not quickly resolved. This essay suggests, however, that one profitable direction of thought is found in a perhaps surprising source: the writings of St. Athanasius, a fourth-century bishop of Alexandria.¹ In his *Letter to Marcellinus*, Athanasius describes a resource that addresses these very issues, a uniquely rich resource and one that remains available to contemporary Christian communities: the book of Psalms. "All Scripture of ours, my son—both ancient and new—is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, as it is written," writes Athanasius; but, for "those who are prayerful," he says, "the Book of Psalms possesses a certain winning exactitude."²

What does this ancient teacher mean by such a statement, and how might it address the concerns raised above? In order to find answers, we must consider Athanasius's comments on the psalms at greater length.

In many ways, Athanasius says, the Psalter is similar to other parts of Scripture. It agrees with the rest of Scripture in "the things it declares," and there are similarities even in form; other parts of Scripture also contain hymns, and like other parts of Scripture, the book of Psalms includes "prophecies and legislations and narrations." Beyond this, though, Athanasius says, the Psalter has

a very special grace, a choiceness of quality well worthy to be pondered; for, besides the characteristics which it shares with others, it has this particular marvel of its own, that within it are represented and portrayed in all their great variety the movements of the human soul. It is like a picture, in which you see yourself portrayed and, seeing, may understand and consequently form yourself upon the pattern given.³

The first part of this statement expresses an idea that will already be familiar to many contemporary readers: the notion that the Psalter gives voice to inner realities that readers—even to the present day—find familiar. John Calvin puts it this way in his commentary on the psalms:

There is not an emotion of which anyone can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror. Or rather, the Holy Spirit has here drawn to life all the

¹This recourse to a father of the church should really not be surprising. On the wisdom of the classical tradition of care of souls as well as suggestions for concrete application in the present, see Thomas Oden, *Care of Souls in the Classic Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

²Athanasius, *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, trans. Robert C. Gregg (New York: Paulist, 1980) 101.

³At this point I prefer the translation in Athanasius, *The Letter to Marcellinus on the Interpretation of the Psalms*, in *On the Incarnation: New Edition, revised, with a letter of St. Athanasius on the Interpretation of the Psalms added as an Appendix*, trans. and ed. by a Religious of C. S. M. V. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's, 1998) 103.

griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated.⁴

Athanasius also uses the image of a mirror and describes the process as being so immediate that those who hear the words of the psalms simply hear them as their own.⁵

This idea, as mentioned above, may already be familiar, but its implications for corporate worship and Christian ministry may not be. The use of the Psalter in the communal life of a Christian community brings into that life exactly those passions that community members are tempted to hide away: grief, despair, anger, even anger with God. The psalms express with great freedom what we may consider least fit for public articulation. Thus, in praying the psalms together, worshipping communities find ready means and, indeed, a not very subtle impetus to include even the most difficult parts of their lives in the corporate offering of worship.⁶

Of course, the passions of the psalms are not all dark ones; confidence and hope are sung out as well. These may not seem as problematic, but for some individuals and communities, their authentic, unselfconscious expression is just as rare. Public expression of wholehearted joy, also, is a practice that the psalms are ready to teach.

This ability of psalms to speak to and express the passions is important, but we misunderstand Athanasius if we stop here. The second half of the quotation above contains a crucial turn: the Psalter not only contains the movements of the soul, he says, but also offers the pattern upon which the soul may be reordered and healed. The Psalter, in other words, does not simply express the passions but works at the same time to mold them and change them. How, we might ask, is this accomplished? Athanasius describes a matrix of transformation that works in several steps.

First, as those who speak and hear the psalms identify so intimately with the psalmist, Athanasius explains, they simultaneously find themselves called into question. One finds his or her conscience pricked and feels an immediate conviction; another is discouraged, but, even as the words are spoken, feels God's call to hope. The question remains, of course: How is the change actually achieved? And it is here that the psalms' true power is seen. At the heart of his exposition, Athanasius describes a basic process of formation by which the psalms teach "how one must heal passion through speaking and acting."⁷

Again, here he compares the psalms to the rest of Scripture. While other parts of Scripture, for example, encourage repentance from sins, the Psalter shows one just what to say at the moment of repentance. While believers are elsewhere ad-

⁴John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. J. Anderson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949) xxxvi-xxxvii.

⁵Athanasius, *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, 111.

⁶Cf. Stephen McCutchan, "Framing Our Pain: The Psalms in Worship," *Christian Ministry* 26 (1995) 18-20.

⁷Athanasius, *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, 108.

monished to live a godly life in the face of persecution, in the psalms “we are taught how one must call out while fleeing, and what words must be offered to God while being persecuted and after being delivered subsequent to persecution.”⁸ Or, if Scripture throughout instructs the believer to bless and acknowledge the Lord, it is in the psalms that “we are instructed how one must praise the Lord and by speaking what words we properly confess our faith in him.”⁹

In short, Athanasius argues that the psalms assist Christians to lead obedient and virtuous lives not simply by prescribing the obedient and virtuous behavior but by embodying concretely the obedience and virtue that is prescribed. The voice of the psalmist is the voice of the one Christians are called to become. As they repeat the words of the psalms—and as they listen to others repeat them—Christians are drawn into this life of obedience; they are changed.

This is perhaps a different line of thinking than that to which we contemporary Christians are accustomed. We tend to think of an intangible, inner part of the person determining outward speech and action, and we assume that if we are to make progress in Christian virtue, then our first goal should not be to change our actions but to amend the attitudes of the heart.¹⁰ Athanasius is clearly suggesting a process that works in the reverse. Here, it is not that a changed heart yields changed speech and action; rather, changed speech and action create a changed heart. As Christians repeat these words of the psalms, they are in fact thus gradually conformed to the model that these words embody.

II. PSALMS AS WORDS OF CHRIST

Athanasius’s discussion of the re-forming power of the psalms is deepened if we pause here to consider it in the light of a related line of thought: Christian tradition has long conceived of the psalms as representing the words of Christ himself. Founded perhaps most primarily in the gospel record of Christ’s recitation of Ps 22:1 on the cross, this tradition does not hesitate to return to the Psalter as a book that, although written a thousand years before his birth, nevertheless contains the very speech of Christ. Even up to our own time, Dietrich Bonhoeffer speaks of “the depth and breadth of the Psalter as the prayer of Christ” and claims that in the Psalter “we learn to pray on the basis of Christ’s prayer.”¹¹ If we think in this way, it is not surprising that the words of the psalms should serve as a powerful means to shape those who hear and speak them. If the word of God has the power to create,

⁸Ibid., 109.

⁹Ibid. It is interesting to note that this exact line of thinking appears again many years later in Martin Luther’s “Preface to the Psalter” (*Luther’s Works*, vol. 35, ed. E. Theodore Bachman [Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1960] 254). The Psalter, writes Luther, “has this noble virtue and quality. Other books make much ado about the works of the saints, but say very little about their words. The Psalter is a gem in this respect. It gives forth so sweet a fragrance when one reads it because it relates not only the works of the saints, but also their words, how they spoke with God and prayed, and still speak and pray.”

¹⁰This tendency to think in terms of “action-following-thought” has, for many, no doubt only been strengthened in reaction to the best-known contemporary alternative: behavioral psychology.

¹¹Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper & Row, 1954) 55.

then the words of the Incarnate God—as they are prayed and spoken and sung—can easily be imagined to have the power to re-create.

In a letter written in the fifth century, St. Augustine offers a careful christological and ecclesiological model—articulated in the language of the psalms—that would support just such a conclusion. In this letter Augustine says that the meaning of grace in the New Testament can be summarized in God’s adoption of human beings as God’s own children. This adoption, he goes on, is accomplished by the mutual sharing of natures in the incarnation, a sharing which he describes as an exchange of voices: Christ takes on our sinful voice, while offering to us his own. Interestingly for our purposes here, the end result is that the church is taught by Christ how to sing rightly to God, for indeed Christ sings in and through them. In chapter 17 of the letter, Augustine speaks of this gift to the church in terms of Ps 22:21: “I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.” This, Augustine says, can be understood as the promise of Christ himself to be present within the church’s singing. “Doubtless,” Augustine claims, “he sings in us Himself, when we sing by His grace.”¹²

Augustine, then, would suggest a specifically christological dynamic at work as Christians sing the psalms. Described above was a general principle that speech and action shape the person, but here that principle is tightened and made more specific. *This* speech and *this* action shape the person, precisely because they are the speech-acts of Christ himself. Thus, the model of obedience and virtue embodied here is the greatest of all models, Christ himself, and yet he is present not simply as the goal toward which the psalms move but within the singing itself, providing the power and assistance needed to sing as he does.

Returning to Athanasius, we find that, having described the proper function of the Psalter as a whole, he goes on in his commentary to consider more specifically the function of various individual psalms. Psalm 3, for example, is especially useful to the one who is undergoing great difficulties. Psalms 11 and 16 give language to the one who would express confidence in God. Psalms 53, 55, 56, and 141 recommend themselves to the one undergoing persecution.

And thus, says Athanasius, the psalms do their work. Each speaks to particular passions and each offers the appropriate remedy—teaching Christians to hope, to repent, to call out for God, etc.—in order that “the stirrings of our souls might be grasped.”¹³ This last phrase nicely hints at both of the fundamental processes Athanasius describes: first, those who hear and speak the psalms are brought to a new awareness of the passions within them, and, second, these passions are at the same time disciplined and healed.

Finally, as Christians are thus moved, the movement comes full circle. In the end, believers are enabled to speak the psalms with new conviction on the basis of

¹²Augustine, “Letter 140: Addressed to Honoratus,” in *Saint Augustine: Letters, Volume III*, trans. Wilfrid Parsons, vol. 20 of *The Fathers of the Church* (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1953) 94.

¹³Athanasius, *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, 111.

the praise or repentance or hope thus engendered. The individual is re-made by the words that stream from his lips and across her ears, and “these words, as his own, he chants to the Lord.”¹⁴

III. IMPLICATIONS FOR MINISTRY

The implications for pastoral care are not far off. A thoughtful reappropriation of the psalms will allow them to do the unique work that Athanasius describes in Christian congregations today. The psalms will encourage believers to give voice to the passions—anger, guilt, despair—that are surely already at work in their lives. At the same time, the psalms will give words to speak those passions that move toward healing and wholeness. Over time, a body of believers will be significantly shaped and formed.

In this process, a groundwork for pastoral work can also be laid. When the pastor turns to the work of individual pastoral care, three important benefits will appear: first, an individual or family will already have an expectation that dynamics such as anger or grief are connected to the life of faith and worship; second, they will be accustomed to the experience of having these passions called into question and changed; and third, a familiar language will be ready at hand. This third point brings up an issue not yet addressed here: the practice of reading and repeating the psalms in the context of pastoral care. This is not a new idea; pastors have long made use of the psalms, especially to comfort the sick, dying, and bereaved, and in contexts of confession and reconciliation. I want to suggest here, however, that the psalms might come into play in pastoral care in more varied and imaginative ways in the context of their revitalized use elsewhere in communal life.

With that, I turn to the more practical questions that this essay raises: Of what might such a “revitalized use” consist? The answer, of course, will vary widely from one Christian community to another. Patterns of worship and devotional practice, community life and history, and other factors must be taken into consideration. Nevertheless, I venture to offer suggestions that may be useful across a broad spectrum of Christian congregations.

First, the psalms must be spoken and heard. In many traditions, the reading or chanting of psalms is already a regular part of the central worship service. In others, psalms could easily be integrated, either in spoken or sung form. A number of time-honored practices recommend themselves here. A psalm may be read in unison by the congregation or antiphonally, with verses or sections divided between a leader and the congregation or between two halves of the congregation. As is still done in many Episcopal congregations, the psalm can be chanted by the choir or by an individual singer; in this case, the congregation may also participate by singing an antiphon interspersed after every two or three verses. Even congrega-

¹⁴*Ibid.*

tions unfamiliar with this practice can be encouraged with an antiphon set to a familiar musical phrase.

Newer practices also offer many possibilities. Of course, new music in many genres takes for its inspiration the words of the psalmist. Again, these arrangements can be sung by an individual, the choir, or the entire congregation. Songs from the French community of Taizé offer an interesting combination of old and new: these chants—often based on the psalms—offer simple, plain-chant melodies, which seem to adapt themselves to a wide variety of worship styles.¹⁵ Some congregations have also made use of a form of readers' theater, in which a group of speakers or the entire congregation divides the psalm into lines spoken individually and lines spoken by combinations of voices. Psalm 132 is just one example of many psalms that contain a number of "voices": in this psalm, we hear the voices of a chorus, of David, and of God, and it is easy to see how this psalm's full impact could be revealed by a group of speakers. In some congregations, readings could move even further in this direction, proclaiming the psalm through dramatic reenactment.

Whatever the venue, this commentary from Athanasius suggests that the psalms should be read in such a way as to reflect the passion they express. Whether read individually or in chorus—with attention to the position or posture of the readers or with other variations—readings should honor the power and range of the psalms themselves.

Alongside the reading of the psalms is their exposition as Scripture, and another means that suggests itself immediately for a reappropriation of the psalms is that of preaching. Even in churches where psalms are included among the Sunday readings, the preacher often passes over this text entirely. Yet one newly aware of the Psalter's possibilities would certainly find points of contact. The psalms might be read in connection with Old Testament narratives as the words of King David—as Christian tradition has long suggested—or (as suggested above) as the words of Christ himself. Or, on the basis of Athanasius's commentary, a preacher might explore how the psalms give the concrete words that allow hearers to obey more abstract commands to acknowledge God or to cultivate hope.

Services other than the main worship service offer possibilities for appropriating psalms in more specialized ways. Here, an even greater range of creative settings may be possible. William Holladay suggests one possibility:

I know of a congregation that has been imaginative in its use of Scripture. One Sunday morning the pastor read the Old Testament lesson, which happened to be Ezek. 37:1-14, the vision of the valley of dry bones. He then asked the members of the congregation to meditate on the passage, and when any member felt his or her bones begin to live, to stand up. And when about two-thirds of the congregation was standing, they sang the doxology together. Perhaps Psalm 30 would be given a similar treatment.¹⁶

¹⁵GIA Publications (Chicago, IL) makes available the music of Taizé in many forms.

¹⁶William Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years: Prayerbook of a Cloud of Witnesses* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 300.

No doubt many psalms could be treated in similarly creative ways that would be appropriate to their own content.

Other services may also direct the psalms toward more specific circumstances. Some congregations, for example, have organized services especially for those who are grieving, and the psalms would easily and naturally be incorporated there. Other services, such as those honoring an important day in the life of the church congregation, might find a psalm of thanksgiving especially appropriate. As this kind of use is increased, a broad familiarity with the particularities of various psalms will naturally develop, and this in turn will facilitate discerning use in the future.

Programs of Christian formation might include the psalms in other ways. The season of Lent, for example, suggests a series of meetings devoted to the psalms of lament, allowing those gathered to move toward personal repentance as well as toward recognition of those who are marginalized both inside and outside their community.¹⁷ At other times, sessions might be devoted to a general educational series on the psalms. Here, they could be treated in a more comprehensive way, allowing those gathered to gain a deeper understanding of the patterns and types of the psalms, glimpses of the history of interpretation, as well as insights of more recent critical work.¹⁸

Above all, I suggest, it is a commitment of pastors—and others—in this direction that will pave the way for the psalms to come to life among bodies of Christian believers. As they encourage worshipers to bring all of themselves to communal life, the psalms will also re-form those who hear them, revealing in powerful new ways “the perfect image for the souls’ course of life.”¹⁹ ⊕

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¹⁷“If a congregation were thoughtfully guided, the laments could greatly extend its sensibility. In laments the psalmist speaks for those who are innocent, whose rights have been ignored; the laments speak for those who are marginalized in the community. In the psalms, worshipers who are marginalized could find a voice.” *Ibid.*, 294.

¹⁸On ways in which critical scholarship might inform pastoral use of the psalms, see John van Seters, “The Psalms and Pastoral Theology,” *Andover Newton Quarterly* 10 (1969) 66-74.

¹⁹Athanasius, *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, 112.