



## Using the Psalms to Broaden Our Spiritual Lives

**T**he book of Psalms is called the Christian's prayerbook, and rightly so. The psalms themselves run the gamut of human spiritual expression, and some of them are widely known and loved. But as with any kind of religious expression, a person can get into the "rut" of using a limited number of psalms to address a limited range of prayers to God—we tend toward using five or ten of the most familiar ones. It might be good to use some of the lesser-known psalms in order to broaden and deepen our relation with God.

Certainly, the most popular psalms have gained that reputation because they so deeply touch our religious lives. Top of this list would be Psalm 23, which many people know by heart. The imagery of God as our shepherd protecting us through times of danger is something most Christians find deeply comforting. Psalms of praise to God for the glories of creation, such as Psalms 8 and 19, are the basis for many of our most glorious works of hymnody and song; when we sing "How Great Thou Art," we are singing the psalms. There are also psalms that help us express our confession of sin and request for forgiveness, such as Psalm 51. Some of the psalms give voice to our fears of abandonment and lament, like Psalm 22, which we pray, as did our Lord Jesus Christ on the cross, or Psalm 46, which expresses our confidence in God in the midst of trouble. Psalms 121 and 130 express many of the same kinds of feelings. And many, many psalms shape our blessings and praise for God and God's goodness, such as Psalms 67, 95, and 150. Many elements of these psalms are deeply embedded in our worship and hymns, and we often sing these without consciously referencing the psalms themselves.

Of course, there are some psalms that might seem not so well suited to the deepening and broadening of our spiritual lives. Leafing through the Psalter again for this editorial, I am surprised to be reminded how many psalms there are whose main purpose seems to be calling down retribution and vengeance against the psalm-writer's enemies, or gloating over the failures of their plans. Although they

praise God for protection and help, quite a few of them really do seem more than a tad mean-spirited (although admittedly, Old Testament politics could be rather rough). Many of the aptly named royal psalms seem to be not much more than flag-waving exercises almost more in praise of the current ruler than of the God of Israel. And though many psalms do praise God for special care for the Israelite kingdoms, their focus on the military successes (or failures) of these kingdoms seems to overlook the prophetic vision of a society where justice and mercy reign.

Be this as it may, there seems to be a third category of psalms—underutilized ones—that might be consulted by Christians and Christian communities in order to express our relationship more fully with God, creation, and God’s people. For example, many of the wisdom psalms seem underused (as does much of the biblical wisdom literature in general). To some, these psalms seem pedestrian and formulaic: be good, and God will bless you. But there is much more to these psalms than this. Think about Psalm 1 and what it might mean to “delight” in the law of the Lord (v. 2). Not just acquiesce to God’s law, or reluctantly place ourselves under that law—but what might it mean to find joy in the law of God? Related to these psalms are many others in which the psalmist begs God for personal transformation, for the power to bend the psalmist’s life to the will of God. Are we as Christians (especially we who are Lutheran) so afraid of the law, and of personal sanctification, that we ignore the psalmist’s example? There are psalms that seek personal self-control and holiness, and many of us (all of us?) could find a deeper relation with God, our planet, and our fellow human beings through adding these psalms to our prayer life.

There are other elements that might help, including using the psalms of individual and corporate lament in our personal and communal lives. Certainly, the psalms of thanksgiving, with their focus on God (and not ourselves), could help our churches and countries to move away from self-justification and triumphalism, and toward an understanding of what it means to be people (truly) living under God! There are surely many other examples, large and small, where we can more completely express our praise and thanksgiving to God, not only for our blessings but also for living under the leading (and correction?) of a God whose majesty and glory the psalms so rightly and fully express.

Editor’s note: After a long process, *Word & World* now has a new website, and we hope all the gremlins that bugged the old (ancient) website are long gone. Check it out at <https://www.wordandworld.luthersem.edu/>.

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