



Martin Luther on Praying the Psalms

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Martin Luther sought to reform the theology and practice of prayer. For this, the Psalms were ideal tools. Luther's monastic experience of daily prayer using the Psalms gave him intimate familiarity with and appreciation for them. Throughout his reforming work, Luther engaged frequently with the Psalms and produced a number of works on them, directed at varied audiences. Luther's first lecture series in Wittenberg was on the Psalms (1513–1515). While these lectures were not published and were certainly intended for an audience of students, they reflect the importance Luther attached to the Psalms, even early in his career. In spring 1517 he published a commentary on the seven penitential psalms.¹ As his reforming movement gathered strength, Luther affirmed the use of the Psalms as prayers. In *An Exposition of the Lord's Prayer for Simple Laymen* (1519),² Luther

¹ Abbreviations: AL: *The Annotated Luther* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015–2017); LW: *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut Lehmann, and Christopher Boyd Brown, 75 vols. (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress and Concordia, 1955–); WA: *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 71 vols. to date (Weimar: Herman Böhlau Nachfolger, 1883–); WADB: *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Deutsche Bibel* (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1906–1961); WABR: *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Briefwechsel* (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1930–1985); VD16: *Verzeichnis der im deutschen Sprachbereich erschienenen Drucke des XVI. Jahrhunderts* (Munich: Bayerische Staatsbibliothek; Wolfenbüttel: Herzog August Bibliothek; Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1983–). WA 1: 154–220. In the modern numbering, the penitential psalms are 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143.

² LW 42: (15–18) 19–81; WA 2: (74–79) 80–130.

As a monk, Martin Luther learned the Psalms by heart, as they formed the center of monastic spiritual life. Luther never lost the centrality of the Psalms for his faith and centered a number of his devotional works for his followers on this book, reforming and deepening his appreciation for the Psalms through his new evangelical rediscovery of the gospel.

oriented prayer around the Lord's Prayer, seeing it as the measure of all prayer, and wrote that the Psalms are also good prayers, for they contain what is in the Lord's Prayer, though not expressing it as clearly.

Luther's *Little Prayer Book*, first published in 1522,³ became popular immediately, going through at least seventeen editions between 1522 and 1525 and at least forty-four by the end of the century. An answer to medieval prayerbooks, this work was not a collection of prayers. Rather, it sought to introduce people to the faith (using the Ten Commandments, Creed, and Lord's Prayer) and thereby to incite them to prayer. The *Little Prayer Book* included eight psalms: 12, 67, 51, 103, 20, 79, 25, and 10. Though Luther neither explained why he chose these psalms nor included their complete texts, he did state for what purposes each should be prayed. For example, Psalm 12 was "to be prayed for the exaltation of the holy gospel," Psalm 67 was "to be prayed for the increase of faith," Psalm 20 was a prayer "for good government and earthly authorities," Psalm 79 was to be prayed "against the enemies of the Christian church and the gospel," and Psalm 103 was useful "for thanking God for all his goodness."⁴ These designations indicate that Luther expected and encouraged a basic understanding of each psalm rather than its mere recitation. Just a few years later (1524), Luther used Psalms 12 and 67 as the bases for two of his early hymns: "Oh God, from Heaven Look Down" (Psalm 12) and "Would That the Lord Would Grant Us Grace" (Psalm 67). A number of Luther's later hymns were based on psalms, including "From Trouble Deep I Cry to Thee" (Psalm 130), and "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" (Psalm 46).

Luther lectured on the Psalms again between 1532 and 1535. His interest in the Psalms in the 1530s continued to be more than academic. He preached on the Psalms many times. He published a number of short works commenting on individual psalms—including, among others, Psalms 45, 51, 82, 101, 110, 117, and 118. His letters indicate that he frequently cited the Psalms as he sought to advise and console his correspondents. Writing to his wife, Katharina, from Eisleben just over a week before he died, Luther admonished her:

Pray, and let God worry. You have certainly not been commanded to worry about me or about yourself. "Cast your burden on the Lord, and he will sustain you," as is written in Psalm 55.⁵

In a variety of writings, Luther expressed his high opinion of the Psalms as prayers and encouraged their use. Luther worked to create a prayer practice that encouraged persistent, thoughtful, and bold prayer rather than mechanical recitation of words. In his preface to his *Summer Postil* (1544), Luther commented on these efforts:

³ AL 4: (158), 165–200; LW 43: (5–10), 11–45; WA 10/2: (331–75), 375–501; VD16 L4081–125.

⁴ AL 4: 194; LW 43: 41; WA 10/2: 410–25.

⁵ AL 4: 473; LW 50: 306; WABR 11: 291.

So also the shameful, false, slanderous prayer books, of which the world was full, have been cleared out, and in place of them pure prayers and good Christian hymns have been published, especially the Psalter, the finest and most precious prayer book and hymnal of them all, concerning which no theologian of our time could boast that he had understood a single psalm as well and as thoroughly as the laypeople, men and women, understand them now.⁶

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In a preface to the *Neuburger Psalter* (1545), Luther urged every Christian who wanted to pray to let the Psalter be their daily prayerbook. He also thought it would be good for Christians to be so practiced in using the Psalms that they memorize them word for word so that, whatever the occasion, they can draw sayings from them. Luther opined that everything a “devout heart” could wish for in prayer could be found in the Psalms, with words much better than any humans could invent.⁷

A brief look at several of Luther’s writings on the Psalms will illustrate how he taught prayer using them.

LUTHER’S PREFACE TO AND TRANSLATION OF THE PSALMS

Probably the most influential of Luther’s works in shaping Lutheran prayer practice using the Psalms were his translation of the Psalms, his 1528 preface to the Psalter,⁸ and his *Summaries*. Luther completed and published his translation of the Psalms in 1524. His first preface to the Psalter was published in 1524; he published a new preface in 1528. His *Summaries* were first published in 1533 (see below).

Luther’s translation of the Psalms offered both explicit and implicit aid to those seeking to pray. The translation provided German words for those unable to use the Latin Psalter. The psalms summarized important biblical teachings. In his 1528 preface, Luther said the “Psalter puts everything that is in the entire Bible most beautifully and briefly.” Luther praised the Psalter for relating “not only the works of the saints, but also their words—how they spoke with God and prayed, and still speak and pray.” In contrast to medieval Christianity, which advocated prayer *to* the saints, Luther emphasized that the Christian can use the words *of* the

⁶ LW 77: 9; WA 21: 201.

⁷ WADB 10/2: 155.

⁸ AL 6: (203–5) 206–12; LW 35: 253–57; WADB 10/1: 98–105.

saints as recorded in the Psalms. Luther saw the Psalms as providing the best of the speech of the saints, “that which they used when they spoke with God in great earnestness and on the most important matters.”⁹ Luther compared the human heart to a ship on the wild sea; in different types of weather it speaks differently. He continued, emphasizing that the Psalms give Christians words to speak to God:

What is the greatest thing in the Psalter but this earnest speaking amid such storm winds of every kind? Where does one find finer words of joy than in the praise psalms and thanksgiving psalms? . . .

On the other hand, where do you find deeper, more sorrowful, more pitiful words of sorrow than in the lamentation psalms? . . .

And that they speak these words to God and with God, this, I repeat, is the best thing of all. This gives the words double earnestness and life. For when one speaks with human persons about these matters, what he or she says does not come so powerfully from the heart; it does not burn and live, is not so urgent. Hence, it is that the Psalter is the book of all saints; and everyone, in whatever situation that person may be, finds in the psalms words that fit his or her case or situation—that suit him or her as if they were put there just for his or her sake, so that he could not put it better himself, or find better words or wish for better.¹⁰

Luther’s translation of the Psalms and his 1528 preface went through numerous editions, both in individual editions of the Psalter and as part of the Bible. They were often printed with Luther’s *Summaries* (see below).

LUTHER’S PSALM SUMMARIES

Frequently reprinted and widely received were Luther’s *Summaries of the Psalms*.¹¹ Luther’s *Summaries* were published without accompanying psalm texts at least ten times between 1533 and 1535, in High German, Low German, and Latin. They were originally the second part of a two-part work: *Summarien uber die Psalmen und Ursachen des Dolmetschens* (Summaries of the Psalms and Defense of the Translation of the Psalms). The first part of the work was a defense of his translation of the Psalms, going into some detail.¹²

The *Summaries* were encapsulations of the content and purpose of each psalm. In brief remarks at the end of the defense of his translation of the Psalms, Luther divided the psalms into five types: psalms that prophesy of Christ, psalms that teach, psalms of consolation, psalms of petition (*Bitpsalmen*), and psalms of thanksgiving. Luther acknowledged that a psalm may fit into “two, three or even

⁹ AL 6, 208–9; LW 35: 254–55; WA DB/1: 99–101.

¹⁰ AL 6, 209–10; LW 35: 255–56; WA DB 10/1: 103.

¹¹ WA 38: (1–8), 9–69; VD16 L 6702–11.

¹² Only *Ursachen des dolmetschens* has been translated into English as of the date of this writing. See LW 35: 209–23.

all five” categories. What was important was to know that the psalms filled all five functions. (Luther considered all psalms suitable for talking to God; petition or prayer psalms were those that specifically asked God for something.)

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In the *Summaries*, Luther linked each of the first thirty-one psalms to parts of the catechism, more specifically to the commandments and the petitions of the Lord’s Prayer. So, for example, he saw Psalm 3 as a “prayer (or petitionary) psalm” in which the example of David shows how he prayed in his need and was heard. Luther linked this to the first commandment, “for God wants to be our God and to help,” and to the seventh petition in the Lord’s Prayer, “in which we ask for deliverance from all evil.” The fifth psalm he linked to the second and third commandments and to the first two petitions of the Lord’s Prayer. Psalm 20, a prayer for all those in positions of earthly authority, is linked to the third petition, “that God’s will and not that of the devil should be done.” In relation to Psalm 10 he notes, “It belongs to the second commandment and in the first petition just like all prayer psalms,” and repeats later that all prayer psalms belong to these “for they honor and call on God’s name.” Luther’s linkage of the Psalms to the catechisms suggests that he saw this work, as well as the use of the Psalms generally, as part of a broader effort to educate the laity in the faith.

Luther recognized the reality that prayer often needs to be tailored to the context. In the *Summaries*, Luther pointed to particular psalms as appropriate prayers for particular situations. Psalm 63 is named as one that can be prayed by “those suffering under tyrants and wanting to hear God’s word.” On Psalm 56 Luther noted, “We may pray it against our tyrants, who without pause persecute God’s word and us and leave no one in peace.” He designated Psalm 74, a prayer against enemies, as one to be prayed against Islam. Luther saw Psalm 80 as a prayer against “everyday enemies” of Israel and drew a parallel to such enemies in his own time. In a number of psalms, he named “false teachers” as the enemies. Regarding Psalm 143, he noted that false prophets and teachers were common in ancient Israel and have been in the church from the beginning. For this reason, many psalms pray against these and ask God to protect us from such.

Luther identified several psalms with particular offices or people. Psalm 61 was not only a prayer against enemies but also a prayer for “king and earthly authority, that they may fear God and reign well for a long time, and that good government not be destroyed by enemies and war.” Others addressed particular

situations in the life of the believer, such as Psalm 38 where Luther understood the one praying as one bemoaning his sin, seeing only God's anger, threat, death, and hell and falling into a despair which consumes the whole person. In prayer, the believer relies on God's promise and receives consolation. "So we should also pray and not fall into despair, even though we are sinners and suffer under the weight and storm of sin." Psalm 6 bewailed the suffering in conscience of the one praying, but also showed that this prayer is heard "as a consoling example for all who are in such trials (*anfechtung*), that they will not remain in it."

At the end of a 1533 Wittenberg edition, Luther expressed his wish that future editions not mix the summaries with the psalms.¹³ Luther's wishes were largely ignored. His *Summaries* were chiefly published in a format—within the Psalter—he did not wish. The *Psalter with Summaries* was widely published, being printed at least forty-eight times between 1533 and 1599. Places of publication included Wittenberg, Nuremberg, Lubeck, Magdeburg, Leipzig, Erfurt, Jena, Frankfurt/Main, Rostock, Stettin, Hamburg, Helmstedt, and Lemgo.¹⁴ Most editions were in a small, cheap size easily held in the hand.

Luther intended his *Summaries* to convey the chief teachings of the Psalms and thereby to encourage and aid prayer. Most who encountered the *Summaries* in the sixteenth century would have encountered them printed with the Psalms. The number of each psalm with its title in German (sometimes in Latin) came first, followed by Luther's summary and then the text of the psalm. The psalm was always printed in a larger typeface than the summary. Editors sometimes added appendices to aid prayer and devotional use, providing, for example, lists of psalms to address particular situations. Luther's *Summaries*, virtually unknown today, were intended not merely to enhance biblical understanding but also to encourage and shape prayer.

LUTHER'S COMMENTARY ON PSALM 118

Luther wrote his commentary on Psalm 118, "The beautiful *Confitemini*," while ensconced at the Coburg Castle during the Diet of Augsburg in 1530. (Luther could not travel to Augsburg because he was still under the imperial ban.) This explanation of his favorite psalm was first published in 1530 and went through at least nineteen editions between 1530 and 1572.¹⁵

In commenting on verse 5, "Out of my distress I called on the Lord; the Lord answered me and set me in a broad place," Luther provided a brief primer on prayer. Luther emphasized that prayer comes out of the midst of distress and is directed to a God who seems unfriendly.

¹³ WA 38, 69.

¹⁴ The exact number of editions is difficult to ascertain. A search of online VD16.de, title: *Psalter mit Summarien*, and Author: Luther, reveals numerous editions.

¹⁵ AL 6: (247–51), 252–318; LW 14: 43–106; WA 31/1: 65–182. VD16 lists nineteen editions: L 5813–30, ZV 10095.

Faith does not despair of the God who sends trouble. Faith does not consider him angry or an enemy, as the flesh, the world, and the devil strongly suggest. Faith rises above all this and sees God's fatherly heart behind his unfriendly exterior. . . . Faith has the courage to call with confidence to him who smites it and looks at it with such a sour face.¹⁶

God sends distress in order to drive the Christian "to pray, to implore, to fight, to exercise his faith, to learn another aspect of God's person than before, to accustom himself to do battle even with the devil and with sin, and by the grace of God to be victorious." Luther gave more specific instructions:

We read: "I called upon the Lord." You must learn to call. Do not sit by yourself or lie on a couch, hanging and shaking your head. Do not destroy yourself with your own thoughts by worrying. Do not strive and struggle to free yourself, and do not brood on your wretchedness, suffering, and misery. Say to yourself: "Come on, you lazy bum; fall on your knees, and lift your eyes and hands toward heaven!" Read a psalm or the *Our Father*, call on God, and tearfully lay your troubles before him. Mourn and pray, as this verse teaches, and also Ps. 142:2: "I pour out my complaint before him, I tell my trouble before him!" Likewise Ps. 141:2: "Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice!" Here you learn that praying, reciting your troubles, and lifting up your hands are sacrifices most pleasing to God. It is his desire and will that you lay your troubles before him. He does not want you to multiply your troubles by burdening and torturing yourself. . . . Out of such experiences people become real Christians. Otherwise people are mere babblers, who prate about faith and spirit but are ignorant of what it is all about or of what they themselves are saying.¹⁷

Luther addressed doubts about the efficacy of prayer and criticized the medieval belief that prayer depended upon the worthiness of the one praying and the medieval practice that encouraged the mere repetition of prayers without understanding them:

You must never doubt that God is aware of your distress and hears your prayer. You must not pray haphazardly or simply shout into the wind. Then you would mock and tempt God. It would be better not to pray at all than to pray like the priests and monks. It is important that you learn to praise also this point in this verse: "The Lord answered me and set me free." The psalmist declares that he prayed and cried out, and that he was certainly heard. If the devil puts it into your head that you

¹⁶ AL 6: 267; LW 14: 59; WA 31/1: 93–94.

¹⁷ AL 6: 268; LW 14: 60–61; WA 31/1: 95–97.

lack the holiness, piety, and worthiness of David and for this reason cannot be sure that God will hear you, make the sign of the cross, and say to yourself: “Let those be pious and worthy who will! I know for certain that I am a creature of the same God who made David. And David, regardless of his holiness, has no better or greater God than I have.”¹⁸

For Luther, Psalm 118 provided opportunity to reinforce some of his key teachings on prayer: God hears prayer because God has promised to hear prayer. Just as God heard the unworthy David, so God will also hear us. Humans can call on God in the midst of distress and be assured that God will hear.

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CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Today it is often forgotten how important the Psalms were for Luther and his followers. They produced copious writings on the Psalms, particularly on how one could and should use the Psalms as prayer. They spoke, sang, and paraphrased psalms, appropriating the words and thoughts to understand their own situations and express their needs to God. Any consideration of how Luther and the Wittenberg reformers sought to change prayer beliefs and practices must include an examination of the widespread use of psalms to teach, shape, and support prayer. One could view the prominence of the Psalms as unsurprising, given their importance in medieval (and in particular, monastic) piety. But familiarity was not the only reason Luther and his fellow reformers used the Psalms. The Psalms fit well into their agenda of teaching prayer. As they sought to encourage prayer, the Psalms provided readily available texts. The Psalms fit their concept of what prayer was. They offered examples of praising and thanking God, as well as of people in need crying out to God. Do you need to learn to pray? Do you lack words to pray? Do you wonder if God will hear? The Psalms addressed these questions, providing consolation, words, help, and hope. ⊕

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¹⁸ AL 6: 268–69; LW 14: 61; WA 31/1: 97.