

PSALMS

The School of Prayer



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This study uses the Revised Standard Version–Catholic Edition (RSV-CE) of the Bible. When the New American Bible (NAB) verse numbering differs from the RSV-CE, the NAB reference appears in parentheses. For example: “Read Psalm 12:1-6 (NAB: vss. 2-7).”

Session 2 – Questions

Seeing and Hearing the Psalms

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A. Introduction

It has been said that when we read Scripture, God speaks to us, and when we pray, we reply. Psalms offers us a unique way to experience this two-way conversation. The Psalms were written for this purpose, and their literary form and genre is essential to their success. They are not history, nor letters, nor prophecy, nor law. The psalms are prayers. Aids to worship. Songs. And their poetic nature stirs us in a way that prose does not. It involves our entire being, not just our minds. It grabs our attention, puts our imaginations to work, enlists our wills. Poetry makes the verses come alive. It gives them immediacy and provides rich food for meditation. And as often as not, it is the poetic words that give voice to the inarticulate longings of our souls.

We must learn to read poetry if we are to learn to read and pray the Psalms.

Unfortunately, reading poetry is becoming a lost art. We read to get information, we scan headlines and key sentences to get the gist of an article or essay. Our attention spans are short; if we don't get something right away, we set it aside. But poetry cannot be absorbed in a quick read. We must linger in it. We must notice the images and patterns, turn them over in our minds, chew on them, digest them slowly. We must see and feel before we understand. Fortunately for us, the Psalms aren't like dry toast that crumbles when you eat it. They are rich: packed full of complex sights and sounds and flavors that beg to be savored. The more you do this, the more you will get out of them.

This lesson will introduce you to the key poetic features of the Psalms and give you keys to hear them.

B. Prepare Your Heart

Carefully read Psalms 1 and 18. Before continuing with the lesson, read Psalm 1 again and meditate on it for a few minutes. What strikes your heart about it, today?

C. Take a Deeper Look

Repetition and Parallelism in the Psalms

In English, we can use an exclamation mark (!) for emphasis. Or we can underline something or put it in *italics* or **bold** or ALL CAPS. The Hebrews did something entirely different to add emphasis: they used repetition. So “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord” means that the Lord is VERY holy; in fact, He is *the holiest* Lord of all. Pausing to repeat it, you can almost feel the holiness. You are drawn into the thought, forced to focus upon it.

Repetition and something like it called “parallelism” are two of the hallmarks of Old Testament poetry. They are found in our poetry as well, but usually in a different way. We are used to hearing it in rhythm and rhyme and refrain: it is a parallelism of *sound*. But Hebrew poetry relies on a parallelism of *meaning*. You don't hear the echo as much as you see it in your mind's eye or feel it in your heart. When variations or additions are introduced into parallel thoughts, they stand out and bring you to a new understanding.

1. Read Psalm 34:1 (NAB: vs. 2) and write down the two phrases that form it.

- a. How is the second phrase similar to the first? How is it different?
 - b. What does the second phrase add to the meaning of the first?
2. Clap out an even rhythm for a moment. Keep doing it ... then add in a quick beat right after every fourth beat, hearing how the attention is focused on the odd beat. When a difference is inserted into pattern, it stands out. Hebrew poetry makes use of this fact. Psalm 2:1 is composed of two parallel phrases with essentially the same meaning:

(1) *Why do the nations conspire*

(2) *and the peoples plot in vain?*

What added detail is in the second phrase? What does it make you understand?

A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words: Imagery in the Psalms

We are physical beings, and God has always related to us in an incarnational way that involves all of our senses. From the start, He gave us a way to know Him through Creation. In the same way, the Psalms start with something known to get across the unknown or intangible. For example, "Meditating day and night" helps us understand continual prayer in a way that "meditating all the time" does not. Saying "God is a rock" draws on our experience to evoke a gut comprehension of God's stability and strength.

Images invite us to think deeply about the nature of one thing (often something intangible or hard to explain) by comparing it to something else (often a common thing that can be seen or heard or touched). To identify images in a psalm you are reading, look for *things*. Then look for words that describe those things, including actions that accompany them. They will give you a fuller picture of the image that is painted there.

The next questions will explore some images in the Psalms and unpack their meaning.

Read Psalm 1 at least once all the way through.

3. Psalm 1 introduces a common image that can be found throughout the Psalms: the "way" or "path." Write out the two verses in Psalm 1 in which "way" appears.
 - a. What is a "way," literally? Use a dictionary if you like. What does it mean in Psalm 1?

- b. What two types of ways are described?

- c. Verse 1 tells us a lot about the “way of sinners.” In your answer to question 3 above, underline the verbs (actions) in verse 1. What are they? Is there any logical progression between them?

- d. Think about verse 1. Read it several times. Does the movement of those verbs tell you anything about the “way” that is described?

Read Psalm 18 at least once all the way through.

- 4. Many of the images in the Psalms are used to help us describe God, who we cannot see or feel or touch. Read the title of Psalm 18 and verses 1-3 (NAB: the title (vs. 1) and vss. 2-4).
 - a. What things are used to describe God in verse 2 (NAB: vs. 3)? What do they mean in your experience? Do you know what they might have meant to the Israelites?

 - b. How is God like those things? Why is this a better way of describing God than speaking directly?

 - c. Can you describe a time when He has been like one of these things to you?

- 5. Psalm 18 continues with an example of a time the Lord saved David. Read verses 4-6 (NAB: vss. 5-7). How do they make you feel? What does the psalmist say is happening? What is really happening?

6. Recognizing and understanding poetic language helps us get at the “literal sense” (the intended meaning) of Scripture without getting bogged down in *literalism*. Action words and images are powerful tools when you set out to explain things that we can’t touch or see or even describe. They get at inner truth, not surface truth. If you read something that is impossible to interpret literally, be aware that it is likely an image.

Read Psalm 18 again, this time through verse 19.

- a. What seems to be happening in verses 6-19 (NAB: vss. 7-20)?

- b. What *really* is happening? What is the underlying truth that those images are meant to help us understand?

The key to reading the Psalms: *hagah*

In seeking out the meaning of images, you have taken time to “chew” on words and “digest” their meaning the way the introduction to this lesson described. This process is captured by the Hebrew word *hagah*, “to meditate.” It is the verb used to describe the blessed man of Psalm 1 who delights in the law (*torah*, “teaching”) of the LORD, the man who “meditates” on that law both day and night.

7. Carefully read Psalm 1:2-3. Mull it over, *hagah*. How does the image of the tree help you understand better the value of this sort of meditation?

D. Application

This exercise will help you apply one of the key themes of the lesson to your life.

- Choose a psalm that is meaningful to you. Read it several times, identify parallel thoughts and images, “chew on them” and then *hagah*: meditate. What is God saying to you? What is your response to Him?

Note: Next week’s lesson includes a tutorial on praying with Scripture using *lectio divina*. Please plan to spend extra time on it, preferably spreading it over two or more days, for maximum benefit.

Session 2 Talk Notes

A. Introduction

1. St. Athanasius: all Scripture speaks to us, but the Psalms speak for us
2. The power of poetry and song, rhyme and meter
3. What it means to bless God: *Catechism* No. 1078
4. The importance of slow, careful reading: pause to see and hear

B. Reading with imagination⁶

1. Hebrew use of imagery: Scientific vs poetic language
 - a. *What* vs. *why*
 - b. Abstract vs. concrete (direct vs evocative)
 - c. Flat vs. texture and richness
 - d. Information vs. transformation
2. Metaphors
 - a. The value of metaphoric language
 - i. Metaphors make images, help us visualize
 - ii. Metaphors slow us down
 - iii. Metaphors lead to meditation
 - b. How metaphors work
 - i. By comparing different things (ex: Ps. 42:1, Ps. 1)
 - ii. By transferring (and thus transforming) meaning

⁶ Dr. Gray's quote taken from Fr. Alonso Schokel, *Manual of Hebrew Poetics*

- iii. By creating associations
 - iv. "The Psalter is the schoolhouse of incarnational imagination."⁷
3. Parallelism and repetition
- a. Ex: "Here lies Fred, he is dead": parallelism of meaning; intensification
 - b. Example: Psalm 114⁸
 - i. Vs. 1: When Israel went forth from Egypt,
the house of Jacob from a people of strange speech
 - ii. Vs. 2: Judah became his sanctuary,
Israel his dominion
 - iii. Parallelism yields depth perception (Adele Berlin, "Parallelism focuses the message on itself, but its vision is binocular.")
 - c. Example: Psalm 42 – spiritual dryness
 - i. Where is your God? (vss. 3, 10)
 - ii. Hope in God (42:5, 11; 43:5)

C. The place of meditation in reading the Psalms

- 1. Psalm 1: metaphor of the fruitful tree
- 2. Biblical meditation
 - a. "Chewing the cud"
 - b. Isaiah 31:4 – *Hagah* ("meditate")
 - c. Committing God's word to memory

⁷ William Brown

⁸ Translation by Tim Gray, Ph.D.