READ
PRAY
SING

The Psalms as an Entryway to the Scriptures

A Guide to Resources for SINGING and PRAYING the PSALMS
We are delighted you have come to this conference, and I pray it has been helpful to you. Part of our aim is that you be encouraged and helped to make use of the Psalms in your own worship, using them as a guide for prayer and singing. To that end we have prepared this booklet with some suggested resources and an explanation of metrical psalms.

Special thanks are due to Michael Garrett who put this booklet together. We have incorporated some material previously prepared by James Grant as well.

As God has seen fit to give us a book of prayers and songs, and since he has so richly blessed its use in the past, surely we do well to make every use of it today. May your knowledge of God, your daily experience of him be deeply enhanced as you use his words to teach you to speak to him.

Ray Van Neste
Director, Ryan Center for Biblical Studies

Voices of the Past on the Psalter

Dietrich Bonhoeffer
“Whenever the Psalter is abandoned, an incomparable treasure vanishes from the Christian church. With its recovery will come unsuspected power.”

Charles Spurgeon
“Time was when the Psalms were not only rehearsed in all the churches from day to day, but they were so universally sung that the common people knew them, even if they did not know the letters in which they were written. Time was when bishops would ordain no man to the ministry unless he knew “David” from end to end, and could repeat each psalm correctly; even Councils of the Church have decreed that none should hold ecclesiastical office unless they knew the whole psalter by heart. Other practices of those ages had better be forgotten, but to this memory accords an honourable record. Then as Jerome tells us, the labourer, while he held the plough, sang Hallelujah; the tired reaper refreshed himself with the psalms, and the vinedresser, while trimming the vines with his curved hook, sang something of David.”

Martin Luther
“The Psalter ought to be a precious and beloved book, if for no other reason than this: it promises Christ’s death and resurrection so clearly – and pictures his kingdom and the condition and nature of all Christendom – that it might well be called a little Bible. In it is comprehended most beautifully and briefly everything that is in the entire Bible... In fact, I have a notion that the Holy Spirit wanted to take the trouble himself to compile a short Bible and book of examples of all Christendom or all saints, so that anyone who could not read the whole Bible would here have anyway almost an entire summary of it, comprised in one little book.”
Matthew Henry

“These psalms ought to be rendered according to the metre of every language, at least so as that they may be sung for the edification of the church. And methinks it is a great comfort to us, when we are singing David’s psalms, that we are offering the very same praises to God that were offered to him in the days of David and the other godly kings of Judah. So rich, so well made, are these divine poems, that they can never be exhausted, can never be worn thread-bare. The Psalms were thus serviceable to the Old Testament church, but to us Christians they may be of more use than they could be to those who lived before the coming of Christ; for, as Moses’s sacrifices, so David’s songs, are expounded and made more intelligible by the gospel of Christ, which lets us within the veil; so that if to David’s prayers and praises we add all St. Paul’s prayers in his epistles, and the new songs in the Revelation, we shall be thoroughly furnished for this good work; for the scripture, perfected, makes the man of God perfect.”

John Chrysostom

“Do you wish to be happy? Do you want to know how to spend the day truly blessed? I offer you a drink that is spiritual. This is not a drink for drunkenness that would cut off even meaningful speech. This does not cause us to babble. It does not disturb our vision. Here it is: Learn to sing Psalms! Then you will see pleasure indeed. Those who have learned to sing with the psalms are easily filled with the Holy Spirit.”

Andrew Blackwood

“Perhaps our other denominations would have greater love for the Bible if we sang from the Psalms as often as our fathers did after the Reformation. Many of those songs came out of the fiery furnace, and so they brought our fathers a mighty sense of God’s holiness, as well as a keen awareness of his laws.”

Resources for Psalm Singing

1. C. Richard Wells and Ray Van Neste, editors, Forgotten Songs: Reclaiming the Psalms for Christian Worship (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2012) is the product of the 2008 series at Union University exploring the Psalms. See the review by Professor Mark Gignilliat on the last pages of this booklet for more information.

2. John Witvliet’s The Biblical Psalms in Christian Worship: A Brief Introduction and Guide to Resources (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007) should not be missed by potential psalmody practitioners. Witvliet surveys all of the major Christian communions, with the exception of Eastern Orthodoxy, concerning the use of the Psalter in worship. His resource lists are focused and substantial and should be pursued by the experienced psalmodist. Readers should continue to watch for psalm-singing resources from the Witvliet-directed Calvin Institute of Christian Worship.

3. John Witvliet, Martin Tel & Joyce Borger’s Psalms for all Seasons: A Complete Psalter for Worship (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012) covers “the history, reception, and practice of psalm use and contains all 150 psalms, most in multiple formats.” See its companion website as well: www.psalmsforallseasons.org. This is the psalter that we used for the Friday night psalm singing.

4. Anthony Selvaggio and Joel Beeke, editors, Sing a New Song: Recovering Psalm Singing for the Twenty-First Century (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010). Multiple contributors from Presbyterian and Reformed churches cover psalm-singing in Scripture and church history. They strongly argue for the place of the Psalter in the worship of the church. The essays are short, well-written, and focused on the life of the church. Study groups and worship committees would do well to read this together.

5. Bruce Waltke and James Houston (with Erika Moore) The Psalms as Christian Worship: A Historical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010). Not your ordinary academic or preaching commentary – for both Houston and Waltke, this cornucopia of
materials is the fruit of lifelong labor in the field of the Psalms (they are octogenarians). Waltke’s focus is on the biblical text, and the technical issues that accompany it, while Houston is concerned with the cultural and social setting of the Psalms throughout history. Both men “deplor[e] the confessional reductionism in much contemporary Biblical scholarship,” and seek to bring the spirituality of the Psalms as well as the devotion that they have inspired to the front and center. The first section of the book gives a history of the Psalter’s reception in both the life of the church and the academy. The second section provides commentary on selected psalms. The history of each psalm’s interpretation is given as “the voice of the church.” A heavily-footnoted original translation follows, then the actual commentary consisting of literary patterns and detailed exegesis. Though it doesn’t follow the conventions of modern commentary writing, the writers do accomplish their goal “to reach into the pure gold of the Biblical text and into the hinterland of Christian history, to draw fresh renewal of spirit and thought from both.”

6. Reggie Kidd’s *With One Voice: Discovering Christ’s Song in Our Worship* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005) addresses the place of the psalms in the life of the church. Kidd is an enthusiastic worshipper and sees the necessity of Psalms in both private and corporate worship.

7. Some shorter pieces encouraging the singing of Psalms in corporate worship:


   The booklet by Anne Harrison sounds a similar note: *Recovering the Lord’s Song: Getting Sung Scripture Back into Worship* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2009). Harrison believes that something special happens to the Lord’s people when they sing his word to Him. She gives practical advice for bringing Scripture songs into the church’s worship, including charts of psalms and accompanying tunes, which she expands online: www.grovebooks.co.uk/resources/worship/W198- Resources.pdf.

   Old Testament scholar Gordon Wenham answers the question of his chapter title “What Are We Doing Singing the Psalms?” in his book *The Psalter Reclaimed: Praying and Praising with the Psalms* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013). In a few short pages, he ranges over the Bible, church history, speech-act theory, and finally back to the Psalms themselves as he attempts to cajole the Christian reader into a psalm-singing frame of mind.

   Reading the Psalms with Luther (St. Louis: Concordia, 2007) contains the ESV text of the Psalter with Martin Luther’s *Summaries of the Psalms* interspersed. Each section concludes with a Christian prayer evoked by the psalm. There is a short introduction to singing the Psalms and the ESV text is pointed for singing.

   Ross Miller’s two presentations “Calvin’s Understanding of Psalm-Singing as a Means of Grace” and “Music and the Spirit: Psalm-Singing in Calvin’s Liturgy” in *Calvin Studies VI* (Colloquium on Calvin Studies, Davidson College, 1992) are outstanding elucidations of Calvin at work as a pastor in Geneva. It is unfortunate that they are not more widely available.

   The American Presbyterian churches with a long tradition of Psalm-singing are invariably of direct descent from Scottish Presbyterians. Millar Patrick’s *Four Centuries of Scottish Psalmody* (London: Oxford University Press, 1949) was written to commemorate the tercentenary of the Scottish Psalter of 1650. Of special interest is his introductory essay “Why Metrical Psalmody?” and his description of the beginnings of Psalter publishing after the Reformation in Scotland. Millar says that the Psalter was the Scottish peoples’ “constant companion, their book of private devotion, as well as their manual of Church worship. In godly households it was the custom to sing through it in family worship.”

8. There are a number of books that survey the history of the Psalter in the life of the church. William Holladay’s *The Psalms Through Three Thousand Years: Prayerbook of a Cloud of Witnesses* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) serves as a delightful introduction to the Psalter. The first part deals with historical-critical issues and may be ignored by most lay readers. However the second section is most nutritious; it has the historical usage of the psalms at its forefront. The psalter’s place in both Jewish and Christian history is surveyed. For the
reader who thinks “we haven’t done it this way before,” Holladay expands our definition of “we” and instructs us in what has been done before.

_The Psalms in Human Life_, by Rowland Prothero and _The Psalms in History & Biography_, by John Ker (both reprinted by Solid Ground Christian Books). Both are engagingly written with inspiring anecdotes about how the Psalms inspired specific believers.

9. **The following books are concerned with learning to pray the Psalms for oneself:**

James Sire’s _Learning to Pray Through the Psalms_ (Downers Grove: IVP, 2005) and _Praying the Psalms of Jesus_ (Downers Grove: IVP, 2007) are full of practical advice for making the Psalms part of one’s spiritual life. Readers should especially see the five-step process in his 2005 work (p.13) for assimilating the psalmist’s thought and speech patterns into one’s mind and heart. A more lyrical approach is found in Eugene Peterson’s _Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer_ (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989).

McCrie and Calhoun, _Prayers on the Psalms: from the Scottish Psalter, 1595_ (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth. 2010) provides a Christian prayer drawn from each Psalm. The language is older but these prayers come from a time when believers steeped in the Psalms clung to them in the midst of much hardship.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s _Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible_ (Augsburg, 1974) is a true gem. In this small book Bonhoeffer provides stimulating suggestions for how we should use the Psalms to guide our praying.

10. **The following books are concerned with learning how to pray the Psalms on behalf of others:**

Hughes Old, _Leading in Prayer: A Workbook for Ministers_ (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995)


Peter Martyr Vermigli’s _Sacred Prayers: Drawn from the Psalms of David_ (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal, 1996) is the work of a previously neglected Reformation figure. Martyr’s sumptuous prayers are laid out in Psalter order, with each psalm inspiring one or more prayers. Their intent was formal in nature, intended to conclude public lectures. But those who lead in worship would do well to make use of them. This volume is supplemented with an essay by the translator “The Psalms and Reformation Piety.”

11. A good basic resource for understanding the Psalms is the notes on the Psalter in the ESV Study Bible (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008) written by Jack Collins. Collins writes with an understanding of the psalms as prayers and songs. Since he covers each psalm in a brief compact space, this focus makes his work a great starting place.

12. Many denominations around the globe have produced Psalters, either bound alone or with a larger book of worship. Below is a brief survey of North American and British official worship publications as well as contemporary works commissioned by denominations.

Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland, _The Baptist Church Hymnal: Chants and Anthems with Music_ (London: Psalms and Hymns Trust, 1900)

Episcopal Church, _The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church, According to the Use of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States: Together with the Psalter or Psalms of David_ (New York: Church Pension Fund, 1928)

Reformed Episcopal Church, _The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church: According to the Use of the Reformed Episcopal Church in North America : Together with the Psalter or Psalms of David_ (Philadelphia: Publication Society of the Reformed Episcopal Church, 2005)

Christopher Webber, _A New Metrical Psalter_ (New York: Church Hymnal, 1986)


Reformed Church in America and Gerrit T. Vander Lugt, *The Liturgy of the Reformed Church in America, Together with the Psalter; Selected and Arranged for Responsive Reading* (New York: Board of Education, 1968)


Coombs and the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America, *The Book of Psalms for Worship* (Pittsburgh: Crown & Covenant, 2009), see especially the introductory essays “Understanding the Psalms as Christian Worship” and “The Experience of Singing the Psalms”


*Rahab on the Psalter: A Poetical Version of Nearly the Whole Book of Psalms* (Nashville: Stevenson & Owen, agents for the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1855)


Cameron and Luther, *Reading the Psalms with Luther: The Psalter for Individual & Family Devotions* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2007)


*The Psalter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965)

*The Psalms of David in Metre* (London: Trinitarian Bible Society, 1998). This Psalter has all 150 psalms in Common Meter (see below for explanation of meter), making it very easy to sing every Psalm to a familiar tune.

A note on finding resources:

Most of the resources mentioned here will not be found in public domain (free) electronic formats. The reader will have to either purchase them or rely upon public and academic libraries. Worldcat.org is an excellent resource for determining if a library nearby might have a book. Google Books will often provide substantial previews of books that are still under copyright, as well as providing the full text of public domain materials. Hymnary.org has the full-text of some of the historic hymnals and psalters used by the various denominations. Of course, Amazon.com can assist in locating some of the more obscure titles for purchase. Crown & Covenant Publications offers for purchase a wide selection of metrical Psalters from Scotland, Australia, and North America. One of their websites, Psalter.org, provides a wonderful database of psalm texts and tunes with assistance for beginning psalm-singing.

This resource list is adapted from “Resources for the Recovery of the Psalms in the Life of the Church” by J. Michael Garrett in *Forgotten Songs: Reclaiming the Psalms for Christian Worship*. 
Guide to Using the Metrical Psalter

The Psalters listed in this booklet arrange the Psalms by meter so that they can be sung to familiar hymn tunes. With a basic understanding of meter you can match psalms to different tunes which you know and which fit the tone of the psalm.

Understanding Meter

What is meter? Meter is the number of beats, notes, and syllables in a line. Three basic meter structures commonly used are as follows:

- Short Meter (SM): 6.6.8.6.

Common meter can be demonstrated with Psalm 23:

The Lord’s my shepherd, I’ll not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leadeth me.
The quiet waters.

Other meters are also used. Most hymnals include an index of meters where every hymn is listed according to its meter. With a familiar hymn book and a Psalter, you are prepared to sing any psalm. You look up a specific psalm in the Psalter and see what meter is listed (typically four numbers separated by commas). A hymn tune will also be suggested. You can either use the hymn tune suggested or look up the meter in the metrical index of your hymnal and find a tune you know from your hymnal which will match that psalm. Then you are ready to sing!

Here are some well-known hymn tunes in some of the most frequently used meters:

**Common Meter:**
- Amazing Grace (New Britain)
- O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing (Azmon)
- Alas and Did My Savior Bleed? (Martyrdom)
- Our God, Our Help in Ages Past (St. Ann)
- I Sing the Mighty Power of God (Ellecomb)
- All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name (Coronation)
- repeat 3rd & 4th lines
- Am I a Soldier of the Cross? (Arlington & Artaxerxes)
- God Moves in a Mysterious Way (Dundee & French)
- Majestic Sweetness Sits Enthroned (Ortonville)
- Must Jesus Bear the Cross Alone? (Maitland)

**Long Meter:**
- Doxology (Old 100th)
- Just As I Am (Woodworth)
- Jesus Shall Reign (Duke Street)
- When I Survey the Wondrous Cross (Hamburg)
- Jesus Thou Joy of Loving Hearts (Quebec & Hesperus)

**Short Meter:**
- Not What My Hands Have Done (Leominster)
- Blest Be the Tie That Binds (Dennis)
- I Love Thy Kingdom Lord (St. Thomas)
- Crown Him with Many Crowns (Diademata)
- This is My Father’s World (Terra Beta)
Book Review

Forgotten Songs: Reclaiming the Psalms for Christian Worship
C. Richard Wells and Ray Van Neste, editors
256 pages, $19.99 paper

Children need to be taught what to say. Christians also need “speech-coaching” when it comes to addressing God. This collection of essays edited by Ray Van Neste and C. Richard Wells is calling churches back to the Psalter for Christian speech-coaching. Made possible by a grant from the Calvin Institute for Christian Worship, the essays in this volume are the product of a series of lectures and events dealing with the Psalms at Union University in 2008. The recent devastation on Union’s campus due to a tornado made the conference especially appropriate given the university’s shared trial.

This volume is inviting because of the range of topics addressed by its authors. All the chapters are accessible to readers, lay and clergy alike. At the same time, the chapters address matters across a wide spectrum of topics, ranging from more technical academic engagement (e.g., John Collins and Ray Van Neste on the significance of the Psalter in the Christian canon) to pastoral advice on how to incorporate the Psalter into Christian worship—without getting fired!—(James Grant’s chapter) to the Psalms in pastoral counseling (Richard Wells). In other words, the potential for the Psalms to shape Christian thinking, worship and life before God is packaged together for the reader in a holistic fashion. One can only hope the vision on offer in this volume has a broad hearing among churches whose liturgical instincts have displaced this ancient, Christian tradition.

Speaking of long-standing Christian practices, several matters in this volume arrested the attention of this reviewer. Van Neste’s pathos for this project was evident in an anecdote he shared in the introduction. He introduced the practice of Psalter singing to his family. The chapters by Blaising and Bond demonstrate how within the earliest history of the church down through the Reformation and beyond it was second nature for Christians in public and family worship to do so. Moreover, Van Neste concludes his chapter on the Psalter in the New Testament with this beautiful turn of phrase: “Jesus died with the psalms on his lips, and the early church was birthed making its first key decision by appeal to the psalms, preaching its first sermon from the psalms, and praying, the psalms in its first prayer meeting after Pentecost” (p. 50). The haunting question from the evidence amassed in the Christian canon and the church’s habitual practices is: how, indeed, did the psalms become “Forgotten Songs?” The pastoral energy emanating from this volume could prove an antidote to the problem for those willing to hear.

Justin Wainscott provides an example of a metered psalm for those unaccustomed to singing the Psalter. Pastors, students, and lay readers will find in J. Michael Garrett’s bibliographic essay a treasure trove of resources for those wishing to broaden and deepen their reading and study of the Psalter.

Corporate worship suffers from biblical and ecclesial malnutrition when the Psalter is relegated to the individual at the expense of the corporate. This volume can hold the hand of many local churches as they plot their way back to the Psalter for spiritual benefit of corporate worship.

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