



# SILENCIO

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## PRAYING THE PSALMS

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In many modern circles, the psalms of the Hebrew Scriptures are primarily studied for their theology and appreciated for their literary beauty. However, for millennia, the psalms had primarily been utilized as a prayer book. An early church father, Evagrius Pontus, commented, “It is a great thing to pray without distraction, but to chant the psalms without distraction is even greater.” Hundreds of years later John Calvin gave us a clue as to why this is so. “I have been wont to call this book, not inappropriately, an anatomy of all parts of the soul; for there is not an emotion of which anyone can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror.”

The true beauty of the psalms is that they express what we are often not able to put into words for ourselves. The intricacies of our hearts, which are often mysterious and frequently fearful to us, are ground which is not tread often enough. The psalms invite us to explore and express our hearts so that God can shape and form us in the context of relationship with himself.

Some psalms, like Psalm 42, express deep desire for God which draws out the deepest, truest parts of who we are. We might feel timid to pray such lofty prayers, or we might not even be in touch with these profound desires, but the psalms prod us in this direction. In addition, there are psalms which express views of God which are not correct per se, but they are reflective of our human condition. The imprecatory psalms, for example, often speak of desiring vengeance. Psalm 137:9 and the lament psalms frequently speak of seeing God as one who has forgotten us. Psalm 13 God is not threatened by our thoughts and perceptions which are not accurate. He desires that we come as we are. The psalms model this approach and beckon us to do the same.

Rather than simply seeing the psalms according to theological

categories — praise psalms, Messianic psalms or lament psalms — it can be helpful to see them based on what is happening in the soul of the one who is praying. Walter Brueggeman suggests that the psalms can be categorized by “season of the soul” represented by times of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation. Especially in times of disorientation, it can be difficult to pray. Psalms that reflect this season can carry us along.

The psalms gives us permission to be in process and transition. Far too often we can feel the pressure of needing to parrot good theology, but the psalms encourage us to express the real us — those parts of us which doubt; feel anger; experience confusion, disappointment or darkness.

Praying the psalms can draw out our hearts, give voice to particular seasons and give courage to live into these seasons, all the while growing in intimacy with him and entrusting our formation to him. Additionally, while we may not be in a particular season ourselves, we are nudged to identify with those who are in such a place.

*This is pure grace that God tells us how we can speak with him and have fellowship with him.*

— Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible*

*Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation.*

— Psalm 42:5

# OH, SAFE TO THE ROCK THAT IS HIGHER THAN I

A HYMN BY WILLIAM ORCUTT CUSHING, 1876

Oh, safe to the Rock that is higher than I,  
My soul in its conflicts and sorrows would fly,  
So sinful, so weary, Thine, Thine would I be,  
Thou blest Rock of Ages, I'm hiding in Thee.

*Refrain:*

Hiding in Thee, Hiding in Thee, Thous Blest Rock of Ages,  
I'm Hiding in Thee

In the calm of the noontide, in sorrow's lone hour,  
In times when temptation casts o'er me its power;  
In the tempests of life, on its wide, heaving sea,  
Thou blest Rock of Ages, I'm hiding in Thee.

How oft in the conflict, when pressed by the foe,  
I have fled to my Refuge and breathed out my woe,  
How often, when trials like sea-billows roll,  
Have I hidden in Thee, O Thou Rock of my soul.

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## SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

- Simply take a psalm and pray the words as they are.
- Select a psalm. Read through it and get a feel for it. Go back through and pray the psalm slowly, stopping at places to meditate and sit with the words.
- Paraphrase a psalm, putting the words into your own words with your own experiences as the descriptors.
- Pray through the psalms over a one month period. Pray through five psalms each day in whatever way you feel led.
- Memorize a few key psalms that you will be able to recite as prompted by the Spirit throughout the day.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- At the present time, which season is most representative of my soul?
- Which psalms might best reflect honest prayers during this season of my soul?
- Are there any psalms to which I am resistant? To what might this resistance relate?
- Are there any psalms which make my heart leap with desire, anticipation or longing? What might this be saying about the state of my soul?

### A Prayer of Illumination:

*Gracious Father, give me the courage to engage you honestly from my heart.  
Thank you for receiving me right where I am, that I might know you in the realities of my life. I entrust myself to you, believing that you will shape me and guide me according to your grace and holiness. Amen.*

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## SUGGESTED SPIRITUAL FORMATION RESOURCES

*Spirituality of the Psalms*, by Walter Brueggeman

*Soul Keeping*, by Howard Baker

*Psalms: Prayers of the Heart*, by Eugene Peterson



*Additional spiritual formation resources are available online at [www.spiritualformationstore.com](http://www.spiritualformationstore.com).*