

ANCIENT PSALMS FOR CONTEMPORARY PILGRIMS  
A PRAYER BOOK

*Dedicated  
with my deepest love and gratitude*

*to the women  
of the  
Thursday Morning Bible Study  
of  
River Oaks Baptist Church  
in Houston, Texas,  
whose open minds and open hearts  
challenge and stretch me,  
giving me courage and deep joy . . .*

*and to the monks  
of  
St. Benedict's Monastery,  
Snowmass, Colorado,  
whose faithful prayers and sacred spaces  
have instilled in me  
a deep awareness  
the reality  
of  
the ineffable Mystery of God  
in the  
ordinary things of life.*

*I am forever blessed by these fellow pilgrims on this sacred path.*

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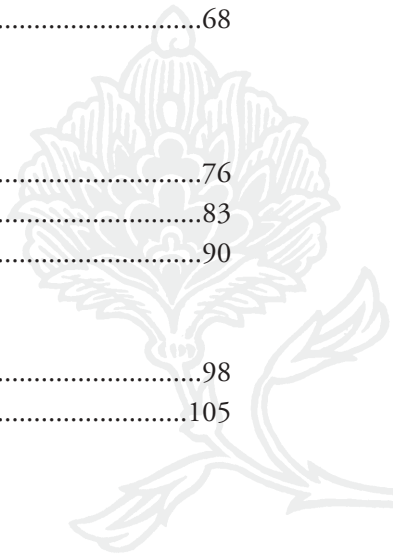
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# Foreword

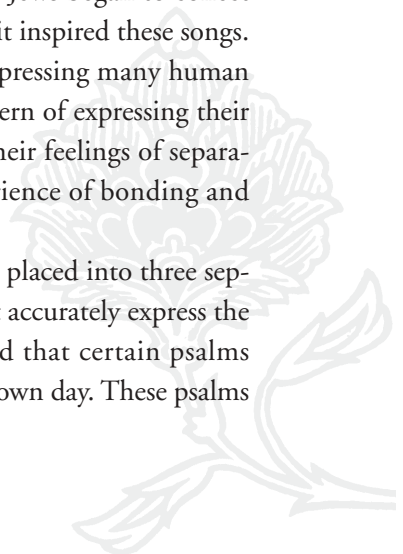
Have you ever been chased by a song? Have you ever, for no reason at all, found yourself suddenly humming a tune or singing a song?

Traditionally, American Indians had the custom of going alone on a four-day vision quest. Often, a vision for the rest of the Indian's life would be accompanied by a song. That song, called the "death song," gave courage in the face of difficulties. It would be sung as the Indian rode into battle.

Another interesting American-Indian custom was the "war dance." I always thought they were dancing to get angry enough to go into battle. Not so. The song and dance served to dispel any anger they held for the enemy and thus purified their intentions as they rode into battle.

When we look at the history of the book of Psalms, we find that in circa 1000 BC, when David was King, the Jews began to collect their folk songs. We now know the Holy Spirit inspired these songs. They were often written in praise of God, expressing many human emotions. The writers usually followed a pattern of expressing their oneness with their creator God, lamenting their feelings of separation and division, and ending with an experience of bonding and reunification with God and each other.

Around the year 500 BC, the psalms were placed into three separate volumes. Though our language does not accurately express the rhythm in which they were written, we find that certain psalms match the feelings and life experiences of our own day. These psalms become our own personal songs.



In this prayer book, *Ancient Psalms for Contemporary Pilgrims*, Jeanie Miley asks us to spend seven days praying one psalm, ending our prayers by contemplating questions that turn each psalm into our own song. Because of her unique gift, we can use this book to find psalms that lead us from darkness to light, from despair to hope, from doubt to faith, and from death to life. With a new vision, we can face life with courage and discover our own death song. And these songs begin to chase you.

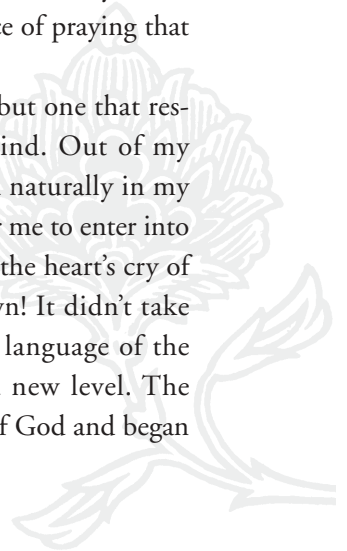
Father Keith Hosey  
Director of John 23 Center  
Hartford City, Indiana

# Preface

It was the middle of the night. I crept downstairs and found my Bible. Instinctively, I found Psalm 23, and while I didn't really need to read the words, I found comfort in seeing them on the well-marked page. How many times, through the years, had I returned to a practice I had learned as a young girl, finding solace and encouragement in the ancient affirmation of God's guidance!

The first time I attended an Ash Wednesday service, I had to move outside my own tradition. Instinctively, I knew that I needed the season of Lent. I needed that period of examination and confession, and so I joined my friends at Good Shepherd Episcopal Church in San Angelo, Texas, and prayed for the very first time the confession of David in Psalm 51, a psalm I had read literally hundreds of times. Suddenly, in the context of that Ash Wednesday service, the psalm had new meaning. I wrote the date in my Bible, and every time I read it, I revisit my first experience of praying that psalm of repentance.

"Praying the psalms" was a new idea for me, but one that resonated immediately with my own heart and mind. Out of my tradition, I knew how to speak to God easily and naturally in my own conversational forms. It was something else for me to enter into the words of another and make them mine, to let the heart's cry of another, albeit a biblical prayer, become my own! It didn't take long, however, to discover that the grandeur of language of the psalms lifted my own thoughts and words to a new level. The beauty of the ancient text transformed my image of God and began to heal and enlarge my own heart.



On a crisp spring morning, I walked down a mountain road from the retreat center and entered the chapel of St. Benedict's Monastery in Snowmass, Colorado. Sitting in the silence in the simple room, I watched the rancher-monks enter, one by one, their simple capes thrown over their jeans and flannel shirts. Each went to his own chair and waited to begin the orderly, ancient practice of praying the psalms.

At the sounding of the bell, the monks rose silently, and so did we, retreatants and guests seated on either side of the chapel.

"Oh, Lord, come to my assistance," they chanted. "God, make haste to help me." Once again, they prayed the old, old words, joining their hearts and minds and intentions with thousands of pray-ers who, through the centuries, had found peace and power and presence in the words of the psalms.

How is it that these psalms have such power and potency that people have returned to them again and again for sustenance and comfort, renewal and release? What is it about them that makes men and women around the world willing to repeat them day after day, year after year? And why is there a renewed interest in these old, old songs today?

In my childhood, I learned a few entire psalms from memory, and also a few verses from several psalms, snatched from first one and then another of the ancient prayers. It was in my adulthood, however, when I began to teach from the book of Psalms in a week-day Bible class, that I began to discover the enormity of their scope and power. During my last yearlong teaching of these prayers I began to realize that immersing oneself in these prayers would change one's image of God. Indeed, in my work as a spiritual director, I often guided directees to various psalms when I realized that where they were stuck was in their view of God.

Just as the psalms could change one's image of God, they could also transform one's own self-image, bringing a person's view into conformity with God's view. The book of Psalms helps directees confess their own sin and heal difficult memories. Praying the psalms brings one's view of the world into alignment with God's

view, and the relationship of people to the world is clarified in the psalms.

Within Psalms is found the full range of human emotion, and so praying the psalms provides a way for the pray-er to vent those strong emotions and heal afflicted feelings. The right psalms give strength and confidence; certain psalms give the courage to face hard situations or the boldness to trust God when life seems to indicate that God has vanished.

Praying the psalms must, as well, join us with the Spirit of Christ as he intercedes on our behalf. Surely, these are his prayers—the prayers he prayed as a young rabbi, the human Jesus, the incarnation of God.

Praying these psalms, we will be changed.



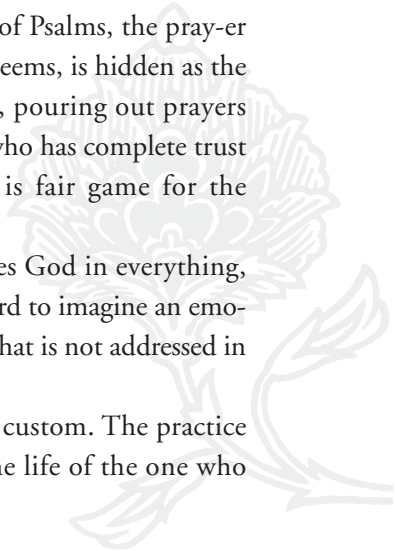
# How to Use This Book

In the book of Psalms, we encounter a relationship between the transcendent, holy God and a fallible, ordinary human being so radical that the communication between the Holy Other and the pray-er bears examination. Perhaps by entering deeply into the psalms through prayer, lingering over the lines that “choose you” and taking into your heart the phrases that touch your wounded places, you may experience some of the same intimacy with God that Jesus experienced as he drew apart to pray. It is not hard to imagine that the wrestling of Jesus in Gethsemane mirrored the psalms of anguish and absence.

If intimacy is the sharing of one’s failures and fears, and the revealing of feelings and longings of the heart with another, the book of Psalms reveals a revolutionary depth of communication and closeness with the Almighty, a closeness that could transform one’s life from the inside out. Indeed, in the book of Psalms, the pray-er lays her heart wide open to God; nothing, it seems, is hidden as the psalmist runs the gamut of human emotion, pouring out prayers with the freedom and spontaneity of a child who has complete trust in the One to whom he prays. Anything is fair game for the psalmist’s prayer life, and so it is for ours.

If a contemplative is one who experiences God in everything, the psalms reveal a true contemplative. It is hard to imagine an emotion of any person, ancient or contemporary, that is not addressed in the psalms.

Praying the psalms is an old and trusted custom. The practice and discipline must have great impact on the life of the one who



prays, for the custom has been sustained through centuries and around the world. The book of Psalms provides the language for extolling and praising God, for giving thanks, for wrestling with the deepest and most disturbing human emotions—rage, terror, guilt, and inadequacy. The prayers find the pray-er in the depths of despair, lamenting the seeming absence of God, and then soaring to the heights of adoration and love for the God who is filled with love and mercy. Surely, anything that has been around as long as these psalms must be worthy of our attention.

In *Ancient Psalms for Contemporary Pilgrims*, the psalms are used as seeds for contemplation. The meditations for each psalm are intended not to explore doctrine or dogma, as important as those are. Instead, the meditations are designed to lead you to an encounter of the Living God and an experience of intimacy with the Holy Other.

Each week, you are invited to pray one psalm for seven days. Each day's meditation contains a thought or a question, evoked by the psalm itself, that is intended to move you into the recesses of your own heart to wrestle with your questions and yearnings in the presence of God and in the intent of the psalm. The meditations provide a way for us to “lean into our own questions” in the presence of God.

By entering thoughtfully into each day's meditation, you may find your concept of God changing from that of a faraway, distant, punitive deity to a present and available, loving and merciful presence. In focusing on the concept of God revealed in the psalms, you are invited to give up your god-concepts that are limited and limiting and perhaps, harmful. With a healing of the God-concept, your concept of your own life, your own place within creation, the purpose and meaning of your life, and your relationship with the world will change.

By nurturing this intimate communication with God that is patterned in the psalms, you will be able to open the depths of your own emotions to the One from whom nothing is hidden. Indeed, through the psalms, you may find the freedom to wrestle with your hardest questions in prayer. By exploring the issues of trust and

obedience, gratitude and praise, forgiving and surrender in the language of the psalms and through the meditations, you will find a deep healing of emotion. Often, by praying the psalms, emotional knots of a lifetime are released and the prisons of one's own making are diminished or destroyed.

As in any spiritual practice, consistency and faithfulness to the practice have an increasingly significant impact on those who make themselves available for a breakthrough of God's grace. Choose a time and a place that works for you; return to this time and place each day. You may receive some gift of grace early in the process. Sometimes, it seems that God waits to see how serious we are about our practice.

To meditate on these Scriptures, turn the the words and the phrases over and over in your mind, as if you were chewing on them, determined to juice each one for every morsel of spiritual nourishment. The more you give to the process, the more the Psalms will give to you.

Each day, read the psalm for the week. Read it aloud and read it slowly. Read the psalm several times. Read it in more than one translation. You may want to memorize it. As you read, pay attention to the verses that resonate within your own heart. Sit in silence and let the words nestle in your mind and heart.

Read the day's meditation. Perhaps you will want to journal about the meditation or the question. Sit in silence for at least twenty minutes and let the One who draws near speak to you. Wait, as the psalmist said, on the Lord. God will speak.

If "nothing happens" in your meditation, carry the thoughts and the psalm with you throughout your day. Now and then, turn your mind toward the psalm. You will be surprised at the insight or understanding that will come to you, seemingly "out of the blue." When that happens, be sure to write it down!

Praying the psalms and meditating on them seems to be one of the ways God forms our faith. It is as if these ancient prayers are the potter's wheel, and the Holy Spirit, speaking the words of the psalms, is the Potter, shaping the willing and malleable life to the design for which he or she was made.

Expect to be changed by praying the psalms. Watch for amazing changes in the way you experience God and yourself and the world. You cannot determine the ways in which God will shape you, and you need not know how God will meet you or transform you; you only need to be willing to enter into the Mystery and consent to the work of the One who makes all things new.



*A Prayer Book*



# *The Invitation*

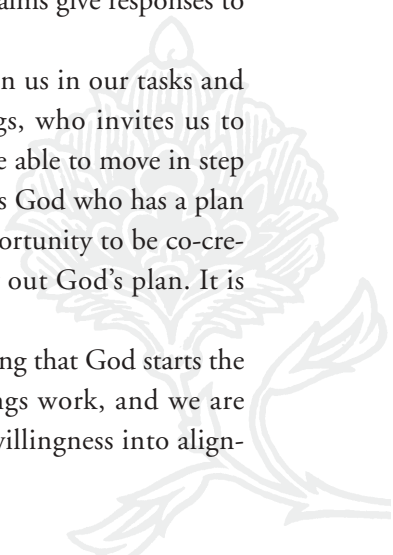
## **Come into His Presence**

In reading the psalms, it becomes clear that the dialogue between the one who prays and the sovereign Holy God is one of intimacy and familiarity. There is the sense that the one who prays does not invoke the presence of God so much as he or she becomes aware of it. The conversations of the psalms move naturally back and forth from God's words to the psalmist and the words of the psalmist back to God.

In contemplative praying, the pray-er comes to understand that all of creation is filled with the activity, purpose, and presence of God. We see the work of God in nature and in other people. We hear the voice of God in the voice of another person. We see God's handiwork in the middle of problems and crises. We experience God in worship and in acts of love. God is in all places, praying to his people, and God wants a response. The psalms give responses to the dynamic presence of God.

It is not we, then, who invite God to join us in our tasks and projects. It is God, the Creator of all things, who invites us to become so aware of his handiwork that we are able to move in step with God's activity and cooperate with it. It is God who has a plan for his handiwork; it is our privilege and opportunity to be co-creators and co-participants with God to carry out God's plan. It is God who initiates; we follow.

True humility begins with an understanding that God starts the conversation with us. God knows how things work, and we are responsible to bring mind, heart, will, and willingness into alignment with God's idea.



# Psalm 95

## DAY ONE

Around the world, and in many different languages, seekers after God gather in chapels and sitting rooms, monasteries and office spaces and pray this psalm, an ancient prayer that invites worshipers to stop for a moment and focus their attention on God.

For centuries, Psalm 95 has called people to prayer. Over time, this psalm has been the beginning point of worship, the announcement of a change of pace and a shift in focus. Those who have prayed this psalm for decades know that simply speaking of the first few words moves them into a deep state of prayer, centering them in the presence of God.

Nomadic people first prayed this psalm together. The words gathered them into a cohesive group from wherever they had been wandering and focused their attention on the Center of gravity that would ground them and guide them. This psalm invited early pilgrims to seek the one who had found them and to see with the eyes of their hearts the one whose eye was always on them.

Today, praying this psalm connects you with the Creator of the universe. It also connects you with fellow pilgrims around the world who take the time to stop and pray this old prayer anew. You do not pray alone, for you are part of the mystical Body of Christ.

*In the communion of saints in your life, what individuals have helped shape your faith? Who encourages you today? What heroes of the faith would you call into your circle?*

# Psalm 95

## DAY TWO

“Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord.”

Millions of pray-ers begin their day with this invitational psalm, joining their voices with others. Others pray alone in solitary cells or empty rooms.

Coming to prayer, each of us brings our many selves into the circle of God’s love. Each of us brings the adult that we are, the child that we used to be, the parent that we carry around inside us. This psalm invites all of our various parts, known and unknown to our awareness, to prayer.

When I come to this prayer and when I focus my attention on the presence of God, I bring my strong self and my weak self to God. The part of me that is noble and high-minded comes, but I also bring that part of me that is self-seeking and base. The truth-teller comes, as well as the liar. The lover in me comes gladly; I have to pull the hater and the bigot into the circle. I bring the part of myself that is the prodigal into the presence of God, and the prideful, arrogant, resentful elder brother sometimes comes, but often holds back. Into this circle, I bring the part of me that is Mary, eager to anoint the feet of my Lord with my tears and my gift. Integrity demands that I also bring the Judas in me, that part of me I wish I didn’t have, the part that will sell out. The beloved in me comes, like John, the beloved disciple, and I also bring the part of me that is Peter, my impulsive self, the part of me that denies Christ.

*Picture your many selves coming into the presence of God, gathered around an altar. Call each part by name. Ask your disowned parts to come as well.*

# Psalm 95

## DAY THREE

So, where have you been, that you think you have to work so hard to find God? In what far country of the mind and heart have you been wandering?

How long has it been, anyway, since you realized you had forgotten to come to God? Did you even know you had neglected to take your concerns to him? Have you been too busy to notice that you didn't give God the time of day until you suddenly discovered that your inner well had run dry?

The reality is that God never moves. We do. God never takes his eye off us and he never lets us slip out of awareness, but we can go for days without remembering that there is nowhere we can go where God is not. We are never separated from God; only our perception makes us think that God is absent.

And so it is that we humans need a practice, a spiritual discipline, that provides the opportunity for us to turn our attention away from our own self-seeking, our own necessary tasks and troubles, our duties and responsibilities, important as they are, and focus our attention on the Source of life. Regularly and consistently, we need the routine of coming before God and singing for joy. We need to find our way back to the presence that never moves. We need to come before God intentionally and purposefully for our own spiritual nourishment as much as we need to eat and breathe and rest.

*If spiritual disciplines are the ways and means of grace, what are you doing to keep your soul nourished?*