

The Adult
Faith Formation
Library



The SPIRITUALITY
of the PSALMS
Prayers for All Times



MARGARET NUTTING RALPH

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The Adult Faith Formation Library



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INTRODUCTION

THE BOOK OF PSALMS IS UNIQUE AMONG BIBLICAL BOOKS BECAUSE THE PSALMS ARE PRAYERS SUNG TO GOD, NOT NARRATIVES TOLD ABOUT GOD. Therefore, the psalms reveal, at the deepest possible level, the Israelites' personal and communal relationship with God under every conceivable circumstance: times of intimacy and times of estrangement, times of health and times of sickness, times of victory and times of defeat, times when thanks and praise are overflowing and times when despair and accusations are bursting forth. As we will see, when we read, study, and pray the psalms, we not only find words for our deepest spiritual experiences, but we find ourselves being comforted, challenged, and even formed by the prayers of our ancestors in the faith. How is it that we have inherited such a treasure?

Our present Book of Psalms consists of songs collected for use in the second Temple. Israel's first Temple had been planned by King David (1000 BC), and was built by his son, King Solomon. However, that Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians. When the Babylonians conquered the Israelites, they forced all the upper-class citizens to go into exile in Babylon, where they remained from 587 BC to 537 BC. The

exile ended because Cyrus, who was a Persian, conquered the Babylonians and allowed the Israelites to return home.

When the Israelites returned home, they rebuilt their Temple. Because they were living under Persian rule, the Israelites' community leaders were no longer kings but priests, who centered the people's attention on God's word and God's worship. The Book of Psalms was collected during this Second Temple period when the Israelites' very identity centered on their worship in the Temple.

In their collection of songs for worship, the priests included *golden oldies* from Israel's past, remembering God's covenant promises to David and to the nation, as well as songs that reflected more recent experiences. Therefore, the psalms give us a synthesis of the Old Testament narrative from creation to the time of the second Temple.

The priests' final arrangement of the Book of Psalms is divided into five sections to reflect the five books of the Torah. Each section ends with a *doxology*, that is, a prayer of praise to God. The doxologies that divide the books appear at verses 41:13; 72:18–19; 89:52; and 106:48. The collection ends with a grand crescendo of praise, the whole of Psalm 150.

Within this rich collection are songs that are distinguished by their literary form (laments, hymns, psalms of thanksgiving) and songs that are distinguished by their content (wisdom psalms, royal psalms, psalms of trust, psalms of Zion, songs of ascent, rites of entrance into the Temple, processional psalms, prophetic psalms, and enthronement psalms).

In a book entitled *The Spirituality of the Psalms*, why bother discussing the literary form or the original setting of a psalm? After all, we want to hear the psalms as living words that shape us, mold us, and help us become the people God is calling us

to be. A book on the *spirituality* of the psalms should focus our attention on our relationship with God. It should nourish our personal prayer lives and inspire and motivate us to live out the gospel more fully.

Nevertheless, knowledge of form and setting is important because, as the Catholic Church teaches us, our understanding of Scripture as a living word must be rooted in a *contextualist* understanding of the text (see *Dei Verbum: the Constitution on Divine Revelation*, par. 12). We must seek to understand what the inspired author intended to say by considering three contexts: the literary form that the inspired author has used, the shared beliefs of the author and audience given their time in history, and the fact that Scripture models a two-thousand-year process of coming to knowledge about the ramifications of the fact that God is love.

In the following chapters, we will explore the psalms not only in their original contexts but, even more importantly, in the context of our own relationships with God, both communal and personal. As an aid to this spiritual reflection, each chapter begins with a Lectionary passage that puts a psalm in a present-day communal worship setting. Each chapter ends with further reflection questions that aid the reader to integrate the psalms into his or her personal prayer life. Through prayer, study, personal reflection, and group discussion, we will discover that the living words of the psalms are just as true when we pray them as they were when they were raised in prayer during worship in the second Temple.

ONE



INITIAL REFLECTION: *On Good Friday, we, the church, pray verses from a lament: “In you, O Lord, I take refuge;/let me never be put to shame./ In your justice rescue me./Into your hands, I commend my spirit;/You will redeem me, O Lord, O faithful God” (Ps 31:2, 6). Why is the psalmist’s prayer appropriate in our Good Friday worship setting? Why is it appropriate on each of our lips? As you read this chapter on laments, consider in what other settings, both communal and personal, we might pray the “Laments.”*

LAMENTS

“MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?” Christians are very familiar with this cry of agony because, in both Mark and Matthew’s gospels, these are Jesus’ last words as he dies on the cross. However, many of us do not realize that Mark and Matthew are picturing Jesus praying Psalm 22, a *lament*. To understand the full significance of Jesus’ prayer we must know a few things about laments. As we grow in our understanding of laments and read some of the many laments in the Book of Psalms, we will become aware that we too are often praying, humming, even singing laments that are familiar to us because they remain integral to our worship today.

Laments compose about one-third of the Book of Psalms.¹

1 Individual laments include Psalms 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 13, 14, 17, 22, 25, 26, 27, 28, 31, 35, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 61, 64, 69, 70, 71, 77, 86, 88, 89, 102, 109, 120, 130, 139, 141, 142, and 143. Community laments include Psalms 12, 44, 58, 60, 74, 79, 80, 83, 85, 90, 94, 123, 126, 129, and 137.

Some laments, like Psalm 22, appear to be the prayer of an individual person. Other laments, like Psalm 60, which begins, “O God, you have rejected us,/broken our defenses...” (Ps 60:1), are the prayer of a whole community. Whether the lament is individual or communal, because it was the prayer of all the people in the second Temple, it functioned as a community lament.

Individual prayers that become community prayers because they are said in community settings are still part of worship today. In the past, when saying the Creed in the Catholic Church, the congregation said, “We believe...” As I write this (2014), the congregation says, “I believe...” However, since each of us is saying these words in a community setting, the “I” becomes a “we.” Each of us is expressing—*we* are expressing—the faith of a people, not just our own individual beliefs. Just so, individual laments express more than the prayer life of one person, and even more than the prayer life of the Israelites gathered for worship in the second Temple. Individual laments, as well as community laments, have come to express the prayer life of the church because the Book of Psalms has become part of the biblical canon and part of the liturgy of the church.

The literary form lament

In order to better understand laments, it is very helpful to be acquainted with the characteristics of this kind of writing, with the literary form *lament*. A lament includes the following components:

- A call to God
- A complaint
- An expression of trust

- A petition
- An explicit or implicit word of assurance by the priest
(Sometimes the words of assurance appear in the psalm.
Most often, they do not.)
- A promise to praise God or an expression of praise to God

Not every lament includes all of these components or has them in the order listed here. In addition, some laments repeat certain elements. Nevertheless, it is important to be aware of these components, because that knowledge helps us understand that a cry of agony is not an unanswered cry of agony. It is an open and honest expression of pain but in the context of faith.

Psalm 3, the first lament in the Book of Psalms, illustrates this form. The first line of the psalm is a call to God: “O LORD, how many are my foes!” (Ps 3:1a).

The next three lines are the complaint:

Many are rising against me;
many are saying to me,
“There is no help for you in God.” (*Psalm 3:1b–2*)

However, this is not the lament of a person who has no experience of God. Rather, the psalmist knows and trusts God. God has protected him in the past, and the psalmist trusts that God will protect him in his present difficulties:

But you, O LORD, are a shield around me,
my glory, and the one who lifts up my head.
I cry aloud to the LORD,
and he answers me from his holy hill.

I lie down and sleep;
I wake again, for the LORD sustains me.
I am not afraid of ten thousands of people
who have set themselves against me all around. (*Psalm 3:3-6*)

Following this expression of trust is the petition:

Rise up, O LORD!
Deliver me, O my God!
For you strike all my enemies on the cheek;
you break the teeth of the wicked. (*Psalm 3:7*)

The words of assurance spoken by the priest do not appear in this lament, but the sudden change of tone informs us that those words of assurance have been spoken. The psalmist ends not with a complaint or with a petition but with praise:

Deliverance belongs to the LORD;
may your blessing be on your people! (*Psalm 3:8*)

We see, then, that laments are part and parcel of an intimate relationship with God. True, the psalmist is in present difficulty, sometimes terrible difficulty, and he honestly acknowledges his present feelings. As we have already noted, Psalm 22 expresses this anguished acknowledgment of present suffering in its initial call to God and complaint:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me, from the words
of my groaning?
O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;

And by night, but find no rest. (*Psalm 22:1-2*)

But this is just the beginning of the prayer, not the end. Because the psalmist knows of God's saving acts on behalf of the Israelites in the past, and because of the loving relationship that he himself has had with God, he trusts that God will save him in the present:

In you our ancestors trusted;
 they trusted and you delivered them.
 To you they cried, and were saved;
 in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.

Yet it was you who took me from the womb;
 you kept me safe on my mother's breast.
 On you I was cast from my birth,
 and since my mother bore me
 you have been my God. (*Psalm 22:4-5, 9-10*)

After additional complaints and expressions of trust, the psalmist moves on to his petition:

But you, O LORD, do not be far away!
 O my help, come quickly to my aid!
 Deliver my soul from the sword,
 my life from the power of the dog!
 Save me from the mouth of the lion! (*Psalm 22:19-21a*)

What is truly remarkable about this beautiful psalm is the extended praise that overflows from the psalmist's heart. Verses twenty-two to thirty-one are all praise:

From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me.
I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters;
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.
You who fear the LORD, praise him!
All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him;
stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!
For he did not despise or abhor
the affliction of the afflicted;
he did not hide his face from me,
but heard when I cried to him. (*Psalm 22:21b-24*)

The psalmist's call to praise gets more and more expansive so that he includes not just himself, not just all of Israel, but all the ends of the earth, all nations, all future generations. The whole world will praise God's saving actions:

All the ends of the earth shall remember
and turn to the LORD;
and all the families of the nations
shall worship before him.
For dominion belongs to the LORD,
and he rules over the nations.
To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down;
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,
and I shall live for him.
Posterity will serve him;
future generations will be told about the LORD,
and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,
saying that he has done it.
(*Psalm 22:27-31*)

We see, then, that by picturing Jesus saying Psalm 22 as he dies, Mark and Matthew are not only expressing Jesus' agony, but they are teaching the significance of the event that is taking place. Through his passion, death, and resurrection, Jesus redeemed the whole world. All the ends of the earth have come to know God's saving power through Jesus. Future generations, including ours, have heard and proclaimed "his deliverance." No wonder the lament becomes a song of praise. God's people, worshipping in the second Temple, and today, know of God's saving power.

The context of covenant love

How could a person who is suffering so much that he feels absolutely abandoned by God nevertheless turn to God and experience such saving love? Such faith is rooted in the Israelites' understanding of covenant love. Recollections of God's fidelity to Israel in the past become part of the expressions of trust in laments.

Psalm 44 begins with a long recollection of God leading God's people to the promised land and making it possible for them to settle there:

We have heard with our ears, O God,
our ancestors have told us,
what deeds you performed in their days,
in the days of old:
you with your own hand drove out the nations,
but them you planted;
you afflicted the peoples,
but them you set free;

for not by their own sword did they win the land,
nor did their own arm give them victory;
but your right hand, and your arm,
and the light of your countenance,
for you delighted in them. (*Psalm 44:1-3*)

Despite the fact that the nation has now suffered defeat, the people have not forgotten their God, God's promise of fidelity to them, or their promise of fidelity to God:

All this has come upon us,
yet we have not forgotten you,
or been false to your covenant.
Our heart has not turned back,
nor have our steps departed from your way.
(*Psalm 44:17-18*)

With hope grounded in covenant love, the people call on God:

Rise up, come to our help.
Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love. (*Psalm 44:26*)

It is not just God's covenant promise of land made to Abraham that the psalmists remember. They also recall God's covenant promises to David. The author of Psalm 89 proclaims:

I will sing of your steadfast love, O LORD, forever;
with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness
to all generations.
I declare that your steadfast love is established forever;
your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens.

You said, “I have made a covenant with my chosen one,
I have sworn to my servant David:
‘I will establish your descendants forever,
and build your throne for all generations.’” (*Psalms 89:1–4*)

Despite God’s promise and God’s fidelity, the king, David’s descendant and so the inheritor of the promise, was defeated. The psalmist, in his suffering and agony, accuses God:

But now you have spurned and rejected him;
you are full of wrath against your anointed.
You have renounced the covenant with your servant;
you have defiled his crown in the dust.
You have broken through all his walls;
you have laid his strongholds in ruins. (*Psalms 89:38–40*)

Yet even with this challenge to his faith and his hope, the psalmist ends his plea with praise:

Blessed be the LORD forever.
Amen and Amen. (*Psalms 89:52*)

Covenant love is so strong that it enables a person to remain faithful to God, to trust God, and to hope in God even when that person is suffering greatly and steeped in mystery. The psalmist cannot help but cry out *Why is this happening to us?* At the same time, he must also cry out, “Blessed be the LORD forever. Amen and Amen.”

We too live in a relationship of covenant love with God. May we, like the psalmist, remember God’s love and God’s fidelity during difficult times. May we too remain full of

hope and faith when confronted with the mystery of suffering.

Characteristics of Hebrew poetry

Before we explore further the spirituality of the laments, it will be helpful to be acquainted with the characteristics of Hebrew poetry. After all, the psalms are poems set to music. An understanding of form will enhance our ability to understand what the author intends to say—not only in laments but in all of the psalms.

In English poetry, the difference between poetry and prose is often the metrics of a line: poetic lines will have an equal number of syllables and the accents will fall in the same places. In addition, the ends of lines will often rhyme. In Hebrew poetry, the difference between poetry and prose is the juxtaposition of units of thought to each other. This poetic device is called *parallelism*.

The Israelites used three kinds of parallelism: *synonymous parallelism*, in which the second line repeats the thought of the first line but in different words; *antithetic parallelism*, in which the second line contrasts with the thought of the first line by stating the opposite; and *synthetic parallelism*, in which the second line expands on the thought of the previous line. We have seen constant examples of these kinds of parallelism in each of the laments that we have already read.

For example, in the opening three verses of Psalm 44 all three types of parallelism are used. The psalm begins with two examples of synonymous parallelism. Each second line repeats the thought of the first line:

We have heard with our ears, O God,
our ancestors have told us
what deeds you performed in their days,
in the days of old: (*Psalms 44:1*)

The second verse of the psalm gives us two examples of antithetic parallelism. Each second line contrasts with the first line by stating the opposite:

you with your own hand drove out the nations,
but them you planted;
you afflicted the peoples,
but them you set free. (*Psalms 44:2*)

The third verse returns to synonymous parallelism in the first and second lines, uses antithetic parallelism with the second and third lines, and closes with synthetic parallelism, expanding on the thought of the previous lines in the last two lines:

for not by their own sword did they win the land,
nor did their own arm give them victory;
but by your right hand and your arm,
and the light of your countenance,
for you delighted in them. (*Psalms 44:3*)

As we read the psalms and notice the use of parallelism, we will gain not only a deeper understanding of what the author is praying, but a renewed appreciation for the beauty of the language chosen to express a wide, wide range of human emotions.

The authors of the laments are overcome by enemies; they are suffering shame; they are in terror; they are in grief; they are physically ill; they are suffering from what we would call depression; they have been wrongly accused; they are doubting God; they are poor and needy; they are lonely. The laments give voice to nearly every kind of human suffering. They express the deepest of feelings experienced in nearly every circumstance of life but always in the context of covenant love. That is why they have been an aid to the spiritual development of every generation, including our own.

A growth in understanding

The laments are certainly a living word for us, helping us to pray honestly and give expression to our deepest feelings. They have been for every generation. That is why laments have become part of the prayer of the church and part of the prayer of individual believers since the time of the second Temple. At the same time, it is important that our understanding of the laments as living words be rooted in a contextualist understanding. In addition to considering such things as literary form and poetic devices, we must consider the beliefs of the time of the author and audience as well as the fact that Scripture developed slowly over a two-thousand-year time period. Over those many centuries the Israelites grew in their understanding of God and God's love.

A consideration of context becomes absolutely essential when we read some of the laments. For instance, Christians would undoubtedly feel jarred, perhaps even shocked, to hear how some psalmists pray that God will absolutely destroy their enemies. The author of Psalm 35 prays:

Let them be put to shame and dishonor
who seek after my life.

Let them be turned back and confounded
who devise evil against me.

Let them be like chaff before the wind,
with the angel of the LORD driving them on.

Let their way be dark and slippery,
with the angel of the LORD pursuing them. (*Psalm 35:4–6*)

The author of Psalm 52, as he prays, rails against the mighty who trust in wealth:

But God will break you down forever;
he will snatch and tear you from your tent;
he will uproot you from the land of the living.

The righteous will see, and fear,
and will laugh at the evildoer, saying,

“See the one who would not take
refuge in God,
but trusted in abundant riches,
and sought refuge in wealth!” (*Psalm 52:5–7*)

The most vitriolic expression of disdain for one’s opponents appears in Psalm 58:

O God, break the teeth in their mouths;
tear out the fangs of the young lions, O LORD!

Let them vanish like water that runs away;
like grass let them be trodden down and wither.

Let them be like the snail that dissolves into slime;
like the untimely birth that never sees the sun. (*Psalm 58:6–8*)

The reason these laments cause at least discomfort, and perhaps even shock, for Christian readers is that we have been taught to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us. In Matthew's gospel, during his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "You have heard it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous" (Matt 5:43–45). So, when we read words such as appear in Psalm 139, we cannot join in prayer with the psalmist:

O that you would kill the wicked, O God,
and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me—
those who speak of you maliciously,
and lift themselves up against you for evil!
Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD?
And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?
I hate them with perfect hatred;
I count them my enemies. (*Psalm 139:19–22*)

We believe that we are not to hate our enemies and pray for their destruction; we are to love our enemies and pray for their well-being. What happened between the time of the psalmists, who believed God hated their enemies so they should hate their enemies too, and the time of Jesus, who taught that we are to love our enemies?

God loves other nations

The psalms that express hate for enemies date to a time before

the Babylonian exile. It was during and after the exile that the Israelites began to understand that while they are God's chosen people and that God loves them, God also loves other nations, even their enemies. This growth in understanding is clearly expressed by Second Isaiah, the prophet to the exiles (Is 40—55), and by the author of Jonah, who wrote during or after the exile (587–537 BC).

Second Isaiah offered the exiles hope in their time of suffering. The hope he offered was that God was accomplishing something wonderful and new through them. Through their suffering God would bring all nations to know the Israelites' God. Second Isaiah says:

I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness,
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
I have given you as a covenant to the people,
a light to the nations,
to open the eyes that are blind... (*Is 42:6–7*)

In addition, the Babylonian exile ended because Cyrus, a Persian, conquered the Babylonians and allowed the Israelites to return home. If God used a non-Israelite, a Persian, to save God's people, God must love that Persian. Second Isaiah goes so far as to call Cyrus one of God's anointed, that is, a messiah.

Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus,
whose right hand I have grasped...
I arm you, though you do not know me,
so that they may know, from the rising of the sun
and from the west, that there is no one besides me;
I am the LORD, and there is no other. (*Is 45:1, 5b–6*)

Another inspired author from the same time period also taught the Israelites that God loves other nations, even their enemies. He does this by telling the story of Jonah, whom God called to preach to the Ninevites. Jonah resisted because Nineveh was the enemy. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, and Assyria was the nation that had conquered the ten northern tribes. Jonah finally obeys and preaches to the Ninevites. When the Ninevites convert, Jonah is furious. He wanted God to destroy Nineveh, and now God isn't going to do it. The story is teaching, through humor, that while God does love Israel, God also loves other nations, even Israel's enemies.

Those psalms in which the author knows that God loves the Israelites, but presumes that the Israelites' enemies are also God's enemies and that God doesn't love them, date to before the Israelites came to this deeper understanding of the ramifications of the fact that God is love. Therefore, it is all-important that we be contextualists when we read these earlier laments. Otherwise, we might mistakenly think that we have license to hate our enemies. We do not. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we are required to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us.

Life after death

A second topic about which it is important for us to be contextualists when we read the laments is the topic of life after death. The Bible models a growth process in coming to an understanding that life does not end with life on earth. The Israelites first began to consider the possibility that there is life after death about two hundred years before Jesus. The Jews of Jesus' time disagreed on whether or not there was life

after death: the Sadducees did not believe in life after death; the Pharisees did (see Acts 23:8).

The laments reflect the beliefs of the time in which they were written. The place of the dead was thought to be Sheol. Sheol was simply a pit, a place of no life. A person could not praise God from Sheol. This belief is clearly expressed in Psalm 88:

For my soul is full of troubles,
and my life draws near to Sheol.
I am counted among those who go down to the Pit;
I am like those who have no help,
like those forsaken among the dead,
like the slain that lie in the grave,
like those whom you remember no more,
for they are cut off from your hand. (*Psalm 88:3-5*)

The psalmist believes that once he is in Sheol, God will no longer hear his cry, and he will no longer be able to praise God:

Do you work wonders for the dead?
Do the shades rise up to praise you?
Is your steadfast love declared in the grave...
But I, O LORD, cry out to you;
in the morning my prayer comes before you.
(*Psalm 88:10-11, 13*)

When the psalmist asked, “Do you work wonders for the dead?/Do the shades rise up to praise you?/Is your steadfast love declared in the grave?” he, his generation, and all generations before him presumed that the answers were

no. However, some two hundred years before Christ, the Israelites began to consider the possibility that the answers were yes. Then, one of their own, Jesus Christ, died and rose from the dead. Jesus' disciples knew this because they experienced Christ's presence after his death on the cross.

Ever since, core to Christianity has been the belief that Jesus rose from the dead, and so will we. When we read Psalm 88, our answers to the psalmist's rhetorical questions are yes, yes, yes! God does work wonders for those who have died, they do rise up and praise God, and they do declare God's steadfast love.

Penitential Psalms

We all long to be in right relationship with God and with each other. This longing for intimacy with God is beautifully expressed in one of the biblical laments:

As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God. (*Psalm 42:1–2a*)

At the same time, we know that we are sinners. The fruit of sin is broken relationships. We learn this terrible ramification of sin in the second story in the Book of Genesis (Gen 2:4—3:24), the story of Adam and Eve in the garden. As the story begins, the man and woman are in right relationship with God and with each other. However, after they do what they know is wrong, they hide from God and blame others rather than take responsibility for their actions and ask for forgiveness.

The laments in the Book of Psalms offer us an entirely

different model in what are called the *penitential* psalms (Ps 6, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143). Here we learn that our response to sin must be trust in God's steadfast love, confession, and repentance. Only through acknowledging our sins and asking for forgiveness can we return to our right relationship with God.

One of the most beautiful penitential psalms is attributed to David.² While David was a charismatic leader, he was also a sinner. He committed adultery with Bathsheba, and when Bathsheba was pregnant with his child he had her husband killed in battle. The heartfelt words of contrition in Psalm 51 are certainly appropriate on David's lips. At the same time, they are appropriate on the lips of all of us because we, too, have sinned. As is usual in a lament, the psalmist begins with a cry to God:

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin. (*Psalm 51:1-2*)

Notice that the psalmist has complete faith that God is loving and faithful. The broken relationship rests entirely on the sinful behavior of the psalmist. He is confident that, while he

2 The Book of Psalms includes superscriptions (notes above individual psalms) that attribute psalms to particular people, like King David, or to guilds of Temple singers, like Korah and Asaph. The superscriptions also give instructions about musical accompaniment. The extent to which these superscriptions were inherited or added to the psalms during the Second Temple period is debated.

has failed to love God, God has not failed to love him. The psalmist does not try to deny his culpability:

For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me. (*Psalm 51:3*)

The psalmist also realizes that he must convert: he must change his behavior in the future, and he needs God's grace to do that:

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit. (*Psalm 51:10–12*)

The psalmist realizes that a right relationship with God is not a matter of externals but a matter of internals. Contrition is absolutely necessary for his right relationship with God to be restored:

For you have no delight in sacrifice;
if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.
The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.
(*Psalm 51:16–17*)

Once more we see that the context for laments is covenant love. God has entered into a relationship of mutual love with God's people, and God cannot be unfaithful to God's

promises. Therefore, no matter what a person is suffering, that person still has abundant reason to call out to God in distress and abundant reason to hope. God saves. That is why laments end with praise. “Blessed be the LORD forever./Amen and Amen” (Ps 89:52).

QUESTIONS *for* FURTHER REFLECTION

Why do you think individual laments might be part of community worship? What role does the community have?

Why is it important to pray honestly, even when you feel abandoned and disillusioned? Do you find that to be a challenge? Explain your response.

Read through Psalm 31 or a lament of your choice. What understandings or beliefs about God do you see expressed in this lament?

If you were to write an individual or community lament, following the form, what would you write?

What do the penitential psalms teach us about how to approach God when we have sinned? Does the sacrament of reconciliation teach us the same insights? Explain your response.