

# Scripture **from** Scratch

A popular guide to understanding the Bible

## The **WOW** and the **WOE** of the Psalms



Illustrations by June Pfaff Daley

St. Paul certainly speaks to and for all of us when he wrote to the Romans and said, “We do not know how to pray as we ought” (Romans 8:26). But we keep trying to find a better way to pray. Proof of that came to me when I browsed through the section entitled “Prayer” in St. John’s University Bookstore here at Collegeville, Minnesota. I was amazed and amused at the creative titles I encountered in my short survey of those shelves.

Here are a few samples of fascinating titles of contemporary prayer **by Daniel Durken, O.S.B.** books: *Meditations for Mothers of Toddlers*; *Daily Meditations for Busy Dads*; *Meditations for Women Who Do Too Much*; *The Complete Guide to Prayer-Walking*; *Prayers at 3 a.m.*; *A Doubter’s Prayer Book*; *Garden Prayers*. And last but not least (my favorite!), *Prayers for Puppies, Aging Autos and Sleepless Nights—Prayers for the Daily Grind*.

With such a torrent of titles anyone should be able to find something to help the prayer process.

But let’s go back to St. Paul and see

what he suggests. It comes as no surprise that he does not recommend our going shopping at the Bambino Bookstore in the Roman Forum. His advice is simple and direct: Go to the Spirit!

"The Spirit comes to the aid of our weakness;...the Spirit itself intercedes with inexpressible groanings...because it intercedes for the holy ones according to God's will" (Romans 8:26-27).

## The Holy Spirit's Book of Prayer

The Spirit has authored a prayer book that has stood the test of time. The above titles will eventually be out of stock, out of print and out of circulation. But the Spirit's prayer book has been around for some 3,000 years and has sold some 150 billion copies since it went into mass production with the advent of Gutenberg's printing press in 1453. The title is a bit prosaic. It's simply called "The Book of Psalms."

Not only have these prayers stood the test of time, they have also stood the test of people who have made them their favorites. What a cosmic chorus they comprise! In the summer of 1995, when Billy Graham came to the Metrodome in Minneapolis for his Crusade for Christ, his musical accompaniment was a choir of 4,000 singers. But that is a mere kindergarten glee club compared to the horde that the author of the Book of Revelation describes: "I had a vision of a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation, race, people, and tongue. They stood before the throne and before the Lamb, wearing white robes and holding palm branches in their hands" (Revelation 7:9).

Palms and psalms—palms in their hands and psalms in their hearts and on their lips! Handel's *Hallelujah* chorus can't hold a note to that combination.

I would like to offer a couple of simple clues and cues for understanding, appreciating and using the psalms.



## Praying With Scripture

- During the next month, make the Responsorial Psalm from Mass the focus of a daily time of prayer and reflection. A missalette, daily missal or lectionary will list the psalm reference for each day. You might want to consult your parish or local religious book store for these resources.

## O for a Perfect Prayer

The first clue is the tiny word that begins so many of the psalms, namely, "O." According to the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, 72 of 150 psalms begin with "O" or have this word in the first line. Furthermore, over 600 "O's" are liberally sprinkled throughout the Book of Psalms.

There are a lot of ways to say "O." Try it! The psalms concentrate on two kinds of "O's"—the "O" of awe and the "O" of agony. The awe "O" belongs to the "glad psalms" that express wonder, delight, surprise, amazement, even ecstasy. Psalm 8 begins, "O Lord, our God, how majestic is thy name in all the earth!" This is the "O" of *wow*!

The "O" of agony belongs to the "sad psalms" that express anguish, anger, grief, sorrow, pain, disappointment, despair, depression. We add our "O" to those "inexpressible groanings" of the Spirit mentioned above, groanings that prove that our God is just as grieved as we are over the violence, the pain, the agony that our free wills allow us to inflict on this o-so-fragile world. This is the "O" of *woe*! The two poles of the psalms are *wow* and *woe*,

and we live our lives alternating those "O's."

Because the psalms are sung prayer and prayed song, I like to think of them as having been written not in the key of G or D or B-flat but in the key of "O." That is "O" as in

open. The psalms first of all invite us to pray with open lips and mouth, as in "O Lord, open thou my lips, and my mouth shall show forth thy praise" (Psalm 51:15).

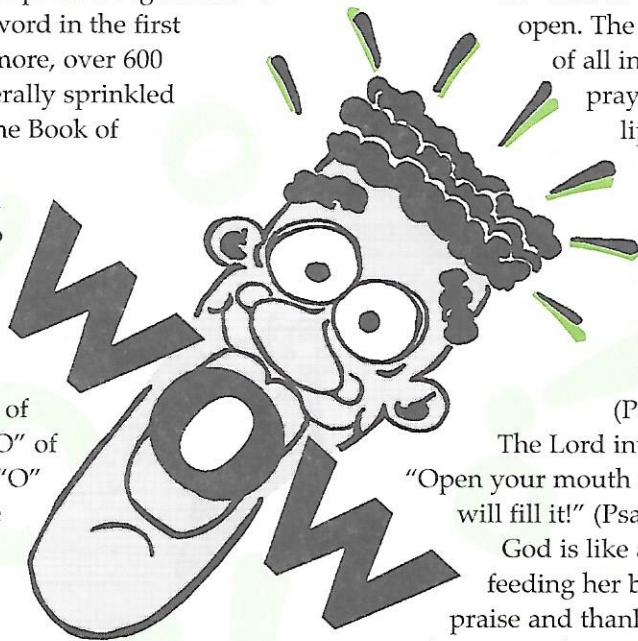
The Lord invites us:

"Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it!" (Psalm 81:10).

God is like a mama bird feeding her babies—with praise and thanksgiving.

The psalms then urge us to pray with open ears as in "O that today you would hearken to his voice!" (Psalm 95:7), or "Hear, O my people, while I admonish you!" (Psalm 81:8). Next on the open market are our open eyes, as in "Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law" (Psalm 119:18). From there we move to the open heart: "Harden not your hearts..." (Psalm 95:8). And finally we come to open hands: "I stretch out my hands to thee" (Psalm 143:6), an ancient prayer posture, and "Clap your hands, all peoples!" (Psalm 47:1), a grand gesture of praise.

Even though Jesus tells us, "When you pray, go to your inner room and



close the door" (Matthew 6:6), the psalms invite us to hang up a sign that says we are open for doing business with God and with others.

## Exclaiming God's Praise

**T**he second clue for praying the psalms comes at the *end* of either the first line or the last line, sometimes both. It is this: **!**, the exclamation point. Over 500 exclamation points are scattered and spattered throughout the 150 psalms. Their point is this: The psalms are meant to be prayed aloud and loudly.

As a prayerful Jew, Jesus followed this tradition: "In the days when he was in the flesh, he offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence" (Hebrews 5:7). So Jesus was not always calm, cool and collected when he prayed. He could let it all hang out. His last sound on the cross was not a resigned whimper or sigh but a *loud cry*, as in "Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last" (Mark 15:37).

Even apart from the exclamation points, the psalms are full of shouting, crying, hollering. For example: "O Lord, my God, I call for help by day; I cry out in the night before thee" (Psalm 88:1). Or "Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth" (Psalm 66:1). And "Shout to God with loud songs of joy!" (Psalm 47:1).

The psalms are not polite, weak and meek, milquetoast prayers. They are full of rough and tough shouts, primal

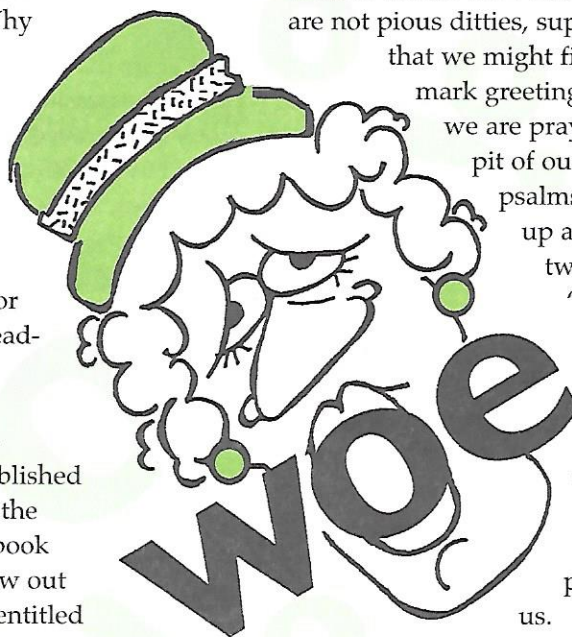
screams, exuberant and audacious exclamations. If a psalm had not said it first, no one would dare to talk like this to God:

"Rouse thyself! Why sleepest thou, O Lord? Awake! Do not cast us off for ever! Why dost thou hide thy face?...Rise up, come to our help! Deliver us for the sake of thy steadfast love!" (Psalm 44:23-26).

Some years ago Patricia Opatz published her reflections on the psalms in a little book (unfortunately now out of print) that she entitled *Nobody Says 'Please' in the Psalms*. That's the perfect title for these feisty, emphatic and dramatic, loud, clear, strong and powerful prayers.

Those who prayed the psalms believed that if their shouts and cries were loud and intense enough, God would have heard. And if God had heard, God will and must obey. "It is not thinkable that God would hear and not act," writes Scripture scholar Walter Brueggemann in one of his commentaries on the psalms. If we never feel like shouting or crying aloud to God, could it be that we have nothing that urgent, that intense to pray for or ask for or demand? Let's not forget Jesus' powerful parable of the persistent widow who badgered the unjust judge until he had no choice but to do her justice.

Do we ever feel like pounding on the altar and telling God, "Now you listen here!?" The psalms are prayers that are meant to be belted out. They are not pious ditties, superficial jingles that we might find on a Hallmark greeting card. When we are praying from the pit of our pains, the psalms help to lift us up and out. These two clues—the "O" of open and the "!" of emphasis—are like keys that let us get into the psalms and let the psalms get into us.



## Poetry, Like It or Not

**T**o better understand and appreciate the psalms it is important to remember that the psalms are poetry. This fact can be both a burden and a blessing. It can be a burden because poetry tends to frighten us or bore us; poetry is not our usual way of speaking; poetry can be obscure, mysterious or at least misty.

But it can be a blessing because the poetry of the psalms, first of all, is basically uncomplicated, easily read and understood. Poetry can say something more emphatically, more intently and intensely than can ordinary prose. That is why the first words we hear the first human on earth say are poetry. Genesis 2:18-23 tells us that after suffering through that original Zoo Review while looking for his "suitable partner," the man finally sees before his very eyes this new, lovely creature and gives vent to his pent-up emotion with nothing less than poetry: "This one at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh!"

We pray with the poetry of the psalms in order to create and express an experience that surpasses the daily,



## Living the Scriptures

- **The psalms spring from life situations equally familiar to us and to our ancestors in the faith. How can we incorporate the psalms more fully into our prayer as expressions of the deepest wows and woes of our daily lives?**

the dull and the dreary. Prose is good at giving us information. But poetry gives us inspiration, emotion, ecstasy, agony, jubilation, from "Wow!" to "Woe!" and everything in between.

The Hebrew poetry of the psalms is built not on rhythm or rhyme but on a "rhythm of sense" called *parallelism*. There is a parallel, a balance, a matching from one line to the next. For example: "The earth is the Lord's and all it holds, / the world and those who live there" (Ps. 24:1).

This poetic technique of parallelism serves to clarify, expand, reinforce and complete the original idea. The repetition helps to strengthen the message. It also offers a contemplative, unhurried, meditative quality to our prayer. We linger a little longer over an idea, a statement before we move on. We savor the thought, take a second sip, chew it instead of gulping it down. The psalms are like good wine that is meant to be sipped, not slurped.

### *The Proof Is in the Praying*

**W**hen all has been written and said about the psalms, the real proof of the psalms is in their praying. And one of the best places to pray the psalms is at Mass during the Liturgy of the Word. The Responsorial Psalm is our

response to and reflection on the first reading.

It took the Catholic Church a long, long time to restore the psalms to their key place in the liturgy. For almost 1900 years the psalms seemed to be the private possession of priests and religious who prayed the psalms as part of the Divine Office or Liturgy of the Hours. Yes, a few laypeople heard about the psalms and prayed them, but they were suspected of trying to be "holier than thou." Ordinary folks had to be satisfied with praying the rosary with its 150 Hail Mary's instead of the 150 psalms.

But then, thanks be to God and good Pope John XXIII, along came the Second Vatican Council and its demand that the treasures of the Bible be made available to all God's people. And when that treasure chest of the Bible was unearthed and opened, what did

we discover? The prayer-pearls of great price: the psalms!

"A psalm a day keeps the devil away." Go ahead and "scratch a psalm." Get set to find a treasure of prayer beneath the crusty surface of that psalm, a treasure that will be an answer to that ancient complaint: "We do not know how to pray as we ought." But now we do, thanks to the psalms! ■

*Daniel Durken is a Benedictine monk and priest of St. John's Abbey, Collegeville, Minnesota. A professor of theology at St. John's College, he has been teaching Bible classes for "lo, some 40 years." He is an editor and writer for The Liturgical Press and contributor to The Bible Today.*

**Next: The Cross in Paul's Writings (by Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, O.P.)**



### **NEW VIDEO SERIES!**

*Scripture From Scratch II: The World of the Bible* (V4000, \$199.95), an 8-part video series featuring Virginia Smith and Elizabeth McNamer. **Only \$149.95 through June 30, 1997.** Preview tape available for \$4.95 (V4011). Call **1-800-488-0488** to place an order or for more information.

**Visit our Web site at <http://www.AmericanCatholic.org>**

*To qualify for bulk rates, all copies must be mailed to the same address. Order toll-free by telephone: 1-800-488-0488 or use address on front.*



### **Talking About Scripture**

- **What do you think accounts for the profusion of new books on prayer on the market today?**
- **What advantages do you see in focusing on the ancient psalm tradition of our religious forebears?**
- **Why is a poetic or musical setting such as that used in the psalms often more prayerful than the customary prose form of literature?**



### **Reading About Scripture**

- **Miller, Patrick D. *Interpreting the Psalms*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986.**
- **Murphy, Roland E. *The Psalms Are Yours*. Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1993.**
- **Nowell, Irene, O.S.B. *Sing a New Song: The Psalms in the Sunday Lectionary*. Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1993.**