



## WAITING ON THE LIGHT

### *Praying with the Psalms through Advent*

#### **Introduction**

The Psalms are tried-and-true help to us as our souls wait afresh for the birth of our Lord at Christmas.

In this guide (which will appear weekly), one verse from a given psalm is presented for each day in Advent. Some of you may find it helpful to read all of the given psalm as part of your Advent devotions.

At the end of each daily meditation, a short prayer is provided.

#### **Week 2**

##### *The Second Sunday of Advent*

**'Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will tell you what he has done for me.'** *Ps 66. 16*

The Hebrew inscription of this psalm reads, 'To the leader (choirmaster). A Song. A Psalm.' Most of the early Greek manuscripts (known as the Septuagint) add another word, *anastaseos*, meaning, 'of the resurrection'. This tells us that by the second century (or even late in the first century), Psalm 66 was probably sung by Christians at Easter, the feast of the Lord's resurrection.

Before Christians adopted Psalm 66 as a song in celebration of the resurrection, it was a song in celebration of God's deliverance of Israel. You hear in these words the prayer of a faithful Jew, coming to make his sacrifice in the temple, in gratitude to God for his saving deeds (verse 3).

On the one hand, those deeds took place generations ago, when the enslaved people of Israel were miraculously liberated from the fiery furnace of Egypt (Deut 4. 20) and brought through the Red Sea to a spacious land of promise and freedom (verses 11-12).

But to the psalmist, those 'awesome deeds' had been repeated in some way in his own personal life. 'I was in trouble' (verse 14) he says to anyone who will listen. 'Come and hear, ...and I will tell you what (God) has done for *me*' (verse 16). To the Psalmist, the delivering power of God is not something only from the distant past. The same God who turned sea into dry land generations ago has kept the poet's feet from slipping in the mire today. Just as God heard the groaning of Israel under bondage (Ex 2. 23-24), 'truly God has listened; he has given heed to the words of my prayer', the psalmist sings.

For Christians, then, this psalm serves a similar purpose. We can borrow the psalmist's words for our own every time we need them.

### **Prayer**

Father, you see the situation I am in.

Pressure seems to be coming from every direction.

It feels as though I can hardly move.

Hear my prayer, and do not leave me alone.

Amen.

### ***Monday of Advent 2***

**'I will bless the Lord at all times, his praise shall be continually in my mouth.'**

***Ps 34. 1***

The psalmist's joy is so full that he has determined to do two things: praise God at all times, and get as many others as possible to join in. Then, once he has the attention of his listeners, he invites them to live their entire lives to the glory of God.

The superscription of the psalm ('A psalm of David, when he feigned madness before Abimelech, so that he drove him out, and he went away') refers to events recorded in 1 Samuel 21. 10-22. 2. Fleeing from Saul, the young David futilely seeks refuge in the Philistine city of Gath, from which he narrowly escapes after pretending to be insane. He hides out in a cave, where he is joined by upwards of four hundred equally desperate friends and family. The psalm title seems to indicate that it may have been composed and sung in the presence of David's fellow fugitives.

The opening half of the psalm contains the psalmist's personal testimony to the goodness of God (verses 1-11). He recounts the wonderful ways in which God has already heard and answered him when he was in trouble. The psalmist cannot say enough about how faithfully and repeatedly God has come to his rescue. It is a natural step, then, to rally everyone around him to join in giving thanks.

He summons them to more than sharing a joyful song, however. Praise offered in the temple or synagogue (or a cave), if genuine, can only come from genuine righteousness lived in the home and among neighbours. The second half of the psalm contains the psalmist's succinct description of a *life* that is full of praise: telling the truth, doing good, seeking peace (verses 12-22).

In his letter to the Ephesians, St Paul writes that all who have put their hope in Christ have been 'destined...to live for the praise of his glory' (1. 11-12). Both the Old and New Testaments teach that the praise of God is best expressed through the lives (and not only the lips) of God's people. Pursuing what is good, standing against what is evil, speaking what is true, humbling the heart, trusting the Lord: these are the ways to praise and thank the Lord 'at all times'.

### **Prayer**

Father, if I offer you the kindling,  
will you help me to set a fire of praise in my heart?  
One tongue of flame is all I need.  
Today, I bring to you the twigs of my thoughts, my decisions, my desires;  
and the great logs of your great deeds in my life.  
Help me to make a fire of praise!  
Amen.

### ***Tuesday of Advent 2***

**'Let Israel be glad in his Maker, let the sons of Zion rejoice in their King.'**  
*Ps 149. 2*

Especially in our time, Psalm 149's militant tone when calling for all the faithful to praise God should not be mistaken for a call to war. On the spiritual battlefield, however, praise of God is one of the most effective weapons; it actually bears the power of God.

The book of Nehemiah describes a scene in the rebuilding of the temple after the exile: 'The burden-bearers carried their loads in such a way that each laboured on the work with one hand and with the other held a weapon' (4. 17). The work of building a house of prayer went hand-in-hand with the work of defending it. Sword and shovel each had its place.

Something similar is going on with Psalm 149. 'Let the praise of God be in their mouths and a double-edged sword in their hands' (verse 6, NIV). Surely the psalmist is talking about something more than a literal weapon of war. At other points in the Bible, the metaphorical image of a sharp sword is used to indicate the incisive truth of the Word of God (Is 49. 2, Ps 45. 2-3).

The visionary writer of Revelation pictures the One who is called 'Faithful and True' finally returning to govern the whole earth with a sharp sword issuing from his mouth, with which he will 'strike down the nations' (19. 15). He who came first in a manger will come then on a throne, bearing the Almighty name 'King of kings and Lord of lords' (19. 16).

Like the writer of Revelation, the psalmist is looking toward that day when all earthly powers and authorities will bow in adoration (willingly or unwillingly) before the true Sovereign of all. Then, no nation nor people, no ruler nor noble, will be able to stand upright before the Lord's coming. Until that day, however, it is for the saints to sing; to rejoice; to dance; to play the tambourine and the harp; and to be joyful in the glory of God. This makes every act of praise a declaration of truth: the Lord God reigns, for ever and ever.

### **Prayer**

Lord, you invite me to sing your praises.  
To sing them not just with my voice, but with my heart.  
It is real sound, and not whispers, that you want;  
Help me to truly praise you in this way.  
Amen.

### ***Wednesday of Advent 2***

**'Be exalted, O God, above the heavens! Let your glory be over all the earth.'**  
*Ps 57. 5, 11*

Is Psalm 57 a prayer of lament or a song of praise? It is both, really, but praise is given the last word.

The psalmist uses vivid imagery to describe his predicament as well as the power of God to save him. For example, his cry for mercy and help is made as he hides himself 'in the shadow of (God's) wings' (verse 1). This is almost a technical reference to the golden wings of the cherubim that hover over the ark of the covenant in the temple (Ex 25. 18-20; 1 Kgs 6. 27-28), but the Hebrew could also refer to 'your *Shekinah*', meaning the glory of God's presence.

*Shekinah* is sometimes used to speak of the pillars of cloud and fire that guided and protected the children of Israel during their sojourn in the wilderness (Ex 13. 20-22).

In either case, even while troubled and in danger, the psalmist pictures himself securely concealed in the protective shade of God's presence. He may be hiding in a cave (see the opening ascription: 'Of David. A Miktam, when he fled from Saul, in the cave'), but he sees himself resting under the cover of God's merciful and limitless power. In this sense, he is surrounded by heaven's glorious light, even as dark shadows loom over his head.

The psalmist pictures his enemies vividly (verses 1, 4 and 6). They are like a violent storm that leaves nothing but destruction in its wake. They are like ravenous lions, stealthily stalking their prey, with teeth as long as spears and as sharp as arrows, and with pointed swords for tongues. They are like hunters, skilfully laying their snares and digging their traps. Pursued by such cruel forces and foes, how can the psalmist hope to escape?

Twice in the psalm, a refrain of victory is repeated. 'Be exalted, O God, above the heavens. Let your glory be over all the earth!' (verses 5, 11). God, the Lord of the universe, reigns over heaven above, and his glory fills the earth below. The psalmist's vision of God dispels his vision of danger. And that God-given vision inspires his fearful heart to awaken with praise and thanksgiving.

### **Prayer**

O God, my Creator and my Redeemer,  
whose glory and love fill the universe,  
Give light to my eyes, so that where now I see only darkness,  
I may see you.  
And give light to my heart, that I may praise you.  
Amen.

### ***Thursday of Advent 2***

**'I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation.'** *Ps 40. 9*  
'I waited, and I waited, and I waited,' might be the opening words of this prayer. It is as if the psalmist is standing up before the assembly of fellow worshippers and telling them the story of his deliverance which (he admits quite frankly) did not come as quickly as he first wanted. As someone has said, God is never late, which means that waiting is bringing us into line with his divine timetable.

At the right time, God did answer the psalmist's cry for help. He reached down and snatched his servant's soul out of the crushing grip of the quagmire. We are not told the exact circumstances of the psalmist's trapped condition, but can look to our own experience of sufferings and difficulties, with destructive holds upon us that seem to be too strong to bear. 'For the Lord has ransomed Jacob', wrote the prophet Jeremiah, 'and has redeemed him from hands too strong for

him' (31. 11). We come to know God's profound deliverance when we are most helpless. Psalm 40 therefore begins a 'new song' of thanksgiving to God, whose saving works are too numerous to be counted and whose strength is the only hope of our salvation.

The writer of the Hebrews sees in this psalm the testimony of Jesus, whose singular delight was to do the will of his Father (Heb 10. 5-10). He declared to the world the utter reliability of God, and then endured suffering at the hands of the same world, all the while remaining steadfast in his determination to 'trust in the Lord'.

Within a few verses, the psalmist turns from addressing the people to addressing God. His testimony of recent deliverance ('I have told the glad news of deliverance in the congregation', verse 10) becomes the very foundation of a renewed plea for God's help: 'Do not, O Lord, withhold your mercy from me' (verse 11). Clearly, he is in trouble again (how familiar his story is to us). This time, his own sins have taken him by the throat (verse 12) and others seek to do harm to him as well (verse 14). But he knows where to turn in his need, and in whom to place his hope. 'I am poor and needy,' he cries, 'You are my help and deliverer' (verse 17). He has waited upon the Lord before, and he will wait again. Still, like all of us, he would not like to wait too long and adds, 'do not delay, O my God'.

### **Prayer**

Yes, Lord, thank you! Many, many times, thank you!

You heard my cry, reached from heaven, and you snatched me up.

May my new song today be a new thank you.

Amen.

### ***Friday of Advent 2***

**'O Most High, when I am afraid, I put my trust in you.' Ps 56. 3**

The ancient editors of the Psalms assigned Psalm 56 to David. Its superscription ('Of David. A Miktam. When the Philistines seized him in Gath') refers again to those events recorded in 1 Samuel 21 and 22 when, fleeing before Saul, David pretended to be crazy and took refuge among his mortal enemies the Philistines. 'Out of the frying pan into the fire', you might say about David's predicament. The psalmist puts it more directly: 'My enemies trample on me all day long; for many fight against me' (verse 2).

The prayer is essentially divided into two parts (verses 1-3 and 5-9), with a similar refrain concluding each part in verse 4 and in verses 10-11. The last two verses of the psalm sum up the writer's vow to go on giving thanks to God for

keeping him safe. Verses 1-3 describe a desperate situation from which the psalmist can see no escape. His enemies prevail over him and he appears to be at their mercy. The most fundamental human emotion rises up within him under these circumstances: David is afraid.

The psalmist further describes and laments his perilous situation (verses 5-7), but not before introducing a new thought that makes all the difference in the world. To do so, he begins verse 3 with the word 'Nevertheless' (see the Psalter in the *Book of Common Prayer*). The 'nevertheless' that we utter in the midst of our fear is like a door handle that opens the way into a room with a different view of the reality around us; and that view is God's view.

This 'nevertheless' is like the first word of the last chapter of St Luke's gospel. For many paragraphs, Luke has been describing the betrayal, the suffering and finally the death of Christ. As he opens a new door by introducing the story of the Resurrection, however, he begins: '*But*, on the first day of the week, at early dawn' (Luke 24. 1). The 'nevertheless' of the psalmist's prayer, like the Evangelist's 'but', introduces a declaration that there is much, much more to the story. 'I am afraid', admits David, 'nevertheless, I will put my trust in God'.

Why? Because God's word, God's faithfulness, and God's mercy will prevail. He who counts and records every fearful tear shed in the darkness will in the end make it possible for me to walk fearlessly in the light. The shadows are sure to come, *nevertheless...*

### **Prayer**

Once again I put my trust in you, Lord,  
to be my Defender, my Protector, my Victor, my Saviour.  
Amen.

### ***Saturday of Advent 2***

**'Lead me to the rock that is higher than I.' Ps 61. 2**

The psalmist is distraught, and it appears that what weighs upon his heart is the overwhelming sense of distance he feels between himself and God. 'From the end of the earth I call to you', he cries in verse 2. His sense of dejection is not unfamiliar. 'Where is God?' we ask miserably, when God's ways are obscure and our days seem devoid of his presence. When we are at the end of our tether, we may feel that God has removed himself from us, or that he stands at a distance, or perhaps that he has even forgotten us. Psalm 61 is a prayer for just such an occasion.

If in fact this is a prayer for David the king (see verse 6), there must have been many times when he felt alone under the weight of his office. The clouds of duty

and responsibility, the storms of conflict and even war must have obscured the brightness of God's presence. Nevertheless, the king knew where to turn, and to whom to turn, in such times. When his own strength was depleted, when all hopeful vision and strength of will failed, the psalmist (like all of us) wept.

He shed his tears before the Lord. In a few succinct phrases, he likens God to a high rock upon which he can stand, a tower in which he can find refuge, a tent in which he can dwell in safety, and wings under which he can find covering (verses 2-4). Any one of these images can give consolation to a fearful heart.

Once the psalmist makes his petition, he can make his promise. Despite how he feels, he knows that he is not alone. He knows that God is ever-present to help and to hide him. Therefore he says with a new-found confidence that he will live before God for ever, singing praise to God's name, and that he will fulfil his vows (probably referring to his coronation).

Being devoid of personal strength, he can rely on the strength of God and recommit himself to God's service. Even as he looks to God's steadfast love to be his help, he promises his own steadfast commitment to be God's servant (verses 7-8). In Psalm 61, renewed dedication accompanies fervent intercession.

### **Prayer**

My faith is anything but rock-solid, Lord.

My hope is equally fickle.

And my love is probably the least reliable of all.

Rock of all the ages, fix my faith, my hope and my love on you.

Amen.