

The Psalter for Christian Worship

Revised Edition

Michael Morgan

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Preface

The psalm paraphrases in this collection were composed during the spring and summer of 1995 for the congregation of Central Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Georgia.

As part of our congregation's desire to reclaim metrical psalm singing, which is at the heart of our Reformed tradition, Dr. Theodore Wardlaw challenged me to write new Editions of the Lectionary psalms for Eastertide. The worshipers at Central Church have a strong attachment to congregational song, and with their encouragement, I composed settings of all 150 psalms. These psalter hymns were designed to be sung to a variety of tunes that our congregation knew from memory, making them readily accessible.

Never before had I embarked on such a meaningful and self-illuminating devotional exercise. I repeatedly found my life experience reflected in the psalms on which I worked. Often, I would struggle with a particular psalm with little insight or inspiration, and in frustration turn to another, where the words would flow almost as quickly as I could write. Sometimes the first line to come to me would be halfway down the page, and the text would grow from there in both directions until the psalm was complete.

My parameters were defined from the beginning:

1. *Make the texts suitable for congregational singing.*
The approach to each text was the same: to condense thought and repetition into single units, paraphrasing those to achieve the sense of the psalm. I sought help in commentaries and devotionals from Calvin and Horne, to Dahood and Brueggemann. Where the Revised Common Lectionary abbreviated the texts or divided the

longer psalms, I considered the same alignment in my edition.

2. *Remain faithful to the character of the psalms.* I have sought not to “Christianize” the psalms, but to balance images and allusions from both sides of the cross (Hebrew poet and the Messiah of the Gospels, the shepherd boy and the Good Shepherd), tempering judgment with justice and vengeance with grace.
3. *Employ modern English language.* In the first edition, a significant number of texts used “thee,” “thou,” “thy,” and “thine” in reference to God. Even though much of our association with the Psalms is cloaked in this classic style, the texts in this revised edition have been reworded in modern English to make them universal in their appeal to those who will sing them.
4. *Commit to the use of inclusive language, both in references to God and to the people of God.*
5. *Provide texts that are suited to a variety of familiar tunes.* The suggested tunes will be found in most standard hymnals. They are suggestions; worship leaders are encouraged to select tunes that may be more familiar to their congregations (being sure that the meter, the accents, and the spirit of the tunes fit the words), or to write tunes of their own.
6. *Make the texts easily accessible as worship resources.* Permission is granted to reprint texts in worship bulletins without having to obtain written permission. All that is requested is acknowledgement of the source.

In addition to the colleagues and friends named in the first edition who generously contributed their scholarship and support, special appreciation for this revision is given to David Gambrell, associate for worship, and Mark Hinds, general editor, with the PC(USA) Office of Theology Worship and Education; and to the worship leaders and congregations who have found in these words new expression for their praise.

Michael Morgan

INTRODUCTION

Metrical psalmody: the name sounds as intimidating and as austere as anything one might associate with staid Scottish Presbyterians! Yet little else is closer to the heart of worship in the Reformed tradition than the psalms of David paraphrased in metered verse. Over four hundred years ago, our first service book, the *Forme of Prayers and Ministration of the Sacraments*, was beloved by the people for the metrical psalter it contained.

We lift up the psalms to God as our prayers. We borrow the language of these ancient texts, and they become our words. We are not secondhand recipients of God's Word, but communicants actively in conversation with God. What seems to set the psalms apart from the rest of Scripture is their sacramental nature, their unique ability to mold and transform the believer.

The psalms we sing and pray may reflect our own sentiments, or may be in conflict with them, but even in conflict, we are able to make them our own prayers. In our praise, they call us to affirm that God creates and sustains us, and deserves more thanksgiving than we can ever express. In our lament, we are assured that this same God will strengthen and nurture and love us.

David Dickson, a Scottish Puritan of the seventeenth century, described the seasons of our lives as a blend of "crosses and sweet comforts." The psalms are reflections of our full human experience, but never without the illumination of who God is, and where we stand in relation to that wonderful Presence.

Christian worship has always included the singing of psalms. Prior to the Reformation, however, liturgical music had gradually become more the possession of the church and less a treasure of the people. In their Latin

editions, which few could understand, psalms in worship were sung to plainchant melodies. Gregorian chant may be a pure and expressive means of conveying the prose of the Latin Bible, but it is far less effective with poetry. The use of chant also required most of the service music to be “performed” by trained singers who could read musical notation, while the congregation sang only the simplest responses. As more intricate service music evolved, even these responses became the property of the choir, leaving the people as passive observers of the liturgy.

If liturgical music was to be returned to the people, three things had to be accomplished:

1. Texts had to be cast in the language of the people to be meaningful to those who sang them. The beauty of Latin never made it past the ears of many listeners.
2. Texts had to be cast in a form that people could read, memorize, and assimilate with ease. Short phrases, structured within a variety of rhyme schemes, made texts more comprehensible.
3. A type of music had to be devised that untrained voices could sing, like the simple ballads the people knew by heart and that sustained them through the remainder of the week.

John Calvin’s Psalter

John Calvin’s innovative psalmody was a fitting solution. Calvin (1509–1564) felt that only those songs given to us by God—the psalms—were worthy to be given back to God. With few exceptions, he desired that only the Psalms of David be sung in worship.

Calvin acknowledged that the psalms would require translation into the vernacular. He also allowed the texts to be rendered in verse. He engaged the poet Clement Marot (c. 1497–1544) and the theologian Theodore de

Bèze (1519–1605) to transform ancient Hebrew verse into the finest French poetry of the day.

English Psalters

The English metrical psalter and the first Scottish psalter found a more humble genesis in the psalm “ballads” composed by Thomas Sternhold (1500–1549), a groom in the chamber of King Henry VIII. Sternhold was no poetic match for Marot, but English-speaking Christians had never sung psalms in their own language, and young Edward, the future king, upon hearing Sternhold singing one of his verses, encouraged him to write more.

Within a few years, both servant and king were dead, and under the violent reign of Mary Tudor, the Church of England renounced many elements of the Reformation. Protestants fled to the Continent. Inspired and informed by the teachings of Calvin, these English Protestants set out to complete a psalter, incorporating the work of Sternhold, but also drawing on the talents of John Hopkins (d. 1570), William Whittingham (1530–1579), William Kethe (d. 1608), and others. The completed “Sternhold and Hopkins” edition, popularly known as the “Old Edition,” was published in 1562. In 1564 Scottish refugees, under the leadership of John Knox (1505–1572), published their own edition, in which about a third of the texts differed from Sternhold and Hopkins.

Music found in both psalters came primarily from popular adaptations of some of the new hymns of the Reformation and original tunes contributed primarily by Louis Bourgeois (1510–1561). As a reaction to the complex music of the pre-Reformation Church, the music prescribed by Calvin was in unison so that the congregation might lift a common voice to God without the “clutter” of harmony, counterpoint, or instrumental accompaniment. The wonderful tunes of Bourgeois brought melodic and rhythmic freshness to singing.

Protestants who returned to England during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I brought their psalter. With occasional revision, this translation was retained for more than two hundred years. Competitive metrical editions appeared, most notably the 1612 psalter by Henry Ainsworth (1571–1622) and the 1632 collection by George Wither (1588–1667), but these appealed to the fringes of the Anglican communion rather than to its core. Even the “New Edition” of Nahum Tate (1652–1715) and Nicholas Brady (1659–1726), published in 1696 and revised in 1698 to replace the archaic “Old Edition,” met with little enthusiasm. The much-loved verses of Sternhold and Hopkins continued to be sung into the nineteenth century.

Scottish Psalters

Throughout this time, the Scots were in conflict with the English over a variety of matters both political and religious. Queen Mary was put to death by Elizabeth I, who later died with no apparent heir. Elizabeth was succeeded by James I, the son of her Scottish adversary. With the ascent of King James (1603), the Tudor succession ended and the Stuart line began. The two countries were united. The national churches, however, had become too distinct to merge and too entrenched to compromise. From the form of church government and ordering of worship to the form of the psalms they sang, one sought independence and the other sought control.

The final assault by the English Church, led by Archbishop Laud, was to force the Anglican Book of Common Prayer on the Church of Scotland. Appended to this liturgy was a new psalter, attributed to the late King James himself, which Laud believed would make the new service more palatable to the Scots. The plan failed and triggered a civil war with England, which ended with the execution of Charles I and the institution of the Commonwealth under Oliver Cromwell.

With the new power they were enjoying at the expense of the English, the Scots and the Puritans abrogated the use of the Anglican Prayer Book in favor of their Directory for Worship, and sought to replace the 1564 Scottish Psalter. The Westminster Assembly (1643–1653) examined editions by William Barton (1603–1678), Francis Rous (1579–1659), and others, and in 1650 published its psalter, “more plaine, smooth and agreeable to the Text, than any heretofore.” The publication of this edition, known simply as the “Scottish Psalter,” delineated English and Scottish psalmody, setting a metrical standard for the Church of Scotland and other English-speaking Presbyterians, which remains virtually unchallenged to this day.

Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries

From the beginning of the Reformation, the texts of the Hebrew psalms presented a dilemma for Christians. Many verses in the psalms applied so directly to the experience of the Hebrew people in their struggle or spoke so intimately of the anger and frustration of the psalmist that they were thought unsuitable for Christian song. Further, early metrical settings adhered so strictly to the original Hebrew that twenty or thirty stanzas were required at times to communicate the full psalm text. Restricted to the use of the psalms in worship, such an approach allowed for no proclamation of the gospel through congregational song. Surely praise, thanksgiving, mercy, grace, and redemption were present in the psalms, but the realization of God’s covenant through the gift of Jesus Christ was nowhere to be found. The efforts of John Patrick (1632–1695), Isaac Watts (1674–1748), and others brought the psalter into conversation with the New Testament through liberal paraphrases of the original texts.

A second problem remains: the difficulty of producing a metrical edition of the psalms that can be called

“poetry” when these texts are to be sung by a congregation at worship. Some of the more “poetic” paraphrases of the psalms, such as those of James Merrick (1720–1769), seem too “sublime” to be confined to the monotony of a long meter or common-meter tune. This may be one more reason that many great poets—George Herbert (1593–1633), John Donne (1572–1631), and John Milton (1608–1674) among them—did not attempt to turn the whole psalter into verse, choosing instead only those psalms that most appealed to them.

The “culprit” in the near demise of metrical psalmody was not the psalms themselves, but performance practice. Since many people could not read music, they depended on a leader, or “precentor,” to “line out” the psalms. The tune would be sung, line by line, with the congregation responding, line by line, in echo fashion. So as not to tax the communicants’ tonal memories, the psalms were often sung at a snail’s pace, with little of the energy Bourgeois had written into his original tunes.

To simplify singing further, only a dozen tunes were allowed for many years, with the hope that congregations would learn them. There are amusing stories of psalm singing in worship where the people sang their favorite tune without regard for the precentor or the rest of the congregation, resulting in what one contemporary critic described as a sound that resembled the bleating of sheep on the moors! Precentors soon began to embellish the psalm tunes with “graces,” which so disguised the melodies that congregations were challenged to identify them, much less reproduce them.

In an attempt to salvage metrical psalmody, some presbyteries restricted the singing in worship to choirs composed of parishioners who were willing to learn to sing. Precentors became music educators and offered instruction in singing psalm tunes. Some considered the psalm texts too sacrosanct to be sung outside of worship, however, so “practice verses” were written to be

substituted for the psalm when learning the music; these were then discarded at the church door. These texts were personal, secular, and even earthy at times, but singing meant so much to the people that they endured the instruction in order to sing in the choir, and soon some of the choir lofts held more people than the naves.

By the Victorian era and the early twentieth century, psalmody had for the most part been swallowed up in a vast sea of hymns authored by the Wesleys, the poets of the Oxford Movement, and other independent hymn writers.

Contemporary Psalters

As metrical psalms disappeared from regular use in worship, prose settings of the psalms, which had endured in other liturgical traditions, began to take their place. Lectionaries, whether strictly observed or not, regularly included psalms among the lessons. Responsive readings helped maintain the presence of the psalms in worship, albeit in a less than imaginative manner. Those charged with fostering creative and meaningful corporate worship began to seek ways to improve prose psalmody. The ancient practice of antiphonal singing, with repeated phrases sung in response to portions of a psalm, became popular in churches for whom that tradition had long been lost. Congregations could easily learn the refrain and sing “on cue” while the choir changed the psalm verses. These responses or “antiphons” gave the people a means of singing the psalms, though not with the complete involvement that metrical psalmody afforded.

The Christian church is experiencing a time of liturgical renewal, with increased interest in reclaiming traditions and particular practices. One of those traditions is metrical psalmody, as evidenced in the proliferation of psalm settings in many current denominational hymnals. The *Psalter Hymnal* of the

Christian Reformed Church, published and revised continually since 1934; the more recent, original psalters by Christopher Webber and Fred Anderson; and *The Psalter for Christian Worship* have served to provide new and more “singable” metrical editions of the psalms.

A new metrical paraphrase sung to a very familiar tune brings psalm singing closer to the hymnody to which we are accustomed. A well-crafted text, coupled with a tune like “Amazing Grace” or “Hyfrydol,” is accessible to any gathering. Familiarity encourages participation, which in turn encourages the whole congregation’s active participation in worship.

Through the seasons of life, the psalms offer strength, affirmation, remembrance, and joy. We share these gifts with all generations before us who have known sorrow and gladness, condemnation and redemption, darkness and light, death and resurrection.

May God in endless mercy ever continue to teach us new songs of life in God’s presence, providence, and praise.

THE PSALMS

BOOK I

Psalm 1

LM (Suggested tunes: CANONBURY; ROCKINGHAM; MARYTON)

How blest are they who venture not
 Into the dark and sinful way,
But find delight in God's own law,
 And contemplate it night and day.

As trees beside the stream they grow
 And flourish, wholesome fruit they bear;
The wicked lot are cast aside
 And lost to their own dark despair.

The judgment of the Lord is sure
 And good to those who seek God's face;
The righteous find themselves redeemed,
 And heirs to God's all-knowing grace.

Psalm 2

8.7.8.7 D (Suggested tunes: EBENEZER; HOLY MANNA)

Why do nations rage together,
 Why in vain do they conspire?
Rulers of earth's vast dominions
 Light the skies with martyrs' fire.
Truth mistaken, God forsaken,
 Banes of righteousness arise;
Yet shall they reap sore displeasure,
 Sure defeat before God's eyes.

To the children of the promise
 God shall give the throne this day;
With a scepter forged of iron,
 They shall dash their foes as clay.
Faith revealing, humbly kneeling,
 Quench the fire and sheathe the sword;
For God's wrath is quickly kindled;
 Blest are they who serve the Lord.

Psalm 3

LM (Suggested tunes: WHEN JESUS WEPT; DEO GRACIAS;
ERHALT UNS, HERR)

O Lord, how many are my foes!
How vast their legions round me press!
From ev'ry side, their threats deride,
And work to shake my faithfulness.

But You, O Lord, remain my shield,
My glory and Redeemer still;
I cry to You, who answers me
Steadfastly from Your holy hill.

My eyes are closed, I sleep in peace,
Assured that I again will wake;
When arms shall raise, I'll give You praise,
Rejoicing for Your mercy's sake.

Arise, O Lord, deliver me
From all who would my life assail;
Your blessing sure will long endure,
And righteousness at last prevail.

Psalm 4

10.10.9.10 (Suggested tune: SLANE)

God of all righteousness, hear when I pray,
In my distress be my hope and my stay;
Long I have suffered revilement and shame,
Great God of mercy, I call on Your name.

Angry, yet silent, I know there will be
Justice according to holy decree;
Never to answer corruption in kind,
But in Your promise true peace will I find.

When those around me my faith would confound,
May I rejoice in Your gifts that abound;
Peace and assurance all discord withstand,
Safely I rest in the palm of Your hand.

Psalm 5

LM (Suggested tunes: ROCKINGHAM; ERHALT UNS, HERR;
CONDITOR ALME SIDERUM)

O hear the words I speak, my God,
To my unuttered sighs attend;
And from Your overwhelming throne
To my frail spirit, grace extend.

For early shall my prayers ascend
Like incense rising to the sky;
In confidence, I make my plea,
And in Your faithfulness rely.

Your heart delights in all things good,
And evil flees if You are there;
Your truth will over pride prevail,
And justice shall be brought to bear.

But through the bounty of Your love
Among Your chosen I am cast,
O lead me forth in righteousness,
And bring me safely home at last.

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