Richer and Deeper: Praying the Psalms with the Ancient Church

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Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, both now and forever, and to the ages of ages. Amen. "Bless the LORD, all his works, in all places of his dominion. Bless the LORD, O my soul!" (Psalm 103:22)

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Scripture

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Chapter One: Starting Steps

"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

Teach Us to Pray

"Now Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples'" (Luke 11:1). At first, this may appear to be a mundane request made by a disciple to his rabbi for clarification about their particular school: "How do *you* say we should pray?" But the inquiry is far more profound, rooted deeply in the human desire to reach beyond ourselves, to the Divine. *Teach us to pray*. *Give us words to lift up in prayer*.

According to St. Luke's telling, this was the opportunity for Jesus to teach his disciples what we now call the Lord's Prayer. That prayer rightly took its place among Christian practice immediately, being commended to the faithful three times each day.[1] Important as it is, though, there is more to prayer than just the words of the Lord's Prayer. How did Jesus' disciples pray? How did their descendants—empowered by the Holy Spirit—pray after Jesus' resurrection and ascension?

This fundamental question forms the seed from which my research has grown. I ask not only how the earliest Christians prayed, but I ask how *we should pray today*, in continuity with them. From then until today, people struggle with prayer—how to do it, what to say, what it

[1] See *Didache* 8.3.

means. The people who worship with me in my congregation desire the same as Jesus' first disciples: "Lord, teach us to pray."

In this project, I trace the practices of prayer from the New Testament forward, into the mature Christian Church of the first millennium. As I explain later, we discover that the early Church prayed with the words of the canonical Psalms, in continuity with Israel and uniquely as the New Israel. My research question involves my church members today and their experience with praying the Psalms alongside the ancient Church: **How can my church members' spiritual lives be enriched by praying the Psalms following an ancient Christian discipline**?

Broadly speaking, my church members use uneven prayer methods. This is one area where I feel they could benefit from a more robust theology of prayer and a more disciplined rule of prayer. As I began this project, I speculated that by praying the canonical Psalms (imitating an Orthodox monastic rule that covers all 150 Psalms in a period of 20 days), the members of my congregation would experience a richer, deeper personal prayer life and draw nearer to Jesus Christ.

I hypothesized that some of the participants might resist praying through the Psalter in 20 days and think it is "too much," but I believed that the practice would be embraced by many. I figured that most people would find great spiritual value in the discipline and wisdom in the rule. Praying through the Psalter at a vigorous pace is both familiar (using the Bible) and yet challenging (following a rule or discipline in prayer). Although they are addressing pastors, Burgess, Andrews, and Small could be speaking to any Christian: "We believe that when exercised in a disciplined way, these practices constitute a 'rule' that helps pastors [or Christians] keep first things first amid the many possibilities and demands of their calling."[2] This "rule" is a

[2] John P. Burgess, Jerry Andrews, and Joseph D. Small, *A Pastoral Rule for Today: Reviving an Ancient Practice* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 1.

measuring stick. "A rule of life gives us a set of criteria for measuring our faithfulness to the gospel"[3] and enables us to walk faithfully the hard way that leads to life.[4]

Prayer is a fundamental activity of believers, and yet many struggle with how best to do it. This is the case with my congregation. We can use help. As I began this research project, I believed that prayer was an essential concern for my church people. I further believed that by working on prayer, our whole congregation would benefit. If individuals have a firmer grasp on prayer—and how to use the Psalms in that endeavor—then we will all benefit and become a stronger praying church. This, in turn, benefits my pastoral ministry, as we share more deeply in the same Spirit. It is my desire that my people become strong in prayer and rooted in Scripture and the disciplines of the Church throughout the ages.

The Plan

In Chapter One, I will lay out an overview of the project, especially the background of the research problem that animates this work. I will then present a mini-ethnography of my ministry context, paying close attention to the needs of my people and how they can benefit from this research. Finally, I outline the burden that lies before us: promoting prayer and Scripture in the Church.

In Chapter Two, I draw on scriptural resources to demonstrate how the early Church used the Psalms. I then shift to discuss how the daily prayer offices and use of the Psalms developed in the first six centuries of the Church. I also dig into the Church Fathers to uncover a deeper, heartier, theology of prayer that enriches our contemporary understanding of prayer.

In Chapter Three, I walk through how the project was implemented in my ministry context, and then I distill the results of the survey and the focus group.

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[3] Ibid., 6.
[4] See Matthew 7:14.

Finally, in Chapter Four, I reflect on the results of the project and evaluate the outcomes in light of my hypotheses and biblical and theological foundations outlined in Chapter Two. In the conclusion of this work, I speculate about how this project has benefitted my pastoral ministry in my context and how my sense of vocation has shifted, as well as looking at the horizon of how Protestants can benefit from embracing the theology and practices of the early Church.

Background

As is often the case for research, this question grows from a personal spiritual quest. For years, as a Christian, I have craved an ordered approach to prayer: a way that is substantive but not overly burdensome, that is structured but not too repetitive, that naturally unites me with the great cloud of witnesses throughout the ages, and that enables me to connect with God and to be increasingly formed in the likeness of Jesus Christ.

I have desired methodical prayer, knowing that without some intentional system to my prayer life, it is likely not to happen. How should I pray? What words should I use? How should I structure my prayer life? The anonymous hymn writer spoke on behalf of many of us, clergy and laypeople alike: "What language shall I borrow to thank thee, dearest friend, for this thy dying sorrow, thy pity without end?"[5]

I know that I need a rhythm to prayer that is both challenging enough and yet accessible enough—a "Goldilocks" approach to prayer that is "just right." In Scripture we are instructed to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17), but in reality, without some intentional method, unceasing prayer becomes a victim of good intentions. Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeyev) affirms

[5] Anonymous. "O Sacred Head Now Wounded," trans. James W. Alexander, 1830. Usually attributed to St. Bernard of Clairvaux.

that ideally, "the Christian's entire life should be imbued with prayer."[6] However, since we are weak and prone to wandering, we must set aside focused "hours" of prayer to fulfill that command, to pray without ceasing.

I have observed that, unfortunately, the tribalism that infects our American society has migrated into the Church, particularly among Protestants. It is not merely denominationalism, which has been a feature of our national scene for decades, but it is *groupings* of denominations into like-minded movements and opposing "teams." I observe that Evangelical Protestants, Liberal or Mainline Protestants, Reformed Protestants, and confessional or conservative Protestants have little in common with each other. They hardly speak the same language, appealing to their own approved scholars, citing their own authorized Bible translations, and policing the boundaries of acceptable theological conclusions. In the end, Protestants are isolated, divided, and fragmented and cannot be seriously considered one, holy, catholic, or apostolic.

I ask the question, however, Is there common ground that Protestants can find with each other and with the ancient Church? What would happen if Christians—especially Protestants of all stripes—opened themselves up to the longer, greater Tradition of the Church? Not just occasionally to borrow liturgical gimmicks from Anglicans or to accept the odd Roman Catholic who agrees with their conclusions. But what would happen if Protestants truly admitted into their theological process as evidence those voices from long ago—from the East, from before the Great Schism and the Reformation? My guess is that such a move would be *transformative*. To open our theological and spiritual process to the ancient Church would be to neutralize our differences and to bring us together as sisters and brothers in Christ.

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[6] Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeyev), *Prayer: Encounter with the Living God* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2015), 17.

As I have sought more sacramental expressions of the Christian faith, I have discovered the riches of Orthodoxy. The Church Fathers have profound insights into prayer, sanctification, and Scripture. Those teachings have been preserved in the liturgical and spiritual life of the Orthodox Church, even to this day. As I have desired more substance in faith and spirituality, I have been drawn eastward to the deep wells of Orthodoxy.

This quest has led me to try many different resources for prayer: some online, some books, some mobile apps. Each of those resources has something to commend itself, but for me none of them was "just right." However, in early 2021, I discovered something that guides my prayers in a way that clicks. Praying the Psalms has become for me like physical exercise: not always enjoyable as such, and not always convenient, but good for my spiritual health. Just as one builds muscle through exertion of those muscles, one builds spiritual strength through spiritual struggle. This, finally, has been my Goldilocks pathway. The Psalms offer me rich language for prayer, and the Orthodox prayer rule gives me the proper amount of discipline. I sense that I have grown spiritually through this ongoing practice.

My former church history professor, Gary Neal Hansen, endorses the ancient practice of praying through the Psalter as a way of "stretching and broadening your conversation with God."[7] As he puts it, this kind of discipline brings "order to our busy lives,"[8] and gives us holy words, so that "when we go to pray on our own, what we have learned is waiting there to help us."[9] I have embraced his wisdom and have come to appreciate the truth of his words.

My pastoral desire is to share this prayer "rule" with others. Praying the Psalms is a Jewish and Christian practice that stretches from the ancient past into the present time. Jesus, as a

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[7] Gary Neal Hansen, *Kneeling with Giants: Learning to Pray with History's Best Teachers* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2012), 29.
[8] Ibid., 23.
[9] Ibid., 24.

faithful Jew, prayed with the words of the Psalms[10] and participated in the liturgical life of Israel. His disciples—the apostles—likewise practiced liturgical prayer that made generous use of the Psalms.[11] There is a continuous line of development from that time until the formal prayer offices of the Byzantine period, and up to today.

When believers today pray the Psalms, we join the great "cloud of witnesses" (Hebrews 12:1) throughout all the ages, "a great multitude…from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb" (Revelation 7:9). As my project title suggests, praying the Psalms means praying with the Church, ancient and contemporary. Furthermore, we are spiritually formed and patterned when we pray the Spirit-breathed words of Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16), offering God's own words to God in prayer.

Ministry Context

Although I have been ordained in the Presbyterian Church (USA) since 2002, I have been serving as a bi-vocational, part-time pastor for an American Baptist congregation since 2018. What follows is a brief ethnographic profile of the congregation, with the goal of establishing the background of my ministry setting and demonstrating the importance of my research project. For this profile, as well as reporting the qualitative data in Chapter Three, I am inspired by Mary Clark Moschella's vision for using ethnography as a tool for understanding a congregation more deeply. Ethnography, she reminds us, "is a way of immersing yourself in the life of a people in order to learn something about and from them. Ethnography as a pastoral practice involves opening your eyes and ears to understand the ways in which people practice their faith."[12] And so we listen and watch and learn.

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[10] See Mark 15:34 (Psalm 22:1/22 LXX); Luke 23:46 (Psalm 31:5/30 LXX).
[11] See Acts 4:25-26 (Psalm 2:1-2).
[12] Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice*, 4.

First Baptist Church of Atlantic, Iowa, was organized on March 29, 1869, with nine constituent members. At the time, the town itself was only a few months old, born as a stop along the Rock Island Railroad in 1868.[13] At first, the Baptists had no official meeting space and no regular pastor. So, they shared space with the neighboring Presbyterians and led worship on their own.

The Baptists called their first pastor in 1871, and a Sabbath school was established to pass along the Faith to a new generation. The congregation completed a new church building in 1875 and a baptistery in 1877, replacing the old method of being baptized in the muddy waters of the Nishnabotna River. The congregation grew and became established throughout the first half of the twentieth century. The Baptists moved twice before taking up residence in their current home.

Like nearly all Christian congregations in the United States, the Baptists of Atlantic celebrated their heyday throughout the 1960s and 1970s. By the 1990s, though, society had begun to shift, and the demographics were not favorable to the Baptists. Children of the church had been encouraged to go to college and seek their own ways in life, especially in the cities. Those children did exactly that, and they largely did not return to the community, pruning away the organic continuity of the congregation.

The local Baptists have continued to experience attrition, primarily through the death of older, loyal members. Although visitors occasionally come, there have been very few who stay and become new members. Various minor conflicts over time have even accelerated the decline,

[13] Atlantic is the county seat of Cass County, Iowa. Its population has plateaued around 7,000 residents since the 1970s. Its major employers are the county hospital, the public school system, and a handful of small local manufacturing firms. Although it hosts several Christian congregations, Atlantic is increasingly secular.

and the current trajectory does not look encouraging for the long-term viability of the congregation.

Currently, the church sees about twenty faithful worshipers each Sunday. This is a drastic reduction since the glory days when people remember the sanctuary being full. This decimation is a reality that everyone feels on a visceral level when we gather on Sundays. The core of the congregation is a group of older adults, mostly in their 70s, who conduct the business of the church, who keep things going, and who enjoy each other's company tremendously. There is also a small periphery of members and friends who do not regularly attend worship or participate in the life of the church.

Theologically speaking, members of First Baptist Church range from moderate-evangelical to simply moderate. They are denominationally oriented, participating in the American Baptist special offerings and supporting missions through the official ABC channels. There is an openness to women in leadership. Four of their pastors have been women; the first, in 1944, was the pastor's wife who filled in while he was abroad for the War.

There is an intimate, friendly atmosphere among church members. This is the church's great strength: *fellowship*. Nearly every Sunday about a dozen Baptists go out to lunch together after worship, and they cherish that time together. For a small congregation, the Baptists also enjoy excellent music and passable preaching and pastoral leadership from a steady, local, part-time pastor.

In analyzing ministry context, it is necessary to discuss the Baptists' relationship with the neighboring Presbyterian Church—whose building is one block away from the Baptists' house of worship. Since the beginning, the two congregations have shared worship space, worship, Sunday school, friendships, vacation Bible school, and even, on occasion, pastors.

In our current time, there has been an ongoing, friendly relationship between the two groups. In 2017, my wife, the Rev. Dr. Rachelle McCalla, became the full-time installed pastor for First United Presbyterian Church. In the last five years, we have invited our two congregations to share more of our common mission and identity through holidays, special worship services, seasonal studies, and church dinners.

Historically, the Presbyterians have experienced a similar arc of existence as the Baptists. Founded five months after the Baptist Church—a point of playful pride among the Baptists—the Presbyterians also organized in 1869. They grew and became established as an elite congregation throughout the middle of the twentieth century. The current Presbyterian body is actually a merger of two local Presbyterian congregations—or more accurately, the absorption of a smaller group into a larger group—in 1962.

In similar fashion as most Mainline Protestant groups, the Presbyterians have been alternating between plateaus and declines since their peak in the late 1960s. Many older members are joining the Church Triumphant, and conversely, many young members have left the community to pursue education and careers in urban centers. After a rough patch of uneven pastoral guidance, the Presbyterians have recently enjoyed steady pastoral leadership and have gained some members in the last few years to offset losses due to death. Currently, they host about 65 worshipers on a Sunday morning, along with a modest Sunday school program for all ages.

Over the years, the Presbyterians have generally attracted members with higher levels of education and socioeconomic status than the Baptists, which is consistent with national trends that show 47% of Presbyterians with a bachelor's degree versus only 12% of American

Baptists[14]. Of late, however, this disparity has grown blurrier, allowing the two groups to feel more comfortable with each other.

There is a minority group within the Presbyterian Church who advocates the merger of the two congregations into a single community church; the pastors have not registered a firm opinion on the matter, allowing the idea to brew on its own and to take root—or *not*—among the people.

The Problem

Although Protestants are self-professed to be people of *sola Scriptura*, my experience in contemporary Protestantism shows me that Protestant Bibles are just as likely to remain on a shelf, gathering dust, as to be opened daily. Protestant Christians in the congregations I have served over the years largely do not engage with Scripture in meaningful, intentional, or structured ways, let alone using it as a guide for prayer. Some have a regular pattern of Bible reading, but most do not. When Christians do attempt to read Scripture systematically, it often resembles a ploy, like a New Year's resolution that is doomed to fail, rather than a sustained spiritual practice.

The Pew Research Center reports that only 30% of Mainline Protestants read Scripture "at least once a week."[15] This is lower than the 35% of American adults across the board who read Scripture at least once a week. On the same scale, 44% of Mainline Protestants report that they "seldom" or "never" read the Bible.

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[14] Carlyle Murphy, "The most and least educated U.S. religious groups ," Religious Landscape Study, Pew Research Center, November 4, 2016, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2016/11/04/the-most-and-least-educated-u-s-religious-groups/.

[15] "Frequency of Reading Scripture," *Religious Landscape Study*, Pew Research Center, 2014, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/frequency-of-reading-scripture/.

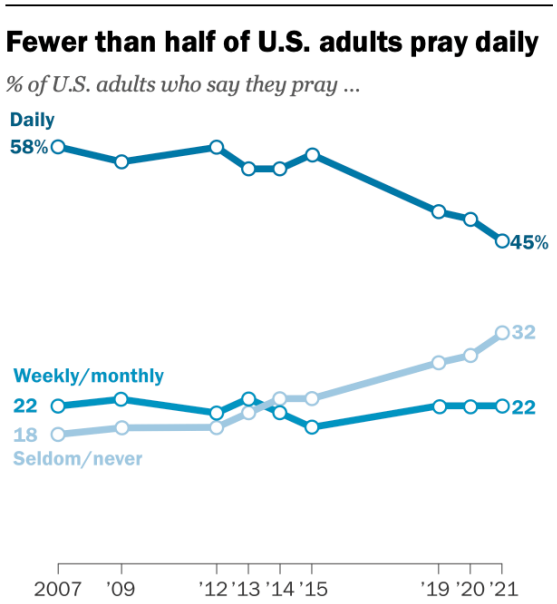

Figure 1 Pew Research Center

Likewise, in my experience, Protestant Christians do not engage in prayer in a deliberate, intentional way. The number of Protestants who pray regularly has been in decline for years. In 2021, the Pew Research Center reported that only about 45% of American adults pray daily. This is down from 58% in 2007.[16] This same survey shows that fully 79% of evangelical Protestants report praying daily. Relevant for our context, though, only 44% of white, non-evangelical Protestants pray daily. Citing a significant overlap, Pew shows that among those adults who pray daily, 89% of them also read Scripture at least once a week.[17] Another 8% of those who pray daily (for a total of 97%) read the Bible weekly. It is clear, then, that Scripture and prayer clearly go together. Praying the Psalms kills two proverbial birds with one stone: praying Scripture is both prayer and engaging with the Bible at the same time.

Non-liturgical, "low-church" Baptists eschew rote prayers as being inauthentic.[18] The preferred mode of prayer—deeply rooted in American revivalism—is spontaneous and heartfelt, and therefore, *authentic*. But this often leads to our original complaint: "When I pray, I don't know what to say." Promising to "pray without ceasing," they end up not knowing how to

[16] "About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated," Pew Research Center, December 14, 2021. https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/.
[17] "Frequency of Reading Scripture."
[18] So-called "Mainline" Baptists, such as my congregation, are more open to some of the trappings of liturgy, calendars, and rote prayers. But for them, a little bit goes a long way.

approach God. Without some rudder to guide the ship, though, many low-church Protestants are adrift in their spiritual lives.

Some evangelical Christians—especially Baptists—follow the nineteenth-century devotional *Morning and Evening* by Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-1892), the great Calvinist Baptist preacher. Ironically, Spurgeon captures the ancient movement of morning-and-evening prayer, but his devotions are randomly selected from his favorite parts of Scripture and often serve as a venue for anti-Catholicism and fanning the flames of intramural sectarian disputes.

For this project, I surveyed the participants to inquire about their current prayer disciplines. I asked, "Before beginning this project, how would you describe your prayer practices?" And I offered four examples: devotionals, memorized prayers, Scripture, or spontaneous. Participants overwhelmingly affirmed spontaneous prayer as their preferred mode. Some explained that this included spontaneously praying throughout the day, as the feeling emerged, and others indicated that this was at a set time, but with no formal, memorized prayers. A few affirmed the practice of mealtime prayers, and a handful claimed the practice of the Lord's Prayer. A couple of the participants admitted using a periodical devotional, published by denominational organizations.[19] Several included reading Scripture as part of their daily prayer discipline. And a couple of participants said, simply, "All of the above."

While these practices can be "good enough," if they are not supported by some discipline—either personal self-control or regulation by a rule—they can quickly become lost despite good intentions. My general analysis is that the prayer that happens among the adherents of these two congregations is decidedly private and sporadic. Both groups would benefit from more and *more disciplined* prayer.

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[19] E.g., *The Secret Place*, published by Judson Press, and *These Days*, published by the Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. These devotions are very basic and are designed to be read once a day.

Protestantism *by design* has shed the great Tradition and traditions[20] of the early Church in favor of Scripture alone. *Sola Scriptura* has become *nuda Scriptura*, meaning an individualistic approach to the Bible. Ideally, this allows Protestants a fresh encounter with God and with Scripture. But in practice, this ideology has cut off Protestants from the rich prayers and practices of the early Church—from the death of the apostles until the rise of the Reformation. Unfortunately, this omission includes the hard-fought and long-developed pattern of praying the Psalms. Holladay echoes my concerns. By and large, he laments, "Protestants have not had a tradition of 'practicing the presence of God' or self-examination…Vocal prayer has tended to center on thanksgiving and on intercessions that reflect personal concerns."[21] Protestants have lost much, and it is no longer sufficient to simply say, "Read your Bible and pray." We need a proper strategy to renew the faithful and to immerse them in the life of God in the Church.

Praying the Psalms

I make the case that Protestants need to recapture the Tradition and traditions of the Church, to be reunited with the saints who "died in faith, not having received the things promised…and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth" (Hebrews 11:13). If Protestants feel continuity and kinship with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—not to mention Martin Luther, John Knox, and John Calvin—they should also develop a sense of kinship and continuity with St. Hippolytus of Rome, St. John Cassian, and St. Isaac the Syrian.

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[20] Here I use "Tradition" to mean the deposit of the Faith, the life of the Holy Spirit in the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church throughout the centuries. This includes Scripture itself and its proper interpretation, the liturgy and mysteries/sacraments of the Church, and the dogma preserved in the canons of the Church, among other things. I use "traditions" to refer to less important, but historically significant, practices of the Church such as daily prayer and how Tradition is lived out in various cultural contexts.

[21] William L. Holladay, *The Psalms Through Three Thousand Years: Prayerbook of a Cloud of Witnesses* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 353. Holladay refers to Brother Lawrence (1614-1691), a French Carmelite, and St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), the Spanish founder of the Society of Jesus.

This rekindling would include adopting the practices—the "traditions"—of those early, faithful Christians such as praying the Psalms in an intentional, structured way, to kneel alongside those saints who have gone on before and who have passed down their faith through the ages.

The practice of praying the Psalms is thoroughly biblical, historical, and Christian. Christians of all stripes—Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants—have historically prayed the Psalms, and today, especially, Christians should be praying the Psalms as a means of engaging with Scripture and enhancing their relationship with Jesus Christ. As Eugene Peterson points out, "If we wish to develop in the life of faith, to mature in our humanity, and to glorify God with our entire heart, mind, soul, and strength, the Psalms are necessary. We cannot bypass the Psalms. They are God's gift to train us in prayer that is comprehensive…and honest."[22]

For the sake of this study, I have included both congregations—Presbyterian and Baptist—as my ministry context. Both groups were invited to participate in the project, praying the Psalms and then participating in a survey.

The goal of this project is to equip those church members to pray alongside the ancient Church, helping them to consciously and concretely enact the nebulous desire to reach out to the Source of Life, the living God. Besides the Lord's Prayer, the Psalms give us language to pray, capturing the whole spectrum of human experience—from joy to anguish and from gratitude to contrition. My goal is to break down the "dividing wall of hostility" (Ephesians 2:14) that isolates contemporary Protestants from the faithful in the East, both now and back to the apostolic age. As we connect contemporary Mainline Protestants with ancient Christian

[22] Eugene H. Peterson, *Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer* (New York: HarperCollins, 1989), 3.

practices, we will explore the question, “How can Protestants benefit from ancient Christian practices?”

Chapter Two: Biblical, Historical, and Theological Foundations

"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God."

Colossians 3:16

"Make it your care to pray without ceasing, for prayer is light to the soul, and it acts as a guard to the body."

Babai (sixth century)[23]

In this chapter, I will explore the biblical, historical, and theological underpinnings of this project. In the biblical section, I will establish the set rhythm of prayer among early Christians and the use of Psalms in their prayers. I will further draw out these two points in the history of the early Church. These two elements—the rhythm of prayer and the use of Psalms—form the basis of this project and provide a plumb line how to evaluate our project. In the theological section, will also articulate a robust, patristic theology of prayer that will fuel this project among my people.

Biblical Resources

This biblical study hinges on Acts 3:1, including 2:42-47 and 4:24-26 as bookends. There we discover that the apostles continued to pray in accordance with their Jewish faith[24] (in the temple), but we also find that they adopted prayers that were intended for their Christian

[23] Babai, "Letter to Cyriacus" in Sebastian Brock, trans., *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1987), 149. Compare this to an anonymous saying, also from a (probably sixth- or seventh-century) Syrian Father: "Continual prayer is the light of the soul." "On Prayer, from the teaching of the Solitaries" in *The Syriac Fathers*, 181.

[24] Throughout this study, I use the terms "Jew" and "Jewish" consistent with the New Testament: Second Temple Judeans who adhered to the faith of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and who observed the Torah. This is distinct from *rabbinic* Judaism, which emerged after the crisis of the destruction of the temple in AD 70 and was established by the Mishnah (early third century) and later the Talmud (fifth century).

gatherings (in home and synagogue). In both cases, it is clear that the first believers did not merely pray spontaneously; they prayed formal, established prayers (including the Psalms) at formal, established times that enabled them to remember and to participate in the significant moments of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Furthermore, in this study we find a pattern of prayer that instructs us how we should pray today so that we also may participate in the life of the risen Christ.

"The" Prayers

"Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour" (Acts 3:1). How did the apostles pray? What was this "hour of prayer," and why was it at the "ninth hour"? To establish our biblical foundations, we will visit the newborn Church and examine their prayer practices, as related to us in St. Luke's narrative in the opening chapters of the Book of Acts.

The early group of believers continued their previous religious observance, but they also developed novel ways of praying and using the Scriptures, especially the Psalms, in light of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah. The Holy Spirit was active, and the "Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47). The followers of Jesus, guided by the Spirit of truth (John 16:13), were beginning to truly understand the Scriptures because of his coming (Luke 24:44). However, since these believers were steeped in Second Temple Judaism, they continued to observe their religious heritage, with some key changes.

The newly baptized were devoting "themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of [the][25] bread and the prayers" (2:42). There is a lively and fascinating discussion to be had about "the apostles' teaching," "the fellowship," and "the breaking of [the] bread."[26] Our primary interest, though, is in the phrase "the prayers." "The" prayers—with the definite article—seems to indicate prescribed, fixed prayers that were offered together, in community, especially for the celebration of the Eucharist.[27] Jaroslav Pelikan—himself a convert from Lutheranism to Orthodoxy—affirms that "the prayers" were not just generic, individual "prayers" offered spontaneously during gatherings. This phrase "does appear to suggest the presence, already at this early stage, of more or less fixed texts and liturgical forms."[28] Pelikan cites the example of Acts 4:24b-30 as a standardized template for "the prayers" employed by the apostolic church.

Saint Luke's phrasing in Acts 2:42 can refer to "the prayers" of the Eucharist, but also "the prayers" of their Jewish faith. David Peterson, commenting on Acts 2:42, connects "the prayers" with Second Temple piety: "In the context, this most obviously points to their [i.e., the disciples'] continuing participation in the set times of prayer at the temple."[29] Farley contends that the "disciples functioned as a kind of Christian synagogue, offering the same prayers as their Jewish brothers, though doubtless with a more Christian expression."[30] Bruce gives a nod to both

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[25] The Greek text includes a definite article for bread, probably indicating a specific kind of bread: "τῇ κλάσει **τοῦ** ἄρτου" (Acts 2:42 NA28). This definite article, indicated here in brackets, is omitted by nearly every English translation. The New American Bible (Revised Edition, 2011), a Catholic version, retains the definite article.
[26] Humphrey distills a coherent vision of the early Church with her comments on Acts 2. See Edith M. Humphrey, *Entrance: Worship on Earth as in Heaven* (Ada, MI: Brazos Press, 2011), 49.
[27] "The prayers." The definite article is omitted by many popular English translations (NIV, NET, KJV/NKJV, CSB, NASB), perhaps reflecting a Protestant bias. The Roman Catholic New American Bible (Revised Edition, 2011), the English Standard Version, and the New Revised Standard Version (Updated Edition, 2021)—the latter two reflecting the RSV and based on critical texts of the NT—properly translate "ταῖς προσευχαῖς" as "the prayers."
[28] Jaroslav Pelikan, *Acts: Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Ada, MI: Brazos Press, 2013), 60.
[29] David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 162.
[30] Lawrence R. Farley, *The Acts of the Apostles: Spreading the Word* (Chesterton, IN: Ancient Faith, 2012), 43.

kinds of prayer: "the primary reference is probably to their own appointed seasons for united prayer within the new community, although we know that they attended the public Jewish prayers as well."[31]

Attending the Temple

Saint Luke tells us that the disciples were daily "attending the temple together," (Acts 2:46) while also breaking (the) bread in their own homes—presumably eating meals in common that culminated in the Lord's Supper.[32] This detail demonstrates that there was a continuity of temple practice that dovetailed with emerging Christian devotion, recognizing that the Church was the fulfillment of the promises made previously to Israel (see Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Galatians 6:16). As Pelikan observes, even "after the crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and Pentecost, the disciples of Jesus continued to be observant Jews…They went on with prayer at the appointed times (4:24-30) and at the appointed places (7:47-48)."[33]

"Attending" is a significant word in our study. Saint Luke uses προσκαρτερέω twice in this section—the first to describe how the believers "devoted" themselves steadfastly to the apostles' teaching and their fellowship.[34] For the second usage, he also deploys the same verb to demonstrate how the Spirit-led believers "attended" or were faithfully devoted to worshiping in the temple.[35] Previously in his story, St. Luke used the same term in his description of the very first disciples—pre-Pentecost—who were "devoting themselves to prayer" (1:14)[36] "Attending"

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[31] F.F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 80.
[32] Keener gives a good summary of early practice of the Lord's Supper. Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary: Volume 1: Introduction and 1:1-2:47* (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 1004.
[33] Pelikan, *Acts*, 62.
[34] "Ἦσαν δὲ **προσκαρτεροῦντες**" Acts 2:42 NA28
[35] "καθ' ἡμέραν τε **προσκαρτεροῦντες** ὁμοθυμαδὸν ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ" 2:46 NA28
[36] "οὗτοι πάντες ἦσαν **προσκαρτεροῦντες** ὁμοθυμαδὸν τῇ προσευχῇ" 1:14 NA28

or "devoting" oneself to the temple was not merely a spontaneous, individualistic activity, but rather a faithful observance of a fixed cycle of liturgy in the temple's cult.[37]

Although Luke does not employ "attending" (προσκαρτερέω) to describe Peter and John's journey to the temple in Acts 3:1, it nevertheless serves as a backdrop for their continuance as faithful Jews who accepted Jesus as the Messiah, but who also "attended" the temple. Truly, if we overlook the chapter divisions later imposed on the Book of Acts, the account of Peter and John's visit to the temple flows naturally from the summary of the early believers' life together (2:42-47), and it becomes an example of their communal disciplines.

Socially and religiously, then, there began to be cracks of daylight between those who accepted that Jesus was the crucified and risen Messiah and those who did not. Peterson summarizes thus: "Even though Jesus had implied that he would replace the temple in the plan and purpose of God…his disciples did not immediately disengage themselves from the temple and separate themselves from the traditional practices of their religion."[38] Luke Timothy Johnson, a Catholic exegete, emphasizes the apostles' continuance in the temple. Just as Jesus gathered his disciples in the temple precincts for teaching and prayer during his earthly life, so the temple became "the place where his followers congregate[d] for prayer…and for teaching."[39] Keener illustrates the tentative, even ambivalent, relationship between the first Christians and the temple. Although Jesus taught that the temple would come under judgment (Luke 21:5-6), "he and his disciples regarded it as an appropriate place for worship and teaching."[40] It was a natural place for the apostles to gather the renewed community for prayer according to their custom.

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[37] See Keener, *Acts*, 1034.
[38] Peterson, *Acts*, 167.
[39] Luke Timothy Johnson, *Sacra Pagina: The Acts of the Apostles* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1992), 59.
[40] Keener, *Acts*, 1032.

This observation—of continuity and discontinuity—forms a critical bridge from Old Covenant practice to New Covenant practice that informs the trajectory from temple prayer to Christian prayer. Saint Luke's depiction of the apostolic Church in Acts 2 also sets the stage to properly understand Peter and John going up to the temple at the hour of prayer.

The Hour of Prayer

Why did Peter and John go up to the temple specifically "at the ninth hour," which is called "the hour of prayer"?[41] What specifically were the disciples "attending" or "continuing" with in the temple?[42] What were they going to see and participate in? Certain passages of Scripture, as well as historical and cultural context, illumine the historical and cultic background of Peter and John's afternoon visit to the temple.

Peterson explains that the clear reason that the apostles went up to the temple at the ninth hour (i.e., 3:00 p.m.) was because they "wanted to be present for the service of public prayer that accompanied the evening sacrifice each day at three in the afternoon."[43] In the apostles' time, regular sacrifices were still being made in the temple, and although the practice was occasionally interrupted throughout history (e.g., by destruction and exile), its origin dates back to Moses—to the time of the tabernacle.

In the Torah, the Lord commanded Moses that the priests "shall offer on the altar: two lambs a year old day by day regularly. One lamb you shall offer in the morning, and the other lamb you shall offer at twilight" (Exodus 29:38-39). These lambs, together with oil, wine, and grain, would be a "pleasing aroma, a food offering to the Lord" (Exodus 29:41).[44]

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[41] "ὥραν τῆς προσευχῆς τὴν ἐνάτην" Acts 3:1 NA28
[42] "προσκαρτεροῦντες" Acts 2:46 NA28
[43] Peterson, *Acts*, 167.
[44] Numbers 28:1-8 echoes this same commandment from the Lord.

In the days of the apostles—before the destruction of the temple in AD 70—these sacrifices continued faithfully, as God commanded "throughout your generations," as a way for God to meet with his people and to sanctify them by his glory (see Exodus 29:42-43). This Old Covenant background clarifies why Peter and John, who were still observant Jews, were going up to the temple at the ninth hour, the "hour of prayer."

There are examples of the faithful going up to pray in the temple—or even in other places—at the set hours of prayer. As mentioned above, Zechariah the priest went into the temple to offer incense, according to the Torah's direction.[45] And as he served in the temple, "the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense" (Luke 1:10). One can imagine this same scenario from the apostles' perspective (Acts 3:1), praying outside the Holy Place, in the temple courts, while the sacrifices were being made inside.

Even when there were no temple and no sacrifices—even in exile—the faithful were "devoted" to the prayers and "attended" to their tradition of praying three times each day, obeying King Solomon's mandate that the faithful should pray constantly toward the temple in Jerusalem.[46] For example, Daniel, defying the pagan king's repressive order, "entered his house, where the windows facing Jerusalem were open to him in the upper rooms, and he knelt down on his knees three times that day and prayed and gave thanks to his God, as he was doing before" (Daniel 6:11 SAAS). Although the precise historical context presented in the book of Judith is unclear, it is assumed that the sacrifices were being maintained at the temple in Jerusalem at that time. The righteous Judith, as she steeled herself for her mission, prayed at the time of the evening incense offering. During that set hour—presumably the ninth hour—she "cried out to the Lord with a loud voice" (Judith 9:1 SAAS).

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[45] See 2 Chronicles 2:4 and 13:11; Exodus 30:7-8.
[46] See 1 Kings 8:29.

Extra-biblical, contemporary sources confirm the continuing daily sacrifices during the Second Temple period, which formed a fixed "time of prayer" for the faithful. Josephus, writing in the first century, described the faithfulness of the priests in the temple, even during the siege of Jerusalem by General Pompey (106-48 BC). Josephus lauded their "piety" toward God and their observance of his laws, telling how they preferred suffering and death to neglecting their obligations to God. Josephus says that the priests "were not hindered from their sacred ministrations, by their fear during this siege, but did still twice each day, in the morning and *about the ninth hour*, offer their sacrifices on the altar."[47] This is a clear statement that corroborates St. Luke's historical setting in telling the apostles' story.

The apocalyptic work *2 Enoch* also recommends fixed daily prayer, especially in the temple in Jerusalem. In a larger section that pronounces blessings and curses, Enoch pauses and offers encouragement to God's people. Echoing Psalm 55:17 (54:17 LXX) and Daniel 6:10 (6:11 LXX), the speaker invites the faithful to seek the Lord in his house. "In the morning and at noon and in the evening of the day it is good to go to the LORD's temple to glorify the Author of all things."[48] Although it is difficult to locate *2 Enoch* historically or even theologically, this passage is clear enough: the faithful are enjoined to seek God in his temple three times each day. And this is what Peter, John, and the first disciples did.

Jeremias argues that the practice of fixed hours of prayer predates the tabernacle and the temple. He points back to the twice-daily recitation of the *Shema* and claims that it forms the basic structure of Jewish—and then Christian—prayer that would later inform home and temple

[47] Josephus, "Antiquities, 14.65," in *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. William Whiston (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987), 370, emphasis added.
[48] "2 Enoch 51:4-5," trans. F.I. Andersen, in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, Vol. 1, Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1983), 179.

practice.[49] "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). When you pair this "creed" with a later injunction, you find a morning-and-evening pattern of devotion to the Lord: "You shall teach them [i.e., God's words] to your children, talking of them when you are sitting in your house, and when you are walking by the way, and *when you lie down, and when you rise*" (Deuteronomy 11:19, emphasis added).

Prayers and Psalms at the Temple

We may inquire, more specifically, what was the *content* of those prayers that John and Peter attended. Besides the Eucharistic gatherings in their homes, what were "the prayers" that the disciples devoted themselves to? Certainly, individual worshipers may have engaged in spontaneous prayer at the temple (e.g., the publican's prayer in Luke 18:13), but as Edersheim points out, the fact that "liturgical formulas were used not only in the Temple, but in the daily private devotions [of the faithful], cannot be doubted."[50]

Drawing on various traditions, Edersheim reconstructs this set liturgy of the public sacrifices offered in the temple in the afternoon. According to rabbinic witness, the lamb was slain at about 2:30 in the afternoon, "and the pieces laid on the altar an hour later—about 3:30 p.m."[51] Edersheim speculates that Peter and John were participating in the prayers that "accompanied the offering of incense," which would have followed at about 4:00.[52] The twice daily incense offering was commanded by God to Moses, as a gift to the Lord,[53] but the faithful understood the *spiritual* significance of burning incense to the Lord and its connection with

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[49] See Jeremias. Joachim Jeremias, *The Prayers of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 67-68.
[50] Alfred Edersheim, *The Temple: Its Ministry and Services as They Were at the Time of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1874), 168-169.
[51] Ibid., 144.
[52] Ibid., 144.
[53] Exodus 30:7-8

prayer: “Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice!” (Psalm 141:2)

The *Mishnah*, compiled at the dawn of the third century in Sepphoris, records the oral traditions of the Second Temple period, including the twice daily sacrifices (*Tamid*) offered in the temple. It also grants insight into the liturgy of the temple that the apostles would have participated in. The text says that while the priests were offering the lamb, they recited a variety of scriptural passages including the Ten Commandments, the *Shema*, Deuteronomy 11:13-21, and Numbers 15:37-41. The priests also pronounced three benedictions: “True and Sure,” “*Abodah*,” and Numbers 6:24-26.[54] This liturgy was followed by the Levites singing Psalms accompanied by instruments.[55] Waltke and Houston agree, underscoring the centrality of the Psalms: the “Psalter functioned as the cultic hymnbook of this period.”[56]

Cohen describes the daily sacrifice in the second temple, emphasizing its regulated nature. While the sacrifices were highly scripted for the priests and Levites, though, he maintains that there was no particular prayer that was required on the part of the faithful. The exception, Cohen cites, is the Psalter. The Psalms became, over time, a part of the temple ritual, if not for the priests *in* the temple, then for the laity *at* the temple. Israel Knohl, referring to Kaufmann, distinguishes between the prescribed cultic behavior of the priests during the sacrifices and the “popular” religious behavior practiced by the faithful outside the temple proper. Ordinary worshipers expressed emotion in their popular worship: through “dance, song, music, prayer,

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[54] “M.Tamid 5:1.” in *The Mishnah: Translated from the Hebrew with Introduction and Brief Explanatory Notes*, ed. Herbert Danby (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1933), 586-587. See m.Ber. 1:4 and 2:2 for further description of the benedictions.
[55] Ibid., 589.
[56] Bruce K. Waltke and James M. Houston with Erika Moore, *The Psalms as Christian Worship: A Historical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 25.

psalm, and lament."[57] These vulgar forms did not extend to the priests, though. The priests did not engage in dancing, music, or psaltery during the sacrifices. "All of these practices and forms of religious expression were excluded from the priestly Temple—the Temple of silence."[58] This is a key insight to understanding the apostles outside the temple at the hour of prayer and an important foundation stone for this project.

The Psalms were meant to be prayed by the laity at the temple; they were the language of prayer. Bradshaw observes that in the "Temple liturgy some Psalms were used, on a selective basis, each day of the week having its proper Psalm sung at the morning and evening sacrifice by the Levites, and appropriate Psalms were also prescribed for the festivals."[59] Cohen implies that Peter and John (as well as the other members of the messianic community) certainly would have recited Psalms from memory as they attended the sacrifice. "Having come to the temple, either with or without a sacrifice, the worshiper would recite either a psalm of joy and thanksgiving or a psalm of woe and lament, whichever was appropriate for his situation."[60]

Besides public, liturgical gatherings, Jewish adherents—especially in places outside Jerusalem—also engaged in personal prayers at set times. Bradshaw points out that, absent a ten-man quorum to constitute a synagogue, "the times of prayer were of necessity private devotions."[61] This individual devotion was continued by Christians.[62] This is not to say that the Psalms formed the entire content of the earliest Christian prayers. There is "uncertainty what part

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[57] Israel Knohl, *The Sanctuary of Silence: The Priestly Torah and the Holiness School* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2007), 42.
[58] Ibid., 42.
[59] Paul F. Bradshaw, *Daily Prayer in the Early Church: A Study of the Origin and Early Development of the Divine Office* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 21. E.g., Psalm 141 (140 LXX) during the evening sacrifice. Holladay outlines which Psalms were appointed for daily liturgical use in the first-century temple. See Holladay, *Three Thousand Years*, 139-140.
[60] Shaye J.D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 65.
[61] Bradshaw, *Daily Prayer*, 18-19.
[62] See Ibid., 39-40.

it [i.e., the Psalter] played in early Christianity."[63] For the apostles, the Psalms were primarily kerygmatic,[64] although the Psalms were used in early Christian worship. Therefore, praying the Psalms personally—rather than communally—would be natural for Jewish worshipers.

It is very plausible that Peter and John were filled with the joy of the Holy Spirit as they went up to the house of the Lord, and it is altogether possible that the Songs of Ascents bubbled in their hearts: "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the LORD!' (Psalm 122:1)" This is also instructive for us today as we use the words of the Psalms for our expressions of praise or lament.

We have established then, that the earliest believers, represented here by the leading apostles, engaged in rituals and practices that were continuous with their Jewish identity, including attending fixed public prayer in the temple, praying the Psalms individually, and praying "the prayers" rooted in the faith of Israel. Summarizing this issue, Jeremias argues that by the time the Church came into being, "we find the three hours of prayer to be a firmly established practice"[65] that was embraced by the apostles.

This continuity with set times of prayer was upheld by those who faithfully participated in the life and cult of the temple and then came to repentance and faith in Jesus the Messiah. Saint Luke later tells us that "a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith" (Acts 6:7). These were ostensibly not the aristocratic Sadducees who controlled much of the religious life in Jerusalem, but rather the rank-and-file priests who offered sacrifices in the temple.[66] If these men were faithful and pious in offering sacrifices in the temple morning and evening—as Josephus attests—and if these men subsequently came to faith in Jesus, then it is perfectly

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[63] Ibid., 43.
[64] See Acts 2:25-28; 2:34-35.
[65] Jeremias, *Prayers of Jesus*, 79.
[66] Zechariah is a model of this kind of faithful servant. See Luke 1:8ff.

reasonable that they transferred and transformed their sacerdotal practices into the Christian community. In the Church gatherings, they surely encouraged their brothers and sisters in faith to "continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name" (Hebrews 13:15).

Redeeming the Time

Saint Luke, as well as other New Testament writers, seems to draw attention to a deeper spiritual significance by noting the time stamp of certain events. Saint Mark, for instance, pauses to emphasize that "it was the third hour when they crucified" Jesus (Mark 15:25). Saint Luke mentions that the Spirit was poured out on the community in "the third hour of the day" (Acts 2:15). Saint Luke also clearly marks the time when Jesus was suffering on the cross: "It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour" when Jesus died (Luke 23:44; See also Matthew 27:45 and Mark 15:33 for parallels). Saint Luke narrates that St. Peter's (Acts 10:9) and St. Paul's (Acts 22:6) respective visions both occurred at the sixth hour, at noon. Cornelius' vision happened at the ninth hour (Acts 10:30).

The Church Fathers also perceived this deeper meaning in the New Testament writings. For instance, St. John Cassian (ca. 360-435) saw great significance in the "ninth hour." He explains that the "evening sacrifice" mentioned in Psalm 141 (140 LXX) refers both to the Last Supper that Jesus shared with his disciples—when he instituted the mystery of his Body and Blood—as well as to Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, which also happened at the ninth hour. There, at Golgotha, St. John Cassian notes, was the "evening sacrifice that he [i.e., Jesus] offered to the Father on the last day—namely, at the end of the ages [see Hebrews 9:26]—by the raising of his

hands for the salvation of the whole world."[67] Because when Jesus raised his hands on the cross—as a raising of his hands in prayer—he drew all people to himself (John 12:32).

The Alexandrian scholar Origen (ca. 185-253) likewise finds spiritual meaning in "the ninth hour," hearing echoes from the prophet Daniel. He says: "Now prayer in the ordinary sense ought to be made no less than three times each day. This is evident from the story of Daniel, who prayed three times a day when such great peril had been devised for him."[68] Origen provides three specific examples that bolster his conviction that Christians should pray three times a day: midday prayer illustrated by St. Peter praying on the roof at the sixth hour (Acts 10:9); morning prayer recommended by Psalm 5; and evening prayer established by Psalm 141 (140 LXX).[69]

These time stamps are not merely neutral historical facts recorded by diligent Scripture writers; they are *spiritual* truths that are imprinted onto time itself. The hours of human experience have been sanctified by the Son of God during the time of his Incarnation. Saint Basil the Great (330-378) composed a prayer to be recited at the ninth hour. He uses the occasion to call to mind the evangelical significance of the ninth hour: "Master, Lord Jesus Christ, our God, Who have long endured our transgressions, and brought us to this hour in which, hanging on the life-giving tree, You showed the good Thief the way into Paradise and destroyed death by death."[70]

Saint John Cassian, who served a pivotal role in developing monastic prayer practices, summarizes the significance of the fixed hours that are received as the hours of prayer. Citing St. Peter and St. John's visit to the temple in Acts 3:1, the saint declares that "it is clearly proved that

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[67] John Cassian, "Institutes 3.3.8-10," in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Psalms 51-150*, ed. Quentin F. Wesselschmidt (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007), 394.
[68] Origen, "On Prayer, 12.2," in Ibid., 393.
[69] See Origen, "On Prayer," in Ibid., 394.
[70] In *Orthodox Christian Prayer Book: Full Size Edition* (Columbia, MO: Newrome Press, 2021), 130.

these hours were not without good reason consecrated with religious services by holy and apostolic men, and ought to be observed in like manner by us."[71] Here, St. John Cassian extends the spiritual meaning of the "hours" from simply remembering Christ's mighty acts, to urging Christians to imitate the rhythm of those hours.

Saint Jerome (ca. 342/347-420) saw in Daniel's account a clear connection to the practice of the Church. "Furthermore," Jerome reckoned, "there are three times in the day when we should bow our knees to God, and the tradition of the church understands them to be the third hour, the sixth hour, and the ninth hour."[72] Notably, St. Jerome connects Daniel and the Church even more explicitly by pointing out that it was at the "ninth hour that Peter and John were on their way to the temple."[73]

Here we find a profound exegetical insight from the Church Fathers. When many of the Fathers read Scripture and heard echoes of other biblical passages (e.g., the "hours" of the day), they paid attention to the deeper, spiritual implications of the text. These are not merely interesting insights, but they are an invitation for the faithful—including *ourselves*—to live in congruence with the life of the Incarnate God—by the power of the Holy Spirit—praying at the third, sixth, and ninth hours.

Going to the Lord's House

"Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour" (Acts 3:1). Along the way, they encountered a lame man looking for alms. Instead of giving him silver or gold, St. Peter announced that he had a better gift for the man. The apostle commanded him to

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[71] John Cassian, "Institutes, 3.3," in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series 1*, Vol. 2, p. 442, ed. Philip Schaff, 14 vols. (1886–1889; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994).
[72] Jerome, "Commentary on Daniel 6:10," in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Ezekiel, Daniel*, ed. Kenneth Stevenson and Michael Glerup (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 213.
[73] Ibid., 213.

walk and then helped him to his feet. The man's feet and ankles were immediately strengthened. "Leaping up, he stood and began to walk, and *entered the temple with them*, walking and leaping and praising God" (Acts 3:6b-8, emphasis added).

Here, in this sequence of events, we can discern a pattern of prayer that imitates the temple sacrifices, but that exceeds the rituals done in Jerusalem. The man entered the Lord's "gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise!" (Psalm 100:4) It was not a bloody sacrifice, but he presented his own body as a spiritual offering to God (see Romans 12:2). So, the schemes of Christian worship and prayer became less and less dependent on the physical temple—culminating in the destruction of the temple—even if Christians borrowed the rhythms of that temple.

The biblical pattern of prayer at the third, sixth, and ninth hours gives Christians a gift and a mandate. As heirs of the apostles, we are invited to "go to the house of the Lord" (Psalm 122:1) and offer our prayers in the power of the Holy Spirit. We cry out, "Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice!" (Psalm 141:2) By doing this, we join the "great cloud of witnesses" (Hebrews 12:1) as we journey toward our heavenly country (Hebrews 11:16), and we conform our lives to the unending life of the Incarnate God, Jesus Christ.

Historical Resources

It is also clear from the apostolic and post-apostolic age that the Church early on came to practice fixed hours of prayer among laypeople, clergy, and monastics. There is obviously tension among the early Fathers about the proper, precise observance of prayer. Some believed in morning-and-evening prayer. Some advocated third-, sixth-, and ninth-hour prayers. Still others saw morning, the ninth hour, and sunset as the proper times for prayer. Jeremias asks, "How

many of these [i.e., times of fixed prayer] were there? How did they originate? Neither of these questions is particularly easy to answer."[74]

Despite this diversity, there is agreement that fixed prayer was a way of praying "without ceasing," according to the apostle's command. Although these hours of prayer were no longer connected to the temple sacrifices in Jerusalem, they still bore the marks of the Old Covenant practices.

Didache

The *Didache*, which surfaces during the late first century, instructs believers to pray the Lord's Prayer as taught by the Lord Jesus and recorded in the Gospels. But relevant to our focus, the *Didache* tells Christians to pray thus "three times a day,"[75] presumably in the morning, at midday, and in the evening. This directive serves as a foundation for later, more elaborate prayer offices of the Church.

St. Clement of Rome

In St. Clement of Rome's (ca. 35-99) first letter to the Corinthians, we find evidence for a nascent prayer discipline. The Roman saint uses the term "at set times" in several places. "We should do in order everything that the Master commanded us to do *at set times*. He has ordered oblations and services to be accomplished, and not by chance and in disorderly fashion but *at the set times* and hours."[76] Here we see an emerging awareness of the need to observe fixed hours of prayer in obedience to the Lord Jesus.

St. Clement of Alexandria

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[74] Jeremias, *Prayers of Jesus*, 67.
[75] "Didache 8," in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Ezekiel, Daniel*, ed. Kenneth Stevenson and Michael Glerup (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 214.
[76] "1 Clement 40:1-4," in Robert Taft, *The Liturgy of the Hours in East and West: The Origins of the Divine Office and Its Meaning for Today* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1986), 14, emphasis added.

Saint Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150-215) gives us a marvelous glimpse of the development of fixed prayer during the years between Peter and John and himself. Already, in the early years of the third century in Egypt, Christians were praying according to a fixed pattern: the third, the sixth, and the ninth hours—besides other times of prayer (e.g., upon rising, going to bed, during the night, and before, during, and after meals). Taft relates that, for St. Clement of Alexandria, "the true Christian must pray always," but according to St. Clement's work, "it is clear that fixed hours for prayer were already and established custom in some circles."[77]

Tertullian

Tertullian (ca. 155-220) also remarks on the "ninth hour," the "hour of prayer." In his treatise *On Prayer* (ca. 198-204), he uses Scripture to cite the importance of certain hours of the day for Christians, much like other Church Fathers saw the eternal stamped on the temporal:

> Concerning the time [of prayer], however, the external observance of certain hours will not be unprofitable. I mean those common hours that mark the intervals of the day: the third, sixth, and ninth, which are found to have been more solemn in the Scriptures. At the third hour the Holy Spirit was first poured out upon the gathered disciples (Acts 2:15). Peter, on the day he experienced the vision of the whole community in that small vessel, had gone upstairs to pray at the sixth hour (Acts 10:9). The same one was going into the temple with John at the ninth hour when he restored the paralytic to health (Acts 3:1).[78]

These points of the day serve as an admonition for us to cease our daily tasks and to pray. Tertullian recommended that "we at least pray not less than three times a day…which, as we read, Daniel also observed, certainly, with Israel's discipline."[79] This invitation helps to give

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[77] Taft, *Liturgy of the Hours*, 14.
[78] Tertullian, "On Prayer, 25," in Taft, *Liturgy of the Hours*, 17-18. Saint Cyprian (ca. 210/214-258) and the *Apostolic Tradition* of St. Hippolytus (ca. 215), as well as Tertullian, engage in this sort of allegorical admonition, seeing in the threefold prayer times a witness to the Trinity.
[79] Taft, *Liturgy of the Hours*, 18.

structure to our Christian discipline today, especially to those low-church Protestants who are unfamiliar with the custom of fixed prayer.

Other Early Christian Sources

Taft exhaustively traces the development of the Liturgy of the Hours throughout the pre-Constantinian Church. He follows Origen, St. Cyprian (ca. 210/214-258), and the *Apostolic Tradition* (ca. 215). In each case, we see the fixed hours of prayer recommended to Christians, with significance given to Psalms 5, 55 (54 LXX), 63 (62 LXX), 141 (140 LXX), and 119 (118 LXX); Daniel 6; and Acts 3:1 and 10:9. These fixed hours developed more after the legalization of Christianity in the fourth century.

Saint John Cassian, who served a pivotal role in cultivating monastic prayer, summarizes the significance of the fixed hours that are received as the hours of prayer. Citing Peter and John's visit to the temple in Acts 3:1, the saint declares that "it is clearly proved that these hours were not without good reason consecrated with religious services by holy and apostolic men, and ought to be observed in like manner by us."[80]

Fixed Prayers and the Psalms

Although there is little proof that Christians prayed the words of the Psalms exclusively until the Byzantine period, the Psalms were certainly a part of the language of prayer. After Peter and John were released after being detained by the temple authorities, "they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God" and prayed for boldness in the face of persecution (Acts 4:23-24). Strikingly, they prayed using the Spirit-inspired words of the Psalms: "Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who through the mouth of our

[80] John Cassian, "Institutes, 3.3," in *NPNF*.

father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, 'Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed'" (Acts 4:24-26). Of course, the application is clear and immediate: "The Lord" is God, and his "Anointed" (*christos*) is Christ.

The apostles were certainly echoing Jesus' practice by continuing in the temple liturgy and by incorporating the Psalms into their prayers. Jeremias says that "we may conclude with all probability that no day in the life of Jesus passed without the three times of prayer: the morning prayer at sunrise, the afternoon prayer at the time when the afternoon sacrifice was offered in the Temple, the evening prayer at night before going to sleep."[81]

It is certainly the case that Jesus himself, during his earthly life, uttered the words of the Psalms in his prayers to the Father. As Jesus hung on the cross—at the ninth hour—he "cried out with a loud voice," recalling Psalm 22:1 (21:1 LXX), "'*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani*?' that is, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'" (Matthew 27:46; see parallel in Mark 15:34). In Luke's account, as Jesus neared death, he called "out with a loud voice," and said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" (Luke 23:46, quoting Psalm 31:5 [30:5 LXX]) And finally, the Letter to the Hebrews interprets Psalm 40:6-8 (39:7-9 LXX) as being on Jesus' lips. So, when the believers quoted Psalm 2:1-2 in prayer (in Acts 4:25b-26), they were imitating Jesus' practice of praying the words of the Psalms, expressing the affections of the heart and the spiritual significance of the moment.

The apostles and those who shared in their fellowship persevered in prayer at the appointed hours—in continuity with their Jewish ancestors, as well as a precursor to future Christian practice. Jeremias observes that the "foundation of this prayer and discipline of prayer

[81] Jeremias, *Prayers of Jesus*, 75.

[i.e., prayer by first-century Jews] is provided by the times fixed for daily prayer."[82] Establishing the *existence* of fixed prayer times is not difficult. We see abundant evidence that Jews and then Christians observed a set liturgy of the hours. But the question remains: what was the *content* of those prayers that John and Peter attended? What were "the" prayers that the disciples devoted themselves to?

The Early Church

The content of post-apostolic Christian prayers is obscured by persecution and a lack of documentary evidence. During times of prayer, we can be sure that the first Christians recited the Lord's Prayer and other bits of Scripture and canticles, just like their Jewish cousins. But Christians early on began to use the Psalms in their prayers.[83] Stanley Jaki (1924-2009), a Benedictine priest, elaborated the meaning of the Psalms in prayer: "The use of the Psalms by the Church was a signal evidence of the Church's awareness that if the New Covenant was the fulfillment of the Old, this had to be especially true when it came to prayer."[84] That is, using the Psalter was a natural, theological practice for Christians who saw themselves as completed Israel. Laurence Kriegshauser, a contemporary Benedictine monk, draws a connection between Jesus' prayer and the prayer of the early Church. Jesus prayed the Psalms, and therefore the Psalms "were as much part of early Christian prayer as they were part of the prayer of Jesus."[85]

The heresy of "*psalmoi idiotikoi*" ("psalms of personal experience") in the second and third centuries spurred the Church to make use of *biblical* psalmody for her prayers. Tertullian reports that "Christian daily prayers were said alone or in the company of others," using "hymns

[82] Ibid., 67.
[83] See Taft, *Liturgy of the Hours*, 28, for a summary of early Christian testimony.
[84] Stanley L. Jaki, *Praying the Psalms: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 20.
[85] Laurence Kriegshauser, *Praying the Psalms in Christ* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 3.

and biblical psalms."[86] These Psalms were also chanted responsorially. According to Taft, Tertullian and the *Apostolic Tradition* both describe the *agape* meal, "which included a ritual of the evening lamp, psalmody, and prayer."[87] This clearly demonstrates that the earliest Christians freely employed the Psalms in their prayers.

The practice of praying the Psalms was appropriated for Christians clearly by St. Athanasius (ca. 296/298-373). The Alexandrian saint saw the Psalms as an aid to prayer for Christians. In his letter to Marcellinus, he counseled "that there is a psalm for every mood and circumstance of life."[88] The saint said, "Whatever your particular need or trouble, from this same book you can select a form of words to fit it, so that you not merely hear and then pass on but learn the way to remedy your ill."[89]

In the same letter, St. Athanasius commends the Psalms as highly personalized prayers that give voice to our souls and aid us in individual repentance: "And the one who hears is deeply moved, as though he himself were speaking, and is affected by the words of the songs, as if they were his own songs…Each sings them as if they were written about himself."[90]

Cathedral Office

Following the Edict of Milan (AD 313), Christians began to develop a more fully flowered Liturgy of the Hours. Taft reports that in the so-called "cathedral" offices,[91] which included rich symbolism, rituals, and chanting, "the psalms were not read continuously according to their numerical order in the Bible, but only certain psalms or sections of psalms

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[86] Taft, *Liturgy of the Hours*, 28.
[87] Ibid., 28.
[88] Gordon J. Wenham, *Psalms as Torah: Reading Biblical Song Ethically* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 20.
[89] Athanasius, "The Letter of St. Athanasius to Marcellinus on the Interpretation of the Psalms," in *On the Incarnation: The treatise "De Incarnatione Verbi Dei*," trans. a religious of C.S.M.V., rev. ed (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1993), 103.
[90] Ibid., 103.
[91] Categorized as such by Baumstark and others over against the monastic offices.

were chosen for their suitability to the hour or service."[92] Eusebius (ca. 260/265-339) testifies that the nucleus of the morning office was Psalm 63 (62 LXX) and that the core of the evening prayer was Psalm 141 (140 LXX). According to Taft, Eusebius speaks of the "tradition of singing and psalmody throughout the whole Church of God."[93]

These prayer offices were for laypeople; as it was then and is now, people had lives to lead—families, work, and other activities. Attending church services three times each day was not practical for most people. The beginning of the day and the evening were more amenable to most Christians to gather in the Church buildings for formal, communal prayer. Bradshaw points out that those prayer times "which occurred during the working day would have had to remain in general as individual devotions, and similarly night prayer would normally be something to be observed privately in the home."[94]

Saint John Chrysostom (ca. 347-407), corroborated by the *Apostolic Constitutions* (late fourth century), shows that "the morning and evening offices at Antioch were composed of two main elements, psalmody and intercession."[95] For the cathedral office, this was not an exhaustive trip through the Psalter; particular Psalms were appointed for morning (Psalm 63; 62 LXX) and evening (Psalm 141; 140 LXX), plus other Psalm readings. Intriguingly, Bradshaw relates that in that time, there was a "general movement linking Christian liturgical practices with those of the Old Testament cult, [and] the morning and evening offices came to be regarded as the Christian fulfillment of the daily sacrifices."[96] This reinforces our conclusion that Christian prayer was the continuation and transformation of Jewish prayer.

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[92] Taft, *Liturgy of the Hours*, 32.
[93] Ibid., 33.
[94] Bradshaw, *Daily Prayer*, 72-73.
[95] Ibid., 74.
[96] Ibid., 73.

Monastic Office in the East

Behind the monastery walls, the so-called "monastic" offices began to blossom in Egypt and in various urban centers throughout the Eastern empire during the fourth century. Wenham underscores the importance of monastic communities in developing Christian prayer, especially the Psalms. The "establishment of monasteries involved the discipline of communal prayer in which the psalms played a central part."[97] Dimitri Conomos, a scholar of music and liturgy, demonstrates how the Psalms were central to monastic life in the Eastern Church. Unlike in the cathedral offices, monastic communities structured their lives together with the "remarkable institution of the *cursus psalmorum* [i.e., the course of the Psalms], that is, the recitation of the Book of Psalms from beginning to end" over a set period of time.[98] Conomos claims that it "is no exaggeration to say that psalmody remained the hallmark of monasticism; no invocation of the monastic way of life could fail to mention it."[99]

Saint John Cassian, describing the Egyptian monastic prayers of the late fourth century, affirms the importance of praying the Psalms in the community. In this monastic office, he refers to their "unbroken and continuous recitation" of the Psalms, punctuated with prayers and responses such as the *Gloria Patri*.[100] Gillingham clarifies that this means that "the whole Psalter would have been read [or chanted] in a week."[101]

Saint John Cassian's observations give us a wealth of spiritual insight that we can adopt today. In those days, the hermits and monks tended to meditate on the Psalms at the expense of

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[97] Wenham, *Psalms as Torah*, 23.
[98] Dimitri Conomos, "Elder Aimilianos on the Psalter and the Revival of Melodious Psalmody at Simonopetra," in *Meditations of the Heart: The Psalms in Early Christian Thought and Practice, Essays in Honour of Andrew Louth*, eds. Andreas Andreopoulos, Augustine Casiday, and Carol Harrison (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2011), 284.
[99] Ibid., 285.
[100] John Cassian, "Institutes 2.7," in Taft, *Liturgy of the Hours*, 60.
[101] Susan Gillingham, *Psalms Through the Centuries*, Vol. One (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 41.

non-canonical hymns, identifying the "spiritual songs" mentioned in Colossians with the canonical Psalms.[102] According to Bradshaw, with practice, each monk was expected to

> take into himself all the thoughts of the psalms and sing them in such a way that he utters them with the deepest emotion of the heart not as the compositions of the prophet but as if he himself were their author, as his own prayer, or certainly consider them to have been directed at himself and recognize that their words were not only already fulfilled through the prophet or in the prophet but are realized and accomplished daily in himself.[103]

Bradshaw relates that among the Egyptian monastics, "it came to be regarded as a great and worthy accomplishment to be able to get through the whole Psalter in the space of twenty-four hours: in effect, the hymn book of the secular Church became the prayer book of monasticism."[104] As Bradshaw observes, this monastic practice departed from the "Cathedral offices" practiced in churches. The monastic prayer offices became more "inward and not outward looking,"[105] and the object was the "individual meditation on the word of God."[106]

While some monastic communities used *selected* Psalms, Gillingham indicates that "it is clear that Psalms were read continuously in some traditions."[107] For instance, the Ambrosian rite completed the Psalter once every two weeks, and the Roman and Gregorian rites, usually once every week. This historical evidence clearly informs our effort to reclaim the Psalms as our daily prayers today.

Bradshaw shows that "for the nourishment of their prayer the hermits and monks meditated on the Psalter, as earlier generations had done, but there were significant differences in the way they used it."[108] The Psalms took a more central role in worship and prayer. One could argue that they were *soli Psalmi*, "Psalms-alone." Bradshaw explains that those monastics used

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[102] "ψαλμοῖς ὕμνοις ᾠδαῖς πνευματικαῖς" Colossians 3:16 NA28.
[103] See Bradshaw, *Daily Prayer*, 95.
[104] Ibid., 94.
[105] Ibid., 99.
[106] Ibid., 98.
[107] Gillingham, *Centuries*, 42.
[108] Bradshaw, *Daily Prayer*, 94.

only Psalms, "not because they lacked anything else but because there was a growing conviction in the fourth century in both secular and monastic circles that the 'songs of the Spirit'"[109]—as the Psalms were considered—were more reliable than non-canonical works which were often vessels for heresy.

This reliance on the Psalms was a distinctly new development. Holladay summarizes: "The necessity of common prayer in the newly emerging monastic communities led to a novel use of the Psalter—the practice of reciting the whole Psalter, in its biblical order, over a given period of time—normally a week—without any reference to the hour, the day, or the season."[110] And furthermore, Bradshaw adds, "whereas previously the Psalms had been used chiefly in communal situations, sung by one to others at meals and in prayer in groups, now they were also to be used to feed the prayer of individuals."[111] Here, we see the shape of praying the Psalms come more sharply into focus. We also find here our paradigm for praying the Psalms in this current project: straight through, without reference to liturgical seasons, for the edification of individual believers—rather than communities per se.

It is in the Byzantine Rite that we discover a fully developed prescription for praying the Psalms in the daily offices of prayer. Gillingham tells that the Byzantine Rite developed "first from the Liturgy of Basil of Caesarea for the churches in Antioch and [was] later adapted by John Chrysostom for the churches in Constantinople."[112] This rite's calendars, liturgical rubrics, and practice of the divine hours "became the common practice throughout the Byzantine Empire, and its influence is found in many Orthodox churches today."[113]

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[109] "ᾠδαῖς πνευματικαῖς," see Colossians 3:16 NA28. Bradshaw, *Daily Prayer*, 94.
[110] Holladay, *Three Thousand Years*, 175.
[111] Bradshaw, *Daily Prayer*, 94.
[112] Gillingham, *Psalms Through the Centuries*, 50.
[113] Ibid., 50.

By the late sixth or early seventh century, we see a clear description of the monastic offices that are very similar to the practices of Byzantine monks today. In this rite, the Psalter is organized into twenty groups (called *kathismata*, Greek for "sittings"). Each *kathisma* is divided into three parts, called a *stasis*.[114] This is the pattern that constitutes *The Holy Psalter* from St. Ignatius Orthodox Press (2022), as well as most other Orthodox Psalters: all 150 Psalms repeated—in 20 *kathismata*, each consisting of three *stases*—over the course of a week.

We can say with confidence, then, that by the end of the fourth century, monks in urban centers in Egypt developed the Liturgy of the Hours to synthesize the existing monastic and cathedral usages. Relevant to our discussion, according to Taft, they retained the "continuous monastic psalmody at the beginning and the end of the monastic order of the day."[115] So, the Psalms served as the language of prayer for monastics in the East.

St. Benedict

Saint Benedict of Nursia (480-548)—who was inspired by St. John Cassian—became the father of western monasticism as he established communities governed by his *Rule*. In Chapter 16 of his *Rule*, St. Benedict explicitly connects his divine office to Psalm 119:164 (118 LXX) "Seven times a day I praise you for your righteous rules." He then lays out his schedule for the divine offices in his communities: "We will fulfill this sacred number of seven if we satisfy our obligations of service at Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, and Compline."[116]

Besides hymns, liturgical prayers, and a lectionary of readings, the meat of St. Benedict's offices is the chanting of the Psalms. The Psalms in the daily offices were—and *are*—the backbone of Benedictine spirituality. Of course, "the divine presence is everywhere," St.

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[114] See also John A. Lamb, *The Psalms in Christian Worship* (London: The Faith Press, 1962), 61, for the division of *kathismata* and *stases*.
[115] Taft, *Liturgy of the Hours*, 90.
[116] Benedict, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, ed. Timothy Fry (New York: Vintage, 1981), 25.

Benedict declares, "but beyond the least doubt we should believe this to be especially true when we celebrate the divine office."[117] And the language of prayer is the divinely inspired Psalms. "Let us consider, then, how we ought to behave in the presence of God and his angels," he exhorts, "and let us stand to sing the psalms in such a way that our minds are in harmony with our voices."[118]

Although St. Benedict appoints certain Psalms to certain offices and certain days,[119] his overall intent is clear. There can be some adjustments in the schedule, he says, "provided that the full complement of one hundred and fifty psalms is by all means carefully maintained every week."[120] In all Benedictine traditions, Gillingham reminds us, "no other biblical book was as widely used as the Psalms."[121] This practice of the early Western Church, in its monastic communities, serves as an important hallmark for this study and project.

Summary of Monastic Use

It is obvious why the Psalms came to be the chief content of the divine hours. Lamb ponders the ongoing appeal of the biblical Psalms. The Psalter "gives to man a revelation of God and is thus a means of grace. While it is true that there is here no systematic theology, no dogmatic scheme, there is much that tells us of God, of His nature and His purpose."[122] The Psalms are sung, read, or chanted because they are part of God's inspired Word. Echoing a broad ecumenical impulse, Taft declares that in "the Psalms we answer God in his very own prayers."[123] Thomas Merton (1915-1968), a Trappist Catholic monk, discusses why the Psalms

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[117] Ibid., 28.
[118] Ibid., 28.
[119] Holladay gives an exhaustive list of the appointed daily Psalms used in the West during the early Middle Ages. See Holladay, *Three Thousand Years*, 176.
[120] Benedict, *Rule*, 28.
[121] Gillingham, *Psalms Through the Centuries*, 53.
[122] Lamb, *The Psalms in Christian Worship*, 160.
[123] Taft, *Liturgy of the Hours*, 369.

continue to possess spiritual power, from the ancient Church to the present time. The Psalms "not only form our minds according to the mind of the Church…but they *establish us in God*, they unite us to Him in Christ. But they do this only if our hearts follow their thoughts and words back into the inspired source from which they have come to us."[124]

In the words of the Psalms, we encounter a God who is like a Father who has mercy on his children, a Creator who lovingly creates and sustains, a Judge who shows compassion, a Shepherd who cares for his sheep, a King who rules over all, a great God whose steadfast love is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children's children (see Psalm 103:17). Lamb concludes that to "learn of such a God is to have wakened within the heart a response of penitence, of gratitude, of reverence, and of adoring love."[125]

Although we are borrowing our discipline of praying through the Psalms from a monastic tradition, we must remember that there is not a two-tiered system of prayer in the Church. Yes, monastics are able to devote themselves to prayer in a way that laypeople are not, but that does not mean that laypeople are forbidden—or unable—to plumb the depths of the Psalms in prayer as well. Thomas Merton advocated for such a vision—praying the Psalms as clergy and laypeople alike. Certainly, the Psalms are the "ideal prayer" for the clergy, he said, but the "Psalter is also a perfect form of prayer for the layman."[126] Merton continues: "As we recite the Psalms, His mysteries are actualized by grace in our own hearts and we participate in them with the whole Church"—clergy and laity alike.[127] Rooting us in the rich soil of the Psalms, Merton summarizes: "Therefore even in our private prayer Christ and the Church pray in us when we

[124] Thomas Merton, *Praying the Psalms* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1956), 14, emphasis in original.
[125] Lamb, *The Psalms in Christian Worship*, 160.
[126] Merton, *Praying the Psalms*, 15.
[127] Ibid., 18.

pray with the Holy Spirit. Nowhere can we be more certain that we are praying with the Holy Spirit than when we pray the Psalms."[128]

Regardless of the precise practice or who was praying, the Psalms—inherited from Israel's Writings—assumed a central position in the prayer life of the early Church, especially in its monastic communities. Lamb ties together both strands of this study: the Psalms and the hours of prayer: "It is indeed no exaggeration to say that the Psalter is the foundation of the whole system of the Hours."[129] The prominence of the Psalter is summarized best by a quotation attributed to St. John Chrysostom (or Pseudo-Chrysostom):

> If the faithful are keeping vigil in the church,
> David is first, middle, and last.
> If at dawn anyone wishes to sing hymns,
> David is first, middle, and last.
> In the holy monasteries, among the ranks of the heavenly warriors,
> David is first, middle, and last.
> In the convents of virgins, who are imitators of Mary,
> David is first, middle, and last.
> In the deserts where men hold converse with God,
> David is first, middle, and last.[130]

It is impossible for us to completely reconstruct the prayer disciplines of the earliest Christians. Despite this limitation, Taft observes that "it is perfectly obvious that the Bible, with its psalms and canticles and typology, provided the raw material and the symbols for what later would become the Liturgy of the Hours."[131] Regarding the Jewish and New Testament background of the divine office, he concludes that "Christians, like Jews, adopted the custom of

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[128] Ibid., 18.
[129] Lamb, *The Psalms in Christian Worship*, 65.
[130] Pseudo-Chrysostom, *De poenitertia*, PG LXIV, 12-13, in Gillingham, *Psalms Through the Centuries*, 51. See Lamb, *The Psalms in Christian Worship*, 30, for a different, more expansive version of this quotation.
[131] Taft, *Liturgy of the Hours*, 10.

praying at fixed times, and that the most important times for public liturgical prayer in common in both traditions were the beginning and end of the day."[132]

There remains ambiguity whether prayer in the early Christian movement was corporate or private, and the answer seems to affirm both. Cunningham deduces that although the "personal prayers of an individual carried a certain priority over public worship at one point, the early Church was conscious of having inherited a regular pattern of formal prayer from Jesus. Before the end of the second century, daily prayer was offered at morning, noon, evening, and midnight."[133]

So, while there may be some gaps in our knowledge, there is still an undeniable continuity between temple and Church. We can see clearly that the Byzantine Rite and St. Benedict's *Rule*, as examples of early prayer disciplines, were not merely conjured from thin air; they were the fruit of centuries' worth of development in the Church, both East and West, that grew from the apostles' teaching, which was informed by the Lord Jesus himself. Therefore, we are on solid historical and theological ground by proposing a liturgy of fixed prayers throughout the day, incorporating the biblical Psalms as our language for prayer.

Theological Resources

In addition to these biblical and historical insights into prayer and the Psalms, there is a wealth of Orthodox theological resources that inform this project. Why do we pray, and how do we pray today? What does it mean to pray, and what is the goal of prayer?

Richer and Deeper

Of course, many Protestants reflexively believe that spontaneous prayer is more heartfelt and therefore more authentic than set prayer. They argue that rote prayers are artificial and

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[132] Ibid., 11.
[133] Agnes Cunningham, *Prayer: Personal and Liturgical* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1985), 23.

quench the Spirit.[134] Metropolitan Anthony (Bloom) dispels this notion. "If we imagine that we can sustain spontaneous prayer throughout our life," he explains, "we are in a childish delusion."[135] Spontaneous prayer comes from a place of either exhilaration or of despair. In those moments, prayer flows out of our souls like a fountain. However, he continues, "we cannot simply turn on a tap and get" spontaneous prayer out.[136] In order to sustain a life of prayer, we need a discipline and the right words to guide our hearts into a deeper relationship with the living God.

"Deeper" and "richer" are the key terms that drive the theology of this project. Indeed, the title of this work comes from the words of Metropolitan Anthony: "*Richer and Deeper*." Anthony counsels, "We must learn that there is always more."[137] Although we are rich because of the Kingdom of God, there are always more riches yet to be revealed to us. The treasure of the Kingdom is inexhaustible. "We should think rather in terms of an increasing progression from depth to depth…so that at every step we already possess something which is rich, which is deep, and yet always go on longing for and moving towards something *richer and deeper*."[138] Protestants should not be content to pray from the shallow end of the pool, so to speak, but must be courageous to go deeper in their relationship with Jesus Christ. They must not be content to live in spiritual poverty but must open themselves to embrace the unfathomable treasure of the gospel.

To pray is not merely to ask God for what we need (e.g., Luke 18:1-8), although it is at least that. Too often people treat prayer as a transaction with God, who becomes a Dispenser of

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[134] See 1 Thessalonians 5:19.
[135] Metropolitan Anthony (Bloom), *Beginning to Pray* (New York: Paulist Press, 1970), 57.
[136] Ibid., 57.
[137] Ibid., 40.
[138] Ibid., 39, emphasis added.

good things, but not the Savior and Lover of mankind. As Metropolitan Anthony incisively points out, we "want something *from* Him, not *Him* at all."[139] But is that really a relationship at all? Is that what God desires of us—a mere transaction—and just as importantly, is that what we really want from God? To pray is to be united to the living Christ and to access the Father through the Holy Spirit.[140] Merton offers wisdom about our prayers. The self-seeking prayer that we often pursue is backwards, and our efforts in prayer "are turned in the wrong direction: toward *ourselves* rather than toward *God*."[141]

Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeyev), in concert with other Orthodox theologians, declares that prayer is nothing less than "an encounter with the Living God."[142] When we stand before God in prayer, we approach the incarnate Son and behold his glory, much like the disciples witnessed his glory on the mountaintop.[143] In prayer, we "with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another" (2 Corinthians 3:18). In this intimate communion with God, we "become partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4) and are purified, deified, and conformed to the likeness of Jesus Christ.

Nikitas Stithatos (ca. 1005-ca. 1090), an Eastern mystic and student of St. Symeon the New Theologian, endorses prayer that transcends mere transaction and engages with God through the intellect (νοῦς): "Nothing so puts you in communion with God and unites you with the divine Logos as pure noetic [i.e., engaging the νοῦς] prayer, when you pray undistractedly in the Spirit, your soul cleansed by tears, mellowed by compunction, and illumined by the light of

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[139] Ibid., 29.
[140] See Ephesians 2:18.
[141] Merton, *Praying the Psalms*, 45, emphasis added.
[142] Alfeyev, *Encounter*, 9.
[143] See Matthew 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36.

the Spirit."[144] As a point of clarification, the *nous* (νοῦς) is one constituent element of a human person. It is often translated as "intellect" because it is the highest faculty with which humans perceive God. Metropolitan Hierotheos (Vlachos), summarizing the dizzying variety of patristic witness about the *nous*, says that sometimes it is "identified with the soul, sometimes it is an energy of the soul, the eye of the soul, sometimes the term suggests the essence of the soul, [and] sometimes its energy."[145]

To pray, then, is to invite the Holy Spirit to pray *within* us, translating our deepest groans into prayer to the Father. "For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words" (Romans 8:26). By the work of this same Holy Spirit, we are adopted by God and conformed to the image of his Son, so that we cry out, "Abba! Father!"[146] In Scripture, we are enjoined to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17), but this is not merely by our own power and will; it is a participation in the Holy Spirit who is active within us. We must pray "at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication" (Ephesians 6:18).

Augustine (354-430) commends this dynamic approach to praying with the Psalms. "We recite this prayer of the Psalm in Him, and He recites it in us."[147] Saint Philaret of Moscow (1782-1867) penned a morning prayer that reflects our dependence on God, even in prayer: "Direct my will; teach me to pray; pray You Yourself in me."[148] Merton visualizes believers who reach a higher level of fellowship with God—this participation—through the Psalms: There are

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[144] Nikitas Stithatos, "On the Inner Nature of Things and on the Purification of the Intellect: One Hundred Texts," Number 69, in *The Philokalia*, trans. and eds. St. Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth (Palmer, G.E.H., et al.) (London: Faber and Faber, Vol. 4, 1979), 127.
[145] Metropolitan of Nafpaktos Hierotheos, *Orthodox Psychotherapy: The Science of the Fathers*, trans. Esther Williams (Lavadia, Greece: Birth of the Theotokos Monastery, 2005), 125.
[146] See Romans 8:15 and Galatians 4:6.
[147] Augustine, *Ennaratio in Psalm 85*, quoted in Peterson, *Answering God*, 4.
[148] St. Philaret of Moscow in *The Ancient Faith Prayer Book*, ed. Vassilios Pappavassiliou (Chesterton, IN: Ancient Faith Publishing, 2014), 10.

those who "know by experience that the Psalms are a perfect prayer, a prayer in which Christ prays in the Christian soul uniting that soul to the Father in Himself. They have entered into the Psalms with faith."[149] Tertullian also comments about praying as a participation in the Holy Trinity: "God alone could teach how he wished Himself prayed to. The religious rite of prayer therefore, ordained by Himself, and animated, even at the moment when it was issuing out of the Divine mouth, by His own Spirit, ascends, by its own prerogative, into heaven, commending to the Father what the Son has taught."[150]

Origen offers a keen insight about Christ's priestly role in our prayers. Of course, in the exalted Jesus Christ "we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven," (Hebrews 8:1; see also Hebrews 2:17 and 4:14) "who indeed is interceding for us" (Romans 8:34). Origen develops this image of Christ's priestly prayer on our behalf: the Word of God—Christ himself—is "standing in the midst even of those who do not know Him and…fails the prayer of none, to pray to the Father along with Him for whom He mediates. For the Son of God is high priest of our offerings and our pleader with the Father. He prays for those who pray and pleads along with those who plead."[151] Prayer is not merely people talking to God, but it is being swept up into the Trinitarian life: entering into communion with the Son of God, through his Spirit, as he prays for us to the Father.

Praying the Words of God in the Psalms

Praying the Psalms is to fill our prayers with the very words of God. Saint Luke tells us that the believers prayed for boldness using Psalm 2, after the apostles were arrested in the temple.[152] This informs our prayer practices today with a biblical view of Scripture in general

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[149] Merton, *Praying the Psalms*, 21.
[150] Tertullian, *On Prayer*, Chapter 9, "Recapitulation," https://ccel.org/ccel/tertullian/prayer/anf03.vi.iv.ix.html.
[151] Origen, *On Prayer*, trans. William A. Curtis (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2023), 18.
[152] See Acts 4:24-25.

and the Psalms in particular. That is, according to St. Luke's testimony, the Sovereign Lord spoke through the mouth of his servant David, by the Holy Spirit (Acts 4:24-25). Even in his own words, David claimed that he was inspired by the Holy Spirit: "The Spirit of the LORD speaks by me; his word is on my tongue" (2 Samuel 23:2). Origen remarks on the prayers captured in Scripture: "Such are the prayers, which are really spiritual because the Spirit was praying in the heart of the saints, recorded in scripture, and they are full of unutterably wonderful declarations."[153] He cites the prayer of Hannah (1 Samuel 2:1-10), but relevant to our study, he also mentions the inspiration of Psalms 18, 91, and 103 (17, 90, and 102 LXX). "These are prayers which, because truly prayers made and spoken with the Spirit, are also full of the declarations of the wisdom of God."[154] Therefore they are appropriate for our prayer as well.

Merton concludes,

> it is not so much what we get out of the Psalms that rewards us, as what we put into them. If we really make them our prayer, really prefer them to the other methods and expedients, in order to let God pray in us in His own words, and if we sincerely desire above all to offer Him this particularly pure homage of our Christian faith, then indeed we will enter into the meaning of the Psalms, and they will become our favorite vocal prayers.[155]

So, if the words of Scripture are breathed out by the Spirit of God (2 Timothy 3:16) and if the Holy Spirit spoke through the mouth of David the Psalmist (Acts 4:25), then when we pray those same words, we offer to God his own words. The Holy Spirit, who spoke through David, then speaks through us. On a *human* level, the words of the Psalms provide us with a full range of human experience—from suffering to gratitude to joy. On a *spiritual* level, the Psalms draw us

[153] Origen, *On Prayer*, 5.
[154] Ibid., 5.
[155] Merton, *Praying the Psalms*, 45.

into the life of the Holy Trinity. Because not only are the Psalms filled with God's written Word, as Merton argues, the "Psalms are full of the Incarnate Word."[156]

Richard Cain, in his dissertation on using the Psalms in the life of the Church, points to the centrality of the Psalms for prayer. "While most of Scripture speaks *to* us, the Psalms speak *for* us. They articulate the cry of our hearts whether the emotions are gladness or sorrow. Most of us are prone to read books that deal with the subject of prayer, but we often overlook the most important book of prayer ever written—the one right in the middle of our Bibles."[157]

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945), the German Lutheran theologian and Church leader, poses a question about praying the Psalms. If the Bible—including the Psalms—is the written Word of God, and if we pray the words of the Psalms, then "are these prayers to God also God's own word?"[158] He affirms this practice as part of praying *in* Jesus Christ and together *with* Jesus Christ. "This is pure grace, that God tells us how we can speak to him and have fellowship with him…The Psalms are given to us to this end, that we may learn to pray them in the name of Jesus Christ."[159]

The Hermeneutics of Praying the Psalms

Modernist biblical scholars who are steeped in critical methods devote significant energy to the area of hermeneutics. Throughout the Modern period, it is *de rigueur* to construct bridges between the supposedly ancient world of the Bible—including the Psalms—and our supposedly far-removed world of today. Even scholars who would qualify as orthodox or Christocentric go

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[156] Ibid., 8.
[157] Richard G. Cain, "Recovering One of the Lost Tools of Christian Spirituality: Praying the Psalms," (D.Min. diss., Reformed Theological Seminary, 2008), 7, emphasis added.
[158] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1970), 13.
[159] Ibid., 15.

out of their way to defend their conclusion that Christ is found on the pages of the Old Testament, including the words of the Psalms.

Jerome Creach successfully builds a bridge between us and the Psalms, as "a collection of model prayers and songs that give believers words to say in prayer and worship."[160] He finds that the Psalms are not merely some distant relic. The prayers found "in the Psalms are uniquely *our* prayers."[161] They are for us. David, he says, "is our example and he offers the words to us to take up as our own."[162] This gives us a clear, Modern apologetic for what was considered obvious to the patristic writers.

The approach of the Church Fathers was less cautious than that of Modern interpreters. In our current paradigm, we would label the Fathers as "Premodern" or "Precritical," as a code for "primitive" or "crude." We tend to engage in chronological snobbery as we look back at the practices of the Church Fathers, as though we were automatically more sophisticated than they are. But is that fair? Saint John Chrysostom practices what I consider *immediacy* with the Scriptures, and especially the Psalms. While "all the Holy Scriptures are from God," he begins, "the Psalms have something that is much more; of such a kind for immediate discretion."[163]

Truthfully, Chrysostom anticipated the Modern academic approach to using the Scriptures in the Church: "And do not let anyone say to me that prior to the interpretation one cannot know the power of the Psalms."[164] Chrysostom, unlike the careful method advocated today that emphasizes understanding before application, counsels believers to jump into the Psalms with both feet. By beginning with the Psalms, he declares, you "will know all things: the

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[160] Jerome F.D. Creach, *Discovering Psalms: Content, Interpretation, Reception* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), 21.
[161] Ibid., 21, emphasis in original.
[162] Ibid.
[163] John Chrysostom, "Introduction to the Psalms," in Ephrem Lash and Christopher M. Morgan, trans., *The Holy Psalter with the Toparia and Prayers of the Cell Vigil* (Zeeland, MI: Saint Ignatius Orthodox Press, 2022), xiii.
[164] Ibid., xx.

things concerning Christ, the things concerning resurrection, the things concerning the future life, the things concerning rest, the things concerning punishment, the things about the character of the Word, all the things concerning the dogmas, and you will discover the book that has been filled up with a myriad of good things."[165] And more than head-learning from the Psalms, the Psalms become a tool for spiritual growth. "If you should fall into temptations," advises the saint, "you will receive much comfort within these pages; and also for sin, you will discover that a myriad of medicines lie within these pages; if for need, if for distress, you will see many safe havens."[166] Although it may seem simplistic and truncated to our current sophisticated system, this is the approach that I adopt for this project: the Psalms possess power for us today, even if we do not fully understand every line of their poetry.

Chrysostom concludes with a clear admonition for his hearers—then and now: "Say these things continually. Discipline yourself from now on…If you also would take counsel with precision to investigate the things that have been said, you would also see much wealth from them."[167] This justifies the approach of prayer *first*, understanding *second*—rather than the opposite, which is pervasive today. Although studying and understanding are important to fully appreciating the Psalms, that understanding is parallel to praying the Psalms. We do not need to first subject the Psalms to critical science—to circle them from above, deciding how to approach them with lofty indifference. We are permitted to launch into their words now, where we expect to encounter the Incarnate Word in the Written Word.

Based on evidence within and beyond the New Testament, Bradshaw argues that the earliest Christians viewed the Psalms as thoroughly Christocentric. Each Psalm, he says, was

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[165] Ibid., xvi.
[166] Ibid., xvi.
[167] Ibid., xvii.

"understood as speaking *of* Christ, or *to* Christ, or *as* Christ speaking, and this Christological interpretation was continued in the second and third centuries."[168] Jesus himself chided his disciples for not seeing this very point: "'O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?' And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:25b-27). In another place, Jesus affirms that the Scriptures "bear witness about me" (John 5:39b). Therefore, we are on firm historical ground when we freely see and hear Christ in the Psalms.

Holladay rightly observes that most of the Church Fathers appeal to the Psalms for apologetics to prove that Jesus of Nazareth is the Anointed One described in the Psalms. However, when dealing with the Psalms, "there was never any distinction, such as we might make, between theology on the one hand and the critical interpretation of a commentary on the other. Scripture was always interpreted on the basis of the stated faith of the Church."[169]

Likewise, many Modern interpreters are inclined to construct a careful hermeneutic that allows them to look backwards—from the New Testament to the Old Testament—before they can see glimpses of Jesus in the words of the Psalms. The assumption is that the Old Testament is fundamentally a Jewish book, whose prophets had no knowledge of the Messiah who was to come. But the Church Fathers instinctively saw Jesus on every page. It is worth noting that the Eastern Fathers were using the Greek Septuagint, which created more literary resonance between the Jewish Writings and the Christian kerygma. It was easy for them to connect the dots when the Greek Psalms use χριστός (*christos*) to designate the Anointed One.[170] Again, it is simple to see

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[168] Bradshaw, *Daily Prayer*, 43, emphasis added.
[169] Holladay, *Three Thousand Years*, 169.
[170] E.g., "κατὰ τοῦ κυρίου καὶ κατὰ τοῦ χριστοῦ αὐτοῦ," "against the Lord and his Anointed One/Christ." Psalm 2:2b LXX

the Church even in the Old Covenant when the Psalms use the term ἐκκλησία (*ekklesia*) to describe the assembly of God's people.[171]

Father Patrick Henry Reardon reinforces this Christocentric and Orthodox approach. "It is the profound Christian persuasion," he insists, "that Christ walks within the Psalms."[172] It is right that Christians pray the Psalms because "Christ is the referential center of the Book of Psalms."[173] There are obvious messianic Psalms that were interpreted definitively by the apostles in their writings.[174] Some of the Psalms are found on the lips of Jesus himself.[175] But the Church trains us to see Christ everywhere, on every page and in every Psalm.

Blessed Augustine declared it bluntly and gave us an invitation: "All that there is of those former Scriptures [i.e., the Old Testament] tell of Christ; but only if it find ears. He also 'opened their understanding that they might understand the Scriptures' [Luke 24:45]. Whence we also must pray for this, that He would open our understanding."[176] And to Augustine, I add my "amen."

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[171] E.g., "ἐν μέσῳ ἐκκλησίας ὑμνήσω σε," "In the middle of the assembly/Church, I will hymn you." Psalm 22:23 (21:23 LXX)
[172] Patrick Henry Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms* (Ben Lomond, CA: Conciliar Press, 2000), xvi.
[173] Ibid., xvii.
[174] E.g., Psalm 2/Acts 4:25-26; Psalm 8/Hebrews 2:6-8; Psalm 110 (109 LXX)/ Matthew 22:44//Mark 12:36//Luke 20:42-Luke 20:43, the Letter to the Hebrews.
[175] E.g., Psalm 22 (21 LXX)/Matthew 27:46//Mark 15:34; Psalm 31 (30 LXX)/Luke 23:46.
[176] Augustine, *Homily 2 on the First Epistle of John*, Paragraph 1. https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/170202.htm.

Chapter Three: The Project

"Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law."

Psalm 119:18

"When the Holy Spirit acts in the soul, that person sings Psalms and prays, in total submission and meekness in the secret of her heart."

St. Diadochos of Photiki (ca. 400-ca. 486)[177]

Introduction: Project Overview

As articulated in Chapter One, I initiated this research to explore how my church members' spiritual lives can be enriched by appropriating practices from the long Tradition of Orthodoxy, especially the tradition of praying the Psalms. Too often, Protestants live and operate in denominational bubbles that ignore the first 1,500 years of Church history, and they do not appreciate the wealth of spiritual treasures available from the ancient Christian East. Living in such a closed system produces spiritual impoverishment; it also exacerbates our divisions in Christianity and promotes living sectarian lifestyles cut off from the catholicity of the Church.

I set about to explore this question by isolating two elements from Byzantine monastic practice—praying the Psalms and using a monastic schedule of prayer—to see how my church members would connect with these spiritual practices. I intentionally employed an open-ended qualitative approach, but I did speculate beforehand that through the practice of praying the canonical Psalms (imitating an Orthodox monastic rule), my church people would experience a deeper, richer personal prayer life and draw nearer to Jesus Christ.

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[177] Diadochos of Photiki, *Chapters on Spiritual Perfection*, 73, in Cunningham, *Prayer: Personal and Liturgical*, 143.

As I contemplated this project, I speculated that some of the participants would resist praying through the Psalter in 20 days and think it was "too much." But I believed then that the practice would be embraced by many. It was my intuition that most people would find great spiritual value in the discipline and wisdom in the rule. My hypothesis was partially correct. Participants reported finding great spiritual value in praying the Psalms. A majority either rejected the schedule of praying or modified it to suit their needs.

To begin our analysis, we must define our terms and establish our methods. "Praying the Psalms" is a vague term that calls for a standardized definition and procedure for this project. In exploring the historical practices of praying through the Psalms, it becomes clear that the earliest, complete practice is from the Byzantine monastic tradition, as elaborated above in Chapter Two. We have generally followed the Byzantine pattern, with minor modification. For this project, we have divided the Psalter into twenty sections (Greek, *kathismata*), and each section (Greek, *kathisma*) has been divided into three parts (*stases*).

Although this ancient pattern is relevant for our purposes, there are factors that required adjustment for this project. Expecting participants to pray through all 150 Psalms in a week—let alone in a day, as some spiritual athletes did and do—is too much for ordinary laypeople. This pattern was originally intended for monastics whose lives were centered around prayer; our people today have work and families that prevent them from such marathons of prayer. Therefore, we stretched the cycle out to twenty days: one section (*kathisma*) per day, with each group (*stasis*) being prayed at morning, midday, and evening.[178]

Another factor that requires adjustment is the numbering of the Psalter. The Byzantine office relies on the Greek Version numbering, which is different than the Masoretic Text used in

[178] See Appendix 2 for the Psalter division for this project.

Western traditions. In my ministry context, the Septuagint numbering is completely foreign and would be distracting to the larger purpose of this research. Therefore, we have adjusted the Psalter numbering according to the Masoretic Text tradition, which is common to virtually all English translations of the Bible from Hebrew.[179]

On a similar note, we have also avoided using "under-translated" Greek terminology that is unfamiliar or distracting for my English-speaking participants. So, instead of "*kathisma*," we have used "day," and instead of "*stasis*" (or other unfamiliar phrasing such as "matins," "compline," or "vespers"), we have simply called the divisions or groups of Psalms "morning," "midday," and "evening."

There are other important—yet tangential—issues related to praying the Psalms that do not cross the threshold of importance for this project. Many books on the Psalms focus on understanding the Psalms as Scripture. This is not our primary concern; we are not preparing an exegetical or hermeneutical commentary.[180] There are other questions worthy of study as well, but that fall beyond the boundaries of this project: Should the Psalms be chanted, or sung in a metrical setting, or merely read? Should they be spoken aloud? Should the Psalms be prayed in a communal setting or individually, as devotions? Does the translation of the Psalms make a difference? Once again, while certainly being important questions, these are not the focus of our study.

Project Implementation

Participants were recruited from the First Baptist Church and the First United Presbyterian Church of Atlantic, Iowa. Although these churches are denominationally affiliated, their individual adherents are from a variety of backgrounds, including Lutheran, Methodist,

[179] Please refer to Appendix 3 for the numbering adjustments.
[180] See Chapter 2 above for my discussion about the hermeneutics of praying the Psalms.

Catholic, and Nothing in Particular. Twenty-nine self-selected, adult participants originally attended an informational meeting and signed the informed consent form—which was consistent with my initial goal of thirty participants. Of those original 29, 24 completed a survey—a return rate of 87%.

The demographics of those 24 participants reveal a fairly skewed group. The clear majority of the sample are in their 70s, with only a few strays falling below the threshold of retirement age. This is a particular concern that will curb my ability to extrapolate the results to others. In addition, all participants—like all members of both churches—are white and of European descent.

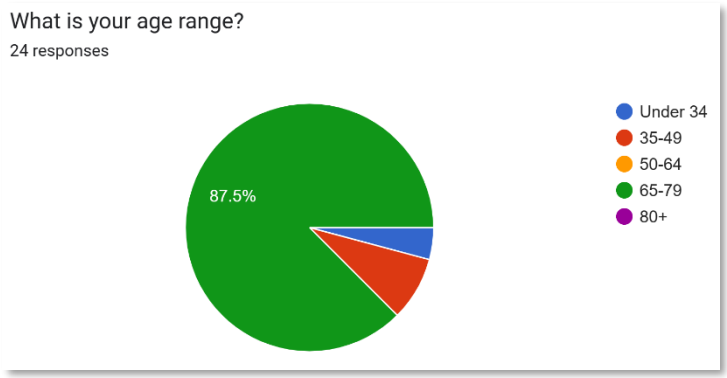

Figure 2 Participant Age Range

Twenty-one of the 24 reported being in the 65–79-year-old category. Two were 35-49, and only one was younger than 34. This age distribution bears strongly on the discipline of praying through the Psalms at an aggressive pace; retired people will have more time to spend on spiritual practices than working people will.

Two-thirds of the sample are females (16), and the remaining one-third are males (8); this seems broadly consistent with the data that active church members tend to be female.

When asked about their experience in churches, the overwhelming majority identified a long personal history in the Church. Twenty-three reported that they have been active in a church for more than 25 years. Only one respondent chose the "10-24 years" option; this is most likely our lone participating high school student who has grown up in the church, but who is still relatively young. The religious affiliation measure was not surprising at all. Eleven of the group identified as Presbyterians, 10 identified as Baptists, and the remaining individual wrote in a hybrid affiliation: "Lutheran and Baptist."

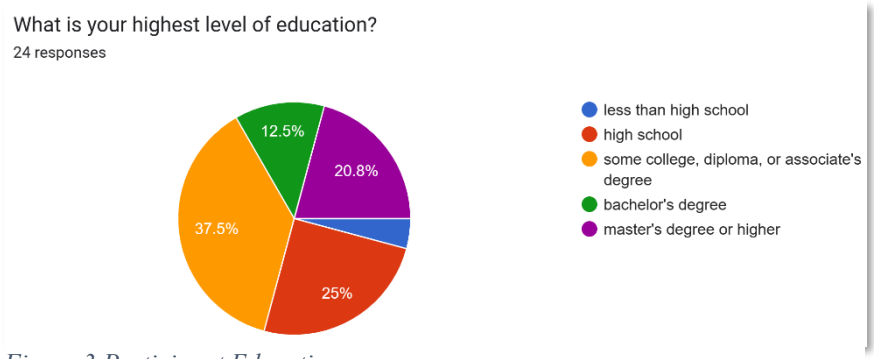

Figure 3 Participant Education

The education question revealed our sample to have diverse educational attainment: 1 did not complete high school[181]; 6 (25%) finished high school; 9 (37.5%) completed some college, a diploma, or an associate's degree; 3 (12.5%) hold a bachelor's degree; and 5 (20.8%) have completed a master's degree or higher. Since I did not sort data by individuals, I cannot determine which congregation has the higher levels of education.

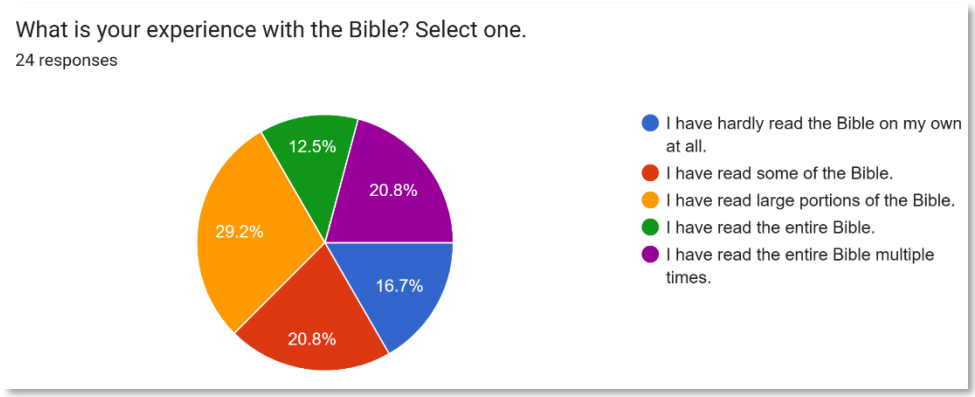

Figure 4 Participant Bible Experience

The most interesting demographic question reveals a diversity of experience with the

[181] Once again, this is likely our one, lone student in the group who has not yet finished high school.

Bible. When asked, "What is your experience with the Bible?" there was quite a division: 4 (16.7%) admitted that they have hardly read the Bible on their own at all, 5 (20.8%) reported reading some of the Bible, 7 (29.2%, the largest plurality) said they have read large portions of the Bible, 3 (12.5%) reported reading the entire Bible, and an impressive 5 said they have read the Bible through several times.

Participants gathered for an Advent meal and informational session on November 29. There they received a brief set of instructions and a pattern to follow for the duration of the project.[182] Participants were encouraged to use whatever Bible translation is familiar to them. With their informed consent, they were asked to pray—and not merely *read*—through the Psalter over a period of twenty days, divided into three groups of Psalms each day. Each group ("*stasis*") was framed by a brief, spontaneous prayer for guidance before and the Lord's Prayer after.[183] At the end of twenty days, each participant was given a survey (through Google Forms) to complete as a reflection on their experience.[184]

In this particular project, we prayed through the Psalms from December 1 through December 20, 2023. This timeframe aligned with the observance of Advent, and the project was promoted as a tool for spiritually preparing for Christmas. Following the end of the twenty-day period, on Friday, December 22, I convened a voluntary focus group of interested participants who were encouraged to share their experiences and feedback from the project.

Project Results

Survey Responses

[182] See Appendix 1. These instructions, as well as the schedule of Psalm-prayers, are a "product" of this project; they can be easily used and adapted to most any ministry context.
[183] See the *Didache*, 8.3, which enjoins the faithful to pray the Lord's Prayer three times each day.
[184] See Appendix 4 for the survey questions.

In the survey, I included six open-ended questions designed to elicit responses from the participants about their experience praying through the Psalms over the 20-day period. Below, I analyze the results of each question, with an eye on my hypothesis. I wanted to know how my church people's spiritual lives could be strengthened by engaging in an Orthodox practice, praying through the Psalms over a period of 20 days. As mentioned before, I presumed that a few of the participants would chafe against the vigorous schedule praying, but I felt that the practice would be embraced by many. For the second prong of this research, I predicted that most participants would find great spiritual value in the Psalms as prayers.

Question One: **Thinking about the schedule of praying through the Psalms (20 days, three times each day), were you able to keep the schedule of praying? Why or why not?**

The aggressive, monastic discipline was one of my primary areas of inquiry. Could "ordinary" Protestant Christians (laypeople) feel comfortable with such an ambitious schedule? And on that question, does it make a difference whether the participants are retired or working? Approximately one-quarter of the participants agreed without qualification that they were able to keep up and even find satisfaction in the rhythm. Another one-quarter expressed the negative: no, they were not able to keep up. The other half explained how they modified the schedule to work for their lifestyles.

Among those who were favorable to the pace, one person said that "It was a little challenging at first, but then I got into the flow and was able to finish." Another person, who is surely retired, reported, "I was able to keep the schedule because I had time to complete the readings periodically throughout the day." Still another participant wrote, "I was able to keep the schedule for the first week. Then I got behind and couldn't get the habit going." It is insightful that this person used the term "habit" in reference to their prayer practice. Beyond the spiritual

and theological approach, there is another element that affects our prayer lives. The current of behavioral psychology runs just below the surface of our spiritual practices. Further research could explore this connection: How do our habits promote or sabotage our prayer disciplines? How can we increase the chances of success by implementing psychological principles into our spiritual practices (e.g., repetition, operant and classical conditioning, reinforcement, schedules of reinforcement)? Humans are habitual creatures—for good or for bad—and that surely includes our spiritual habits.[185]

Among those who modified the rule to better suit their lives, several said that they compressed the three offices of prayer into one block per day, especially in the morning. For those who work, the midday prayer was simply not practical. Others got behind and had to catch up the previous day to keep on pace. One respondent said, "My schedule would not allow me to devote three times each day." One could argue about setting priorities, but I sympathize with having work and children and not feeling like I can dedicate sufficient time to spiritual pursuits.

Two respondents offered wise and thoughtful feedback about the pace of praying the Psalms. One participant simply said, "No. [The schedule] didn't give time to really read and study what I was reading." This person discerned the tension between quantity and quality of prayer. What is more important—to read over lots of verses, or to go deeper into a smaller number of verses? Of course, this project is not a Bible study (which is the word used by this participant, "study"), and the emphasis is on *praying*—rather than *understanding*—the Psalms. But no doubt, understanding and savoring the words of Scripture are themselves acts of prayer.

Another participant responded: "No. Part [of the breakdown] was the pace: too much too fast…I felt I was focusing more on the accomplishment instead of the intent of 'the Word.'" This

[185] See below for further discussion of the role of habits in spiritual disciplines.

is fair criticism of our one-size-fits-all monastic model. Even those monks in Egypt long ago saw praying through the Psalter in 24 hours as a spiritual flex, consistent with their ascetic lifestyle. The pace, as our respondent observed, can come at the expense of depth of engagement. This person continued: "The first week I kept the pace, after that no. I read one Psalm a day and that has always been a song or prayer in my mind. I will continue to do that as before." This is reminiscent of the Psalms themselves: "By day the LORD commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life" (Psalm 42:8). Likewise, it echoes Eugene Peterson's observations about praying the Psalms: "we cannot speed-read a poem. Poetry cannot be hurried."[186]

Question Two: **Thinking about the content of the Psalms, what was your experience using them for your prayers? How did you feel while praying through the Psalms?**

A handful of participants expressed that praying the Psalms had been "useful" for them, in the sense of learning a new scheme or approach to prayer. "I learned a method or pattern that I could use in my own prayers going forward." "I felt this was a very useful form of prayer." "I found them very helpful." While I am grateful for the sentiment, I almost feel that some of these responses are attempting to "please the teacher" and tell the researcher what he wants to hear. I do hope that praying the Psalms is a "useful" practice for them, even if the emphasis is not utilitarian, but rather theological.

Another common sentiment for this question was that the Psalms are repetitive. Someone observed that over several Psalms, there is a repetition of vocabulary and ideas: "evildoers" and "enemies" were singled out. "A lot of repeating," one person commented. "I have never read the Psalms, so it was new to me," one participant offered, "but I did find it rather repetitious." I

[186] Peterson, *Answering God*, 60.

believe that if people took their time and prayed more slowly, they would not detect the repetition as strongly.

Another strand in this tapestry of responses was the emotions of reading through the Psalms. Some reported feeling "peaceful," "emotional," "grateful," "thankful," "encouraged," and "uplifted." "The Psalms are beautiful. They leave one with a feeling of joy, peacefulness, understanding, promise, and much, much more." Another participant took a more detached—and even humorous—approach to the emotional content of the Psalms: "Reading them all at once (over time) got me thinking more about the content and emotions of the psalms. I don't know that I have ever been as depressed as the author seems to be."

Related to this is how the Psalms serve to lead us in a spiritual pathway. Some described feeling moved to compunction, even when the Psalm was oriented toward praise. "Sometimes I prayed asking for forgiveness more than praising him." This is an excellent insight; drawing near to God, even in praise, can prompt us to examine our worthiness. As another person confessed, the Psalms serve as a springboard into more prayer, and not less: "To be honest there were times when I finished the appointed reading and felt like I would have liked to go longer."

Perhaps the most profound insight revealed in these responses refers to connecting our inner yearning with the words of the Psalms (see Romans 8:26). On the one hand, some people expressed a disconnect with the words of the Psalms. "I sometimes felt the Psalm I was praying was not what I felt in my heart, for instance fighting and destroying my enemy (e.g., Psalm 18:35-42), as well as feeling that I was not worthy to pray some of the self-aggrandizing wordings (e.g., Psalm 17:3-5)." In casual conversation early on in the process, one of the participants—presumably the same person—expressed this same caution. She said to me, "I'm trying to decide if I want to use the words of the Psalms for my prayers." Another respondent

referred to the imprecatory Psalms that lurk around the periphery of all discussions of praying the Psalms: "At times I did not resonate with the words as a prayer, especially the more vengeful and wrathful parts."[187]

On the other hand, some people disclosed that the Psalms did, in fact, express their feelings and gave words to their groanings. "There are some very moving Scriptures in the Psalms, and I found a certain level of comfort in using them as prayers." Another participant got into the spirit of using the Psalms as prayers, to enter into God's presence: "As I read them in prayer form, I thought about how they related to my life. They provided comfort." "I felt that many Psalms at times were reflecting my personal thoughts and prayers." This is consonant with St. Isaac the Syrian (ca. 613-ca. 700), who emphasized the importance of storing up the words of the Psalms in one's heart:[188] "Most prayers, in fact, consist of words chosen from Psalms containing ideas and sentiments of grief and supplication, or of thanksgiving and praise."[189]

In casual conversation during the first week of this project, one man shared to me how powerfully some of the Psalms connected with his experience. This man was previously diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in 2019, and the prognosis for him at the time was grim. However, he was healed and has recovered from his disease. He shared with me that through his experience, the words of the Psalms have become his own words, specifically from Psalm 30: "O LORD my God, I cried to you for help, and you have healed me. O LORD, you have brought up my soul from Sheol; you restored me to life from among those who go down to the pit" (Psalm 30:2-3). For him, he knows that he was healed by God, so praise is due the Savior.

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[187] As an aside, if I attempted this project again, I might consider providing workshops or some kind of co-curricular coaching to help participants grasp the seemingly problematic elements of praying the Psalms (e.g., the imprecatory Psalms) and to make sense of the less accessible Psalm passages (e.g., the "enemies" or "foes").
[188] See Psalm 119:11
[189] St. Isaac the Syrian, "Texts on Prayer and Outward Posture During Prayer," in Brock, *The Syriac Fathers*, 290.

This is a crucial pastoral question: When and what should we pray? Should we only give voice to that which stirs within us, or should we follow the Psalms regardless of their emotional relevance? Bonhoeffer offers advice about following the words of the Psalms as a curriculum and how they teach us to pray. "The richness of the Word of God ought to determine our prayer, not the poverty of our heart."[190] Elaborating on that point, Bonhoeffer says that it "does not depend, therefore, on whether the Psalms express adequately that which we feel at a given moment in our heart. If we are to pray aright, perhaps it is quite necessary that we pray contrary to our own heart."[191] In other words, if we are only ever complaining and lamenting—even with the words of the Psalms—perhaps God wants us to lift our eyes higher and engage in doxology and gratitude. Such is the pattern of the Psalms.

There is also a deeper theological question below the surface of this issue, how we should pray with the Psalms, even if they don't match our emotions. If we pray in the life of the Trinity—the Spirit prays in us to the Father, through the Son—then we participate in dynamic prayer that is larger than ourselves. Bonhoeffer instructs us that the "Psalter is the vicarious prayer of Christ for his Church,"[192] and we participate in that prayer through the Holy Spirit. But what about when we encounter a Psalm that we do not agree with, that does not express our inner experience? Bonhoeffer points to God praying in us: "A Psalm that we cannot utter as a prayer, that makes us falter and horrifies us, is a hint to us that here Someone else is praying, not we."[193] Therefore, when we encounter a voice in the Psalms protesting his innocence, invoking God's

[190] Bonhoeffer, *Prayer Book*, 15.
[191] Ibid., 14.
[192] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: A Discussion of Christian Fellowship*, trans. John W. Doberstein (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1954), 46.
[193] Ibid., 45.

judgment, or experiencing the depth of suffering, it is "none other than Jesus Christ himself. He it is who is praying here, and not only here but in the whole Psalter."[194]

Question Three: **What did you gain, if anything, through this process? Please elaborate.**

It was encouraging to read the responses to this question. I will reflect more on these responses in Chapter 4 as I draw out the conclusions of this project.

Many people expressed a change in their habits and disciplines related to prayer and Scripture. Someone reported, "I got in a habit of reading the Bible and praying more than just three times a day." That person not only engaged in the monastic offices, but he or she also experimented with praying without ceasing throughout the day, between the prescribed times of prayer. What did you gain? "Discipline. Praying with a daily schedule," was one response. "I felt good about reading/praying on a regular basis," was another. "I gained a better resolve to set aside time for Bible reading and prayer." "It did get me in the habit of reading the Bible every morning." "I gained a respect for setting aside time for extended reading and studying." Another person appreciated "the habit of reading the Bible out loud," a practice I had originally recommended as a way to promote focus. One participant eloquently expressed what was gained in this project: "I appreciated the pause, setting time aside morning, noon, and evening, to pray and read scripture. It was actually very calming and centering."

These responses highlight the importance of the daily rhythm of making time and space for dedicated prayer, rather than just praying fleetingly throughout the day. Inherent in these responses is also a need for flexibility in the discipline, but I will examine that element more later.

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[194] Ibid., 45.

Other responses underscore the importance of the Psalms *themselves*, over against other practices and prayers. In a statement that would surely make the Church Fathers smile and nod their heads in agreement, someone commented, "I gained a new appreciation for the simplicity and beauty of the Psalms." Another proclaimed, "I gained a better insight of how to apply the Psalms to my life." And another echoed that sentiment: "I gained some insight in how I can use the Psalms in my daily prayers." One participant expressed "a clearer understanding of what the content of the Book of Psalms was intended to be used for and who first used them as prayers and hymns." Another person gained "better knowledge of what is in the Psalms and the ability to pick out favorite ones to go to for prayer and" meditation.

If the ancient Egyptian monastics used the Psalms to guard against heresy, they were not the last ones to do so. One person in our group—presumably a man who grew up in the United Presbyterian Church that was long ago absorbed by the Presbyterian Church—expressed a "better appreciation of the Psalms and thinking about early United Presbyterians only singing the Psalms." It is true that Reformed Protestants have traditionally employed only the canonical Psalms in their worship—rejecting hymnody out of hand—and have treated the Psalter as their official hymnbook.

Besides the discipline of daily prayer and the importance of the Psalms, others offered insights from their experience. "I gained more faith in God, that if it got better for them [i.e., the Psalmists], it could get better for me." Another expressed a similar sentiment: "I noted the pleading prayers of the people of those times. We may have advanced in communication, but these ancient prayers were very meaningful, and I found myself thinking about these people and how modern-day concerns and worries might not really be so different from those of ancient civilizations." I consider this a victory, that someone would contemporize the ancient words of

Scripture to be our own, rather than treating them as distant historical relics. This is the correct hermeneutic to employ for this activity. I also celebrate this comment: "I found myself talking to God throughout the days more." This is a step closer to the biblical idea of praying unceasingly: constant, spontaneous prayer to God that is punctuated and anchored by the divine hours. Others expressed spiritual insight from their praying through the Psalms: "I learned that there is a personal reward that only comes from taking the time to glorify God." "There is hope if you pray." And finally, one person learned "to be a better person and to give my worries to God. He answers all prayers."

One comment stood out from the others here. I imagine that it was made by a Baptist, or at least by someone who loves "the Word," almost certainly meaning in this context "the written Word," equivalent to the Bible. But there is a deeper, perhaps unintended, meaning conveyed here. The participant said, "I felt very close to the word." This, of course, can refer to an almost anthropomorphic Bible—an active, living "Word" that comes to prophets and ordinary people alike. However, as Christians know—and as the Fathers constantly emphasize—the Word of God is the Son of God, who "became flesh and dwelt among us," (John 1:14) and who has made the Father known to the world (John 1:18). The profound insight here is that drawing near to the written Word of God brings into contact with the living, incarnate Word of God, whose Spirit breathed into life the pages of Scripture.

Question Four: **How has this experience impacted your spiritual life, your relationship with God?**

A couple of participants were blasé about the project's effects on their spiritual walk. One spoke frankly: "It didn't hurt my relationship with God, but I'm not sure that it really changed it either." Another person seemed to express a preference for communal worship, rather than

individualistic, Bible-based devotion: “I am glad for the times that we spend together in God; I’m not sure that reading the Bible alone will be my best relationship with God.” One other participant was cautiously optimistic: “[This experience] has enhanced it [i.e., my spiritual life] some.” Another participant, perhaps defending his or her failure to keep up with the discipline, gave a longer response, advocating for diversity in prayer practices—formal and informal. This person concluded: “[God] loves my willing heart and me—without a strict regimen.”

The remainder of the sample, however, heartily endorsed the project’s impact on their spiritual life. From the tepid (“My relationship with God is good.”) to the effusive (“Definitely impacted my spiritual life! This experience brought me closer to the Lord.”), many expressed satisfaction in this area. There is not sufficient space to relate all the positive comments here, but there are some that stand out. “It has made me feel that I have more trust in [God] than I have had before.” This sounds like genuine spiritual growth, although there could be a tinge of telling the researcher what he wants to hear. Still, another person reported that “[the project] has helped me draw closer to my Lord and Savior.”

Others qualified how praying the Psalms improved their spiritual lives: “It made me feel closer to God. I have a better devotion time with him.” “Makes me feel more accessible to God through prayer.” It is possible that any sort of prayer rule might bring about an enhanced sense of God’s presence. Future research could isolate how, precisely, the Psalms are edifying to one’s spiritual life. For instance, one person expressed how the Psalms boosted his or her relationship with God: “This experience enhanced my relationship with God; I found many different areas that these hymns or prayers touched on. Prayers for every need or problem and prayers/hymns of praise to express thankfulness to God.”

Finally, someone—probably the person who expressed a similar sentiment on the previous question—reported, "I feel very close to God and his word." Once again, there is a creative ambiguity in the use of the term "word." For drawing near to the written Word is to draw near to the living, incarnate, resurrected Word, whom the apostles saw in his glory on the mountaintop.[195]

Question Five: **Would you consider continuing this pattern of praying the Psalms? Please explain.**

Respondents were evenly divided between "no," "yes," and "maybe, with modifications."

Besides one blunt "no," some participants offered a nuanced response about their continuation in this way. "No. I don't think I am that desperate to have God in my life, for he is already there." "I am not sure I will continue being quite so structured in my praying," is how another person put it. "I'm doubtful," one person reported. That person continued, "I do our daily devotional, as well as our Bible Study lesson; time is limited." "No, there are some great passages but not something that kept me wanting more. Not sure if it was the speed-to-understanding ratio."

This too-much-too-fast sentiment was expressed by the "maybe, with modifications" crowd. "It was hard to do that fast; if it was slower, it would have been better." Others intend to continue in some fashion of praying the Psalms, but less aggressively: "I will read a Psalm each day." "I most likely will not do this every day, but I have bookmarked some of my favorite Psalms and will look to them for comfort in times of prayer." "I will continue with my one Psalm a day. I want to be able to absorb it and make it more than a routine." "Yes," another agreed, but "in bits and pieces, not all at once." "I will read the Psalms for comfort. I may pray the Psalms at

[195] See Matthew 17:1-8//Mark 9:2-8//Luke 9:28-36.

times but not to the extent we have recently through this exercise." One person committed to using the Psalms as a springboard for further in-depth study of Scripture: "I would like to continue praying the Psalms as well as studying cross references relating to Jesus in the New Testament."

Those who agreed to continue on said, "Yes. Some of the Psalms give me peace and encouragement." Echoed by, "Yes, I really enjoyed reading the Psalms; it was very uplifting." And again: "Yes, I would consider continuing this pattern of praying the Psalms. Continuity of reading certain selections each day established a schedule or routine that has become comforting and gives me a feeling of peace. I look forward each day to reading more of the Psalms."

And also, "Yes, it was very comforting the way they are phrased and their content. Definitely keep my favorites bookmarked so I can go back to them on a regular basis." This cataloging of genres and prayer types within the Psalter seems to be a common desire. Knowing how to select and use the Psalms as prayers on-demand is aided by familiarity and a good directory of Psalm types.

In Chapter Four, I will discuss alternate schedules that are also historically grounded in the ancient Church but provide a more realistic scenario for "ordinary" Christians who are not retired and who are not monastics capable of running spiritual marathons. This is a major issue of this project and deserves more space.

Question Six: **Is there anything else you would like to share about this experience?**

For those who chose to respond, there were some who identified spiritual insights (especially related to the Psalms), and others who commented on the discipline itself (both positively and negatively). This is gratifying since those two prongs (the Psalms and the daily office) were the thrust of my project.

For those who commented on the discipline:

- “It was a little hard to do in that large of chunks.”
- “I did find the Psalms a little repetitive.”
- “The wife and I read Psalms over and over, and it always seems we learn something new every time.”
- “It was a challenge, but an experience that was very worthwhile.”
- “I was happy to take part in Praying the Psalms even though I didn’t do it 3 times a day.”
- “It was an interesting challenge, to help me keep prayers and study as a daily routine.”

Some offered some wonderful insights about the Psalms and prayer:

- “Looking at the Psalms as prayers offered to God makes them more powerful than words someone penned.”
- “It opened my eyes that there is help from God when you pray.”
- “I am glad that I participated in this exercise as I have found a new way to use Scripture in my prayer life.”
- “First time I’ve read through the entire Psalms. Uplifting. Definitely picked out some favorites I’ll refer to regularly. Realizing God’s omnipresence and omniscience.”
- “I feel better about things that have happened in my life.”
- “I’m thankful for the experience.”
- “This was a valuable and meaningful experience.”

Focus Group Responses

I invited all participants to attend a voluntary focus group to further discuss their experiences during the project. The focus group convened Friday, December 22, 2023, at noon at the First Baptist Church building. Only two participants—a man and a woman, both retired and in their early 70s—showed up. I presume that everyone else was satisfied with their feedback on the survey and therefore chose not to attend. Otherwise, it was the Friday before Christmas—a time of busy preparation for many people.

The two participants—whom I will call Solomon and Sarah—were ready to discuss their experiences praying through the Psalms. Solomon, in fact, had a lengthy set of detailed notes made on the schedule that he had tucked into his Bible. I recorded our conversation for approximately 45 minutes. In this section, I will distill the feedback into themes.

Sarah began by observing that the Psalms have very few "we" passages. "It's almost always 'I.' '*I* am depressed,' '*I* am joyful,' and '*I* praise the Lord.'" She reported that she had not noticed this before. In her own perspective, the communal dimension is important; the first-person-singular approach to God felt unfamiliar to her. In her own prayer life, she includes her family and community, so when praying the Psalms, she felt the need to "add something" beyond the self-focused, individualistic concerns. "*We* are joyful." "*We* praise the Lord."

Solomon discussed his own prayer disciplines and highlighted praying before meals and then throughout the day. He reported that his thinking about God all day long goes along with being a Christian for a long time. Solomon found great value in the Psalms, as an addition to his prayer life. "These give us a track to run on, for sure—the Psalms." When asked to elaborate on that, he pointed toward the different genres of the Psalms that give us words to speak to God.

I asked the participants whether praying all 150 Psalms during the course of 20 days was—for an "ordinary" person—too much, too little, or about right. Solomon immediately replied, "I thought it's too much because it's too much to absorb in one day." After contemplating briefly, he said, "But it's doable. I got through it. I got them all read, but not in the depth I might like." This seems to correspond to the sentiment of several on the survey: It was quantity at the expense of quality—breadth over depth.

Sarah chimed in with a similar thought. She said that taking a whole month might be a better pace, and perhaps twice a day instead of three times per day. "A lot of times, I'd do the whole day in the evening," she admitted, "because I was doing who knows what during the day." Solomon nodded and said, "Same here." He then admitted to going ahead a few times and then other times getting behind a day or so, so that he had to "get back on track."

Sarah shifted the conversation to the content of praying the Psalms. She had mentioned to me early on, in casual conversation, that she was unsure whether all the words of the Psalms were really her prayers. "Some of the things where he [i.e., the Psalmist] is talking about…waging war and 'the Lord has allowed us'—I'm just not sure I want to wage war." I affirmed her hesitancy, citing the *historical* as well as the *spiritual* value of the Psalms; that is, King David *literally* made war against his military enemies, and Christians are waging *spiritual* war against our bodiless enemies who seek to destroy our souls. She continued by observing that sometimes the Psalms challenged her prayers. For instance, if a Psalm expressed praise and gratitude to the Lord, it made her consider that she had not praised God or shown adequate gratitude.

Solomon offered something he had gleaned from this project. "I firmly believe that in the process God leads you." He began to be emotional at this point, showing how meaningful some of the Psalms had been to his prayer life. Solomon is the man from our congregation who was healed of pancreatic cancer, and he has expressed his wonder at his recovery. "It was the right time that I was supposed to read these," he said, gesturing to his Bible, which was open to the Psalms. I clarified his meaning: "There was a Providence about it?" And he affirmed that was his meaning. With more emotion, Solomon turned pages and said, "My favorite one is 139." Struggling to compose himself, he said, "Sorry," but I batted away his guilt. "I feel like he leads us to be where we're supposed to be." Solomon then found his voice and quoted that Psalm: "O LORD, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up." And he concluded, "Most of it [i.e., the Psalter] is very comforting."

This seems to be a perfect appropriation of the Psalms to one's personal, contemporary prayer life: "You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me" (Psalm 139:5).

Later on, during the focus group, Solomon also referred to Psalm 116 as speaking to his experience: "I love the LORD, because he has heard my voice and my pleas for mercy. Because he inclined his ear to me, therefore I will call on him as long as I live. The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me" (Psalm 116:1-3a).

Solomon then returned to the pacing of the discipline. "We did it so fast, we had a lot to comprehend. We need to go back!" I affirmed his concern and suggested ways to adjust the rule to fit their lifestyles. In retrospect, I should have used that opportunity to encourage him to continue the discipline, one cycle after another until it doesn't feel so fast. "But it still enabled us to find some of our favorites," Solomon proclaimed. He showed that he had written down some of his favorites and categorized them so he could find them again afterwards. "It was a good experience."

Sarah, whose late husband had been a pastor, shared that she had audited a seminary class on the Psalms. She expressed how that was valuable as background for this experience. She then went on to share how surprised she was to discover many liturgical elements from church that are taken directly from the Psalms. Solomon agreed heartily. Even many of our hymns incorporate bits from the Psalms (e.g., Psalm 87:3 in "Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken"). Likewise, Solomon observed that it was fun to discover verses he has heard before but forgot where they came from. "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" (Psalm 111:10a).

Sarah initiated a new idea. She identified that some of the Psalms have a questionable theology that is at odds with real life. "If you are faithful, then God will protect you," she summarized. Whether this is entirely accurate to the Psalms' intent is up for debate, but she felt that it didn't square with her experience. One family member of hers was a faithful Christian, and yet, she explained, that man committed suicide. I affirmed her ambivalence and offered an

alternate approach: The Psalms—as well as everything in the Old Covenant—is interpreted and fulfilled by the New Covenant. If the Psalmist calls for God to execute judgment on his enemies, and Jesus tells us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us, then Jesus' words define the Psalms and refocus our attention on mercy. Solomon chimed in to agree, citing the imprecatory Psalms that call for the destruction of others. Even his favorite Psalm—139, with its loving, Providential God—also includes an imprecatory section: "Oh that you would slay the wicked, O God!" (Psalm 139:19a) Sarah summarized her strategy for reading difficult passages in the Old Testament: Many things are meant to be metaphors or symbols; so "enemies" are not necessarily humans as much as "the enemies of God, like Satan and the evil angels." I affirmed that, indeed, we read the Psalms with Christian eyes, with the Holy Spirit guiding us, bearing testimony to Jesus in the Psalms (see Luke 24:44).

I invited concluding thoughts, and Solomon reiterated his answer to the survey. What had he gained? "Better knowledge of what is in the Psalms and the ability to pick out favorite ones to go to for prayer and thought." He concluded that the project "was very beneficial." This seemed earnest and genuine, and not just telling the pastor-researcher what he wants to hear. Solomon articulated that praying the Psalms needs to be an ongoing process, and not just once a year. Sarah agreed that she liked the structure of the Psalter but expressed surprise that it wasn't organized better, so to speak, at least from our human point of view: with sections on community problems, personal issues, wars, and conflict.

I invited the participants to go deeper, to the spiritual and emotional level. What was their takeaway? Sarah offered spiritual wisdom about our personal God: "It helps to think of the Lord as someone we can go to *personally*. A lot of them [the Psalms] are like, 'Guard me,' 'I call upon

you, O Lord.' It helps bring us closer to actually talking *to* God and not just talking generalizations *about* God" and other shallow things.

Solomon thoughtfully responded about the importance of spiritual maturity. Praying the Psalms was very beneficial, even after studying them over the years. Praying the Psalms from beginning to end—rather than just finding verses within them—has enabled him to approach prayer differently. He agreed that he will use some of the Psalms, as appropriate, for his daily prayer times. This is in addition to his spontaneous prayers throughout the day. He also identified the importance of memorizing some lines of Psalms to become prayers in his mind and heart.

Sarah and Solomon elaborated some of the same ideas that were briefly expressed in the survey responses. They were in favor of the Psalms as prayers, and forcefully so; but the pace was too aggressive: too much to absorb and savor the wisdom contained in the Psalms. The words of the Psalms spoke to their experiences and gave expression to the unspoken groanings of their spirits. However, sometimes the Psalms needed to be interpreted in light of the New Testament in order to be embraced as prayer. Overall, both participants identified spiritual value in the discipline of praying through the Psalms: becoming more knowledgeable about the Psalms and learning to pray to God directly.

Summary

Although these questions are open-ended and therefore produce qualitative data, there are clear themes that emerge from the responses. Some of these themes will provide grist for the mill as I discuss the conclusions in Chapter Four. I will also evaluate this project, based on these data, and make recommendations for future implementation and research.

My instincts about the Byzantine division of the Psalter were mostly correct. A handful of people (especially retired and spiritually mature people) connected with the rigorous demands of

praying through the Psalter in 20 days. Just as many were turned off by the pacing, correctly observing that there is a tradeoff between quantity and quality. Of course, these people who found the pacing too challenging might change their opinions with repetition, practice, and spiritual growth.

I attempted to investigate a rather strict, monastic practice; participants instinctively modified that discipline to fit their needs. My cookie-cutter approach has been rebuked. This is consistent with the wisdom found in the Fathers: Praying without ceasing requires fixedness *and* flexibility both. Saint Martyrius reminds us, "We should not confine our ministry [i.e., prayer] to the specific fixed times of the Hours; rather, it should be continuous all the time, in accordance with the Apostle's bidding."[196]

As far as praying the words of the Psalms themselves, participants were far more positive than I anticipated. They found value in the Psalms as prayers, even for those they didn't understand or didn't entirely connect with. This seems to be the brief takeaway: The Psalms are good for prayer, but in a manageable, tailored amount.

This is admittedly a subjective measure, based on participants' experience of praying through the Psalms. It is my desire that the participants will benefit from this exposure to an ancient prayer practice, and that they will grow in the likeness of Jesus Christ.

[196] Martyrius (also called Sahdona, in Syriac; seventh century), "Book of Perfection," in Brock, *The Syriac Fathers*, 218.

Chapter Four: A New Horizon

"The Office of psalmody is a rule which subjects the soul to the humility that belongs to servitude. In this rule there is liberty, and in liberty there is a rule."

St. Isaac the Syrian (late seventh century)[197]

"The Spirit of the LORD speaks by me; his word is on my tongue."
David, son of Jesse, the anointed of the God of Jacob, the sweet psalmist of Israel

2 Samuel 23:2

It is a fundamental human impulse to pray—to reach beyond ourselves to the Divine. Creach articulates this universal inclination: "The belief that human beings can have a relationship with God, and that communication is possible between the two, is perhaps the most basic element of religious faith."[198] Prayer is the essential act of faith. That stirring in the hearts of the faithful—those wordless groans—needs form and shape, language and rhythm. Beyond our inarticulate union with God, we desire intelligible conversation with God—a connection with our intellect, our νοῦς. What language shall we borrow to communicate with God? How shall we give utterance to our wordless groans?

Themes

I began this project with an open-ended query in mind. How can my church members' spiritual lives be enriched by praying the Psalms following an ancient Orthodox Christian discipline? Personally, I have found great value in praying with the words of the Psalms, but what about others? Is that value transferrable? I have sought to discern how the Psalms can be used by Protestant Christians today, following an ancient monastic practice. My hope is that they

[197] St. Isaac the Syrian, "Texts on Prayer and Outward Posture During Prayer," in Ibid., 284-285.
[198] Creach, *Discovering*, 137.

have developed a deeper, richer personal prayer life and have drawn nearer to Jesus Christ. But is this the case?

There were two main prongs involved in my research question: the discipline of prayer (i.e., the schedule) and the use of the Psalms themselves (i.e., Scripture as prayer language). The first prong—the discipline that I employed for the project—grew from the Egyptian monastic communities that St. John Cassian wrote about in the fourth century, that was then codified in the Byzantine tradition, and even now is found in Orthodox Psalters published today. The second prong—praying the words of the Psalms—was a practice of second-temple Jews that was used by the first Christians—albeit with a Christocentric reinterpretation—and became part of Christian practice, both in churches and in monastic communities, East and West.

From these two threads, two themes have emerged as important to evaluating the project and commenting on its use for future implementation. I will discuss them in turn subsequently.

Discipline: Twenty Days of Psalms

Participants were divided over the value of praying through the entire Psalter in 20 days. As mentioned above, in Chapter Three, a few people unreservedly endorsed the rhythm of praying three times each day for 20 days. Equal numbers of people were opposed to the schedule, citing lifestyle concerns or just never getting into the habit. I was a bit surprised to encounter clear resistance to the program, but I understand that the demands can be difficult for the busy and the beginners.

The difficulty of implementation and extrapolation is further thrown into relief when we consider the age of our sample. Twenty-one of the 24 respondents (87%) reported being between ages 65 and 79. Only three were younger than 50, including one high school student. Presumably, those aged 65 and older are retired and therefore have more free time to engage in

spiritual activities. If those who are retired still report that the pace of the discipline is too much, then it would likely be too much for working people with children at home. This finding advocates for paring back the intensity of the prayer discipline to be more accessible for busy people, or at least a tailoring of the discipline to each person—if this project were implemented again elsewhere. Once again, regardless of priorities, certain monastic practices are simply too much for people who do not live in monastic communities.

Caution is required—for pastors and church members alike—when tackling a spiritual discipline like praying through the Psalms in just three weeks. Saint Evagrius (345-399) cautions those who are too eager and who might end up being defeated. Although the saint was writing more than 1,600 years ago, his words are powerful and pertinent to us: "If you are thinking of adding to your labors," he begins, "do not be in a hurry. Be patient."[199] If you crave something more ambitious, and the idea persists, then you may pursue it because it is of God. But, he warns, "if the idea should come to you only once or twice, and not again, then you should consider it to be of Satan who cunningly wants to hold you back."[200] Biting off more than one can chew can leave someone feeling more frustrated and distant from God than before.

Saint Evagrius may overstate his case. If believers want to try a new discipline, then they should feel cautiously confident that they can give it a whirl. They may fail, but even in failure the faithful can find some success, some new practice that they can implement in their lives.

I am reminded of the often-repeated dictum, "Pray as you can, not as you can't." This catchy phrase is attributed to Abbot John Chapman (1865-1933), an English Benedictine monk who responded to the various people who wrote to him looking for advice in their journeys of faith. "Pray as you can, not as you can't" was Chapman's slogan that provided guidance for

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[199] Evagrius, "Admonition on Prayer," in Brock, *The Syriac Fathers*, 67.
[200] Ibid., 67.

Christians of all walks of life. L. Roger Owens comments on Chapman's advice: "It's a counsel of freedom, an acknowledgement of uniqueness. It's a key to free us from the oughts so that we may follow in the ways God is leading."[201] It is common sense that not everyone has the time or attention span to immediately jump in and pray the Psalms like a professional monastic who has devoted years to the craft of prayer. The high school student who is young in her faith is likely in a different place than the experienced grandmother who talks to Jesus like he is an old friend. Spiritual discipline takes training, it takes practice, and it takes instruction from an experienced mentor.

Praying as you can, and not as you can't is "not an invitation to jump into the deep waters of prayer without instruction. It presumes guidance; it presumes that there are those guides who know the wisdom embodied in the Christian traditions of prayer, men and women who have spent time in the wilderness and who can therefore help us identify the landmarks so that we may thrive in the wilderness."[202] Many Church Fathers—as well as Orthodox priests today—urge the believer to find a spiritual guide, a spiritual father or mother who can help the pilgrim discover a way of prayer that works for that person, that draws him or her closer to God. This is good advice for those involved in this project: praying the Psalms needs a personalized approach for each person.

Modifying the *Kathismata*

About half of the participant group spontaneously modified the schedule to work for their lifestyles. They rightly identified the tension between quantity and quality of prayer. What is more important in a spiritual discipline? To "get through" lots of material in a set amount of

[201] L. Roger Owens, "Pray as You Can, Not as You Can't: Exploring a Prayer Slogan," *The Other Journal*, Prayer (2012): 21, https://theotherjournal.com/2012/08/pray-as-you-can-not-as-you-cant-exploring-a-prayer-slogan/.
[202] Ibid.

time, or to "go deeper" into less material? As one participant observed, the failure of keeping up with the schedule was "the pace: too much too fast…I felt I was focusing more on the accomplishment instead of the intent of 'the Word.'" The compressed 20-day cycle can feel like one is sacrificing depth for breadth, at least in the short-term, until one gets the hang of it. The object is to get participants up to speed, until the *kathismata* feel just right and the soul draws nearer to God. A more relaxed timeline at first would allow the Psalms to become, as another participant said, "a song or prayer in my mind."

These responses are preceptive and push back against the mindset of spiritual achievement that is a temptation in this kind of exercise. Many of the Church Fathers speak about the conditions required for pure and spiritual prayer. As important as the *technique* of prayer is the spiritual *preparation* for prayer. Repentance, humility, forgiveness, and all the virtues contribute to deeper, purer prayer; they are all one piece of the same picture. Saint Evagrius cautions against performance: "Prayer that does not have mingled into it the thought of God and interior vision is a weariness of the flesh. Do not rejoice over saying a great quantity of Psalms when a veil is thrown over your heart: a single word said with an attentive mind is better than a thousand when the mind is far away."[203] Clearly, prayer is not an isolated pursuit, detached from the larger spiritual life; it is part of a life of cleansing oneself of the passions and pursuing *theosis*—union with God. Origen makes this point clearly. It is not possible "to think of giving oneself to prayer apart from purification."[204]

Saint Nikitas Stithatos addresses this same balance between quantity and quality of spiritual discipline. "Quantity is very important in the prayerful recitation of psalms, provided

[203] Evagrius, "Admonition on Prayer," in Brock, *The Syriac Fathers*, 71. This statement calls to mind St. Paul's declaration: "Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue" (1 Corinthians 14:19).
[204] Origen, *On Prayer*, 16.

that it is accompanied by perseverance and attentiveness; but the quality of our recitations is what gives life to the soul and makes it fruitful."[205] I am chastened by his words, as well as by the responses given by my participants. Although the 20-day cycle of *kathismata* is a powerful tool for spiritual growth, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to prayer. One's spiritual maturity and station in life dictate the discipline that will maximize the quality of the outcome. Each person's relationship with God—with its accompanying rules and disciplines—is utterly unique.

If spontaneous prayer is too inconsistent, and if devotionals are too insufficient, then the *kathismata* employed in this project are a stretch for most non-monastic Christians. There needs to be a Goldilocks schedule offered that Christians can adapt and plug into that is "just right"—not too much and not too little. Whatever modifications are made to the discipline of praying the Psalms, they need to retain integrity, catholicity, and Orthodoxy. On this point, St. John Cassian gives sage—and strikingly contemporary—advice about prayer: "Our prayers ought to be frequent but short, lest, if they are prolonged, the enemy who seeks to attack us would have an opportunity to slip in some distraction."[206] More important than a set "rule" that *everyone* follows is the personalized goal for *each person*. As Merton says, this is our "guiding principle in praying the Psalms…to make use of it as a prayer that will *enable us to surrender ourselves to God*."[207]

To pray without ceasing requires discipline. It is not merely spontaneous, sustained by our wills; it needs structure and guidance, anchors and foundations. Therefore, whatever discipline is adopted, it must enable the person—wherever she or he is in the spiritual journey—

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[205] Nikita Stithatos, "The Inner Nature of Things," in *The Philokalia*, vol. 4, 127.
[206] Saint John Cassian, "First Conference of Abbot Isaac on Prayer," in Cunningham, *Prayer: Personal and Liturgical*, 140.
[207] Merton, *Praying the Psalms*, 26, emphasis in original.

to achieve the goal of praying without ceasing. The life of prayer is not static; it has an end and an arc.

Running a marathon is an apt analogy of praying the Psalms, as part of a life of repentance and faith. If a person is older or out of shape or just beginning running, that person will not one day just go out and run 26.2 miles. That would be suicidal. Instead, that person needs to start training where he or she is—perhaps just running a small amount at first—before working up to a longer distance over a period of time and training. Likewise, engaging in ambitious spiritual disciplines is not for those who are out of shape or just beginning. It is something that one has to work up to, with sound advice from a trusted spiritual director.

All versions of the *Book of Common Prayer*, from the sixteenth century through the twenty-first century, present an agreeable cycle of praying the Psalms that can be adapted and customized. This liturgical family includes Western Rite Orthodox, Anglican, and Episcopalian.[208] "Recitation of the Psalms is central to daily worship throughout the Christian Tradition,"[209] the Anglican editors remark. "Anglicanism at the time of the Reformation established that the entire Psalter should be read in the Daily Office every month."[210] Indeed, the Psalters contained within the various editions of the *Book of Common Prayer* reflect this usage, both for personal and communal prayer. This schedule is thoroughly Western and grew up apart from the ancient Eastern Church. However, it is probably more amicable to average American Christians' lifestyles than the more hardcore Byzantine rite.

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[208] See Lancelot Andrewes Press (2009), Church Publishing (1979), and Anglican Liturgy Press (2019).
[209] *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments with Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church According to the Use of the Anglican Church in North America, Together with the New Coverdale Psalter* (Huntington Beach, CA: Anglican Liturgy Press, 2019), 268.
[210] Ibid., 268.

Another approach for contemporary Protestants would be to further modify the scope of the *kathismata* that comes from Byzantine monasticism. We have already tweaked the timing to fit this project. The original, ancient timeline was to pray through the Psalter in one week: the first *kathisma* on the first morning; the second *kathisma* on the first midday; the third *kathisma* on the first evening; and so on. We have spread those out over the course of 20 days: the first *kathisma* on day one; one *stasis* in the morning, one *stasis* at midday, and one *stasis* at evening; etc. This could be stretched further to fit the needs of ordinary believers: one *stasis* on day one—Psalm 1 in the morning, Psalm 2 at midday, Psalm 3 in the evening, and so forth. This would create a 60-day cycle of reading the Psalms, perhaps giving enough structure to keep participants engaged, but going slowly enough to allow deliberate meditation of the Psalms.

The Habit of Prayer

Embedded in every discussion of spiritual disciplines is the reality that doing any ongoing spiritual activity means behavior changes. For most people, the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak (Matthew 26:41/Mark 14:38). Establishing the "habit" of prayer is worth further investigation, beyond the bounds of this project. Such an examination would need to take seriously the insights of psychology and how they might enhance the development of spiritual practices.

The following material outlines some of the basic contours of how behavioral science might impact spiritual growth. Much of our behavior—whether it is prayer or exercising or staring at our phones—is *habitual*. Changing behavior and adopting new activities amounts to developing new habits. Is there a way to borrow psychological principles to ensure greater success in sticking with prayer habits? This could be a unique study—leveraging behavioral

reinforcement over a period of time to more deeply ingrain spiritual practices into participants' lives.

Wendy Wood is a professor of psychology at the University of Southern California (USC) and the director of the Habit Lab. Wood has studied human habits since the 1990s and argues that as much as 43% of our behavior throughout each day is habitual—that is, automatic, context-dependent, and durable.[211] Therefore, if we wish to change behavior—including incorporating new spiritual disciplines—then we need to intentionally work with the human tendency toward habits, rather than merely attempting to inspire new behaviors through changed minds.

Wood and Rünger identify the "three pillars"[212] of habit formation: repetition, context, and reward. Intentions or goals can obviously set this process in motion,[213] but habits tend to persist despite changes in attitudes or outcomes. To form habits, people must receive contextual cues, repeat the behavior, and be rewarded appropriately with a fitting schedule of reinforcement. But once that habit is established, it becomes a default setting. This has been the case in my own experience. After three years of constantly praying through the Psalter, it has become mostly automatic. It does not feel like a burden because it has crossed over into the habitual.

Wood contends that when someone repeats a behavior enough, the action becomes a habit disconnected from their intentions. "People can intend to do all kinds of things…but in the end, their behavior primarily is cued by performance contexts and therefore has a different causal source than their thoughts, intentions, and beliefs."[214] This explains why people engage in all sorts of self-defeating and addictive behaviors. More important than intention is the cues,

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[211] Chris Palmer, "Harnessing the power of habits," American Psychological Association *Monitor on Psychology* 51, no. 8 (2020): 78.
[212] Wendy Wood and Dennis Rünger, "Psychology of Habit," *Annual Review of Psychology* 67 (2016): 305-306.
[213] "Goals energize and direct action by defining a desired end state." Ibid., 291.
[214] Palmer, "Harnessing," 78.

contexts, and locations that trigger these seemingly automatic behaviors. Certainly, we can consciously interrupt and override these behaviors, even if they are deeply ingrained. But they function as a behavioral *status quo*. These observations would mesh nicely with research into the behavior of spiritual disciplines.

The Psalms as Prayers

There was surprising agreement on the value of praying the words of the Psalms. Nearly everyone expressed value in the Psalms as divinely inspired prayers that we can use today. Certainly, some of the responses raised the predictable red flags of praying the Psalms: they are repetitive, and some of the content is problematic (e.g., war and imprecation). On balance, though, participants expressed positive emotions while praying the Psalms: they felt "peaceful," "emotional," "grateful," "thankful," "encouraged," and "uplifted." Someone averred that the "Psalms are beautiful. They leave one with a feeling of joy, peacefulness, understanding, promise, and much, much more." Others spoke of how the Psalms gave expression to their experiences and feelings. "I felt that many Psalms at times were reflecting my personal thoughts and prayers."

If there were miscalculations in the aggressive prayer schedule, this element hit the mark. How should we pray? What language shall we borrow to praise God? The words of the Psalms, as Spirit-breathed songs,[215] give us words to lift our wordless groans[216] to the throne of grace, "that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16b). The Psalter contains a catalog of human experience, from the lowest valleys to the highest peaks. And that cannot be replicated or replaced.

Evaluation of Praying the Daily Office

[215] "ᾠδαῖς πνευματικαῖς" See Colossians 3:16b NA28.
[216] "στεναγμοῖς ἀλαλήτοις" See Romans 8:26b NA28.

Both monastic and "secular" traditions in the East and West have emphasized the importance of praying the daily offices: morning and evening prayers, with other, lesser, offices sprinkled throughout the day. Although there is disagreement among the Church Fathers about how many offices there should be and what time they should take place, there is consistency about the need to observe focused hours of prayer. As I observed before, the existing prayer practices among my people are inconsistent and uneven. I would like them to adopt these prayer offices so that they may go deeper into the spiritual disciplines that lead to a richer life in Christ.

I was encouraged that my participants were not completely opposed to a rhythm of prayer, especially morning and evening—while perhaps omitting the midday office. I believe that, with the right balance of breadth and depth, my Mainline Protestant Christians could find a rhythm of praying the Psalms twice (or even three times) a day, and that they would find great spiritual reward in such a practice.

Participants were very positive about the discipline of praying (with Scripture), even if they differed on the pace of the discipline. What did they gain? "Discipline," "resolve," "habit," "respect for setting aside time" for prayer. It is plausible that ordinary Protestants, who have been denied the possibility of fixed prayer because of an established ideological presupposition (i.e., that spontaneous prayer is more authentic than rote prayer), are hungry for such structure in their prayer lives.

It seems fair to say that if we are searching for the right balance between discipline and the Psalms, then we need to recalibrate our approach. The structure is good, but too many Psalms in one sitting can be too much, like trying to balance too many heavy boxes at once. But those ancient poems still possess the spiritual power to light the fires of faith and to inspire humans to put their deepest trust in the God who stands behind the words of Scripture.

Saint Evagrius admonishes those who seek the spiritual life, and his advice is relevant for those Protestants who, though they are mature in faith, are novices in spiritual disciplines. For the one who seeks the way of life, let that person examine himself or herself and then

> choose a way of life that is appropriate to himself. It is better to begin from one's feeble state and end up strong, to progress from small things to big, than to set your heart from the very first on the perfect way of life, only to have to abandon it later…Anyone who wishes to embark on the labors of the virtuous life should train himself gently, until he finally reaches the perfect state…Choose a way of life that suits your feeble state; travel on that, and you will live, for your Lord is merciful and he will receive you, not because of your achievements, but because of your intention.[217]

If we are looking for spiritual equilibrium, we need more structure and substance than a daily devotional, but perhaps less structure and content than the hardcore monastic practices of the ancient world. Trevin Wax, a Southern Baptist pastor and scholar, has done an admirable job presenting the Psalms as prayers in his work, *Psalms in 30 Days*. "For generations," Wax begins, "Christians have prayed and sung the Psalms…The songs found in this book form the bedrock of both corporate worship and individual devotion."[218] In that volume, he presents a modified version of the Psalter found in the *Book of Common Prayer*. Instead of uncritically adopting the morning-and-evening rhythm, Wax adds a brief midday office. He also occasionally rearranges the order of the Psalms for effect (e.g., if a Psalm mentions evening or morning, it is placed programmatically in the morning or evening office). I am critical of Wax's selection of prayers and confessions of faith that frame the Psalms,[219] but I generally applaud his effort. His intention—implicit or explicit—seems to be to close the gap between low-church evangelical

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[217] Evagrius, "Admonition on Prayer," in Brock, *The Syriac Fathers*, 66-67.
[218] Trevin Wax, *Psalms in 30 Days* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2021), "Introduction," unpaginated.
[219] Briefly, the prayers that Wax borrows are very Protestant—meaning mostly contemporary, plus Luther and Augustine—and do not reach back into the great Tradition of the Church, and certainly not the Church in the East. Commendably, Wax uses parts of the Apostles' Creed and snippets of the Nicene Creed. However, he quotes liberally from "A Reforming Catholic Confession" (https://reformingcatholicconfession.com/), a basic evangelical statement of faith that rehashes Protestant errors in soteriology and ecclesiology.

Protestants and liturgical Anglicans; however, he seems completely disinterested in Orthodoxy in the East.

Closer to the mark is *The Holy Psalter* (*THP*), published by Saint Ignatius Orthodox Press. *THP* presents a self-contained, freshly translated Orthodox Psalter that functions as a prayerbook. It is based on the Septuagint and follows the monastic *kathismata* we have adopted in this project. Each *kathisma* is prefaced by the "cell vigil"—the familiar beginning of most Orthodox prayers, including the trisagion prayers—and is followed by prayers selected from various Orthodox liturgical sources and Church Fathers. The translation of the Septuagint here is dignified contemporary English, unlike some other resources that retain archaic "Biblish" language.[220] *THP* is thoroughly Orthodox, including a Theotokion prayer after each *kathisma*. This veneration of the Mother of Jesus could be off-putting for Protestants, even if it is historically grounded and theologically sound. For many Protestants, any mention of St. Mary evokes the excesses of the Roman Catholic Church. The same challenge is present in this Saint Ignatius Psalter as well: the discipline is vigorous. If a person were able to adjust the Psalms to a more manageable pace—such that he or she could savor the words of Scripture—this would be an excellent choice.

If I were conceiving a new resource to be embraced by Protestants, that connects them to the ancient Church, I would combine the previous two resources mentioned: a thoroughly Orthodox Psalter with the "cell vigil" before and Orthodox prayers after each grouping of Psalms; however, I would employ the more relaxed morning-and-evening program of the

[220] *The Orthodox Psalter*, produced by the Holy Apostles Convent in Colorado (2010), comes to mind as a modern Psalter that inexplicably retains antiquated English (Thee, Thy, Thou, etc.). Likewise, the Western Rite *Book of Common Prayer* (Lancelot Andrewes Press, 2009) retains the impenetrable archaic language of the original 1549 work. The *Ancient Faith Psalter*, produced by Ancient Faith Publishing, is commendable, if basic.

Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*. This resource would need to use dignified, contemporary English that is accessible, but not too casual.

Richer and Deeper

It would seem that my participants indeed achieved a "richer and deeper" life of prayer during this project, at least to varying degrees. Remembering what Metropolitan Anthony wrote, we must remind ourselves that "at every step we already possess something which is rich, which is deep, and yet always go on longing for and moving towards something *richer and deeper*."[221] Although the daily offices are fixed, and although the Psalms do not change, the Christian life is not static; it is not merely a circle. As we journey through the Psalms in a spiral, we progress to a more profound encounter with the living God. Teaching this truth to my church people—who may assume that faith is a *status* rather than an ongoing *relationship*—gives them permission to reach deeper and to tap into the inexhaustible riches of the Kingdom.

Although it is ultimately impossible to measure spiritual growth, my participants expressed positive advancement in their spiritual life. As one person reported, "This experience enhanced my relationship with God; I found many different areas that these hymns or prayers touched on. Prayers for every need or problem and prayers/hymns of praise to express thankfulness to God." Whether these advances are permanent remains to be seen. It is clear, however, that we need to embrace a thicker, more robust, theology of prayer, expecting that we will grow in faith and faithfulness as we adventure deeper into the heart of God.

This final point deserves expansion. What is the goal of spirituality, especially prayer? The answer to this is obviously different, according to Protestant and Orthodox traditions. Protestants, in my observation, pray because they are supposed to, because they are commanded

[221] Metropolitan Anthony (Bloom), *Beginning to Pray*, 39, emphasis added.

to do so. It is a connection to God. If Protestants talk about a "relationship with God," prayer is the vehicle for that, along with reading Scripture. But what is the end goal, the *telos*? Sophisticated Protestants will say that *sanctification* is the goal of Christian life, including prayer. To paint with broad strokes, assuming that salvation is completed in the act of faith (justification), then sanctification occupies the remainder of the Christian's life—until death and glorification. For the typical Protestant mindset, sanctification does not play a role in salvation, but it is associated with learning (e.g., spiritual insights, Scripture knowledge) and moral reformation.

This view remains shallow, however, compared to the larger, more dynamic Orthodox vision of the Christian life. Stanley Harakas offers a powerful narrative of Orthodox spirituality that creates a context for the role and meaning of prayer—especially praying the Psalms. "Between the new condition proclaimed in Baptism and its full realization in the Kingdom," he begins, "there is a process of moral and spiritual growth in which we are involved."[222] Rejecting the Protestant *ordo salutis*, Harakas goes on to say that we "are not called simply to accept a forensic justification, but to change, to develop, to grow, to mature, to be transformed and transfigured."[223] Indeed, according to the Orthodox witness and over against the Protestant view of justification, "salvation is ontological and not merely forensic."[224]

Many Church Fathers speak of *theosis* (or deification) in relation to the creation of humanity, recorded in Scripture. "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness'" (Genesis 1:26a). There are two parts here: image and likeness.[225] Mantzaridis, summarizing Orthodox teaching on the subject, explains that humans are made in the *image* of

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[222] Stanley S. Harakas, *Toward Transfigured Life* (Minneapolis, MN: Light and Life Publishing, 1983), 31.
[223] Ibid., 31-32.
[224] Ibid., 237.
[225] "κατ᾽ εἰκόνα ἡμετέραν καὶ καθ᾽ ὁμοίωσιν" (Genesis 1:26a LXX)

God and bear that image ontologically; the image is the "common property of all"[226] people. The purpose of humans, however, is to grow in the *likeness* of Jesus Christ as they are conformed to him through participation in the divine life through the Church. Mantzaridis again: "Likeness," in the Greek translation, "expresses something dynamic and not yet realized, whereas the word 'image' signifies a realized state, which in the present context constitutes the starting point for the attainment of the 'likeness.'"[227]

According to Harakas, the goal of *theosis*—the *telos* of human beings—is to become more fully human as we are perfected (as much as is possible in this age) through a "relationship with the divine prototype of humanness,"[228] Jesus Christ himself. "The incarnate and risen Lord provides the Christian…a concrete and living expression of a true and fully human life."[229] However, since Jesus is fully God and fully human in one Person, he is not merely an example for humans. Mantzaridis clarifies that the "consequence of this hypostatic union in Christ of the two natures [i.e., human and divine] was the deification of the human nature He assumed…Thus was brought about in Christ the regeneration of the 'image' and its elevation towards the archetype,"[230] that is, God. Harakas echoes this transformation of the human person in Christ: "His [i.e., Christ's] very being is the prototype of the condition of true humanity and the divinization [or *theosis*] of the human…Thus it is that the imitation of Christ is an integral part of what it means to be a true and full human being."[231]

This recalls St. Paul's mystical vision for humanity: "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image [τὴν αὐτὴν εἰκόνα]

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[226] Giorgios I. Mantzaridis, *The Deification of Man: Saint Gregory Palamas and the Orthodox Tradition*, trans. Liadain Sherrard (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), 21.
[227] Ibid., 15.
[228] Harakas, *Transfigured Life*, 28.
[229] Ibid., 201.
[230] Mantzaridis, *Deification of Man*, 29.
[231] Harakas, *Transfigured Life*, 201.

from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:18).

In this paradigm, the *telos* for believers is much clearer: to be conformed to the likeness of Jesus Christ in anticipation of the Resurrection to eternal life. "This movement," Harakas observes, "is a movement of salvation *from* brokenness and sin *for* wholeness and fullness of life."[232] Therefore, salvation is dynamic and ongoing. It includes healing the entire human person—body, mind, and soul—and preparing that person for the Kingdom that is to come. *Theosis*—the dynamic process of becoming more like Jesus Christ—gives salvation "its content and its *telos*; the image and likeness give it its beginning and foundation; and the Triune God determines it forever as objective, relational, and interpersonal, at once."[233]

What does this have to do with praying the Psalms in a Baptist or Presbyterian Church? I argue that this potent understanding of the Christian life provides meaningful context to why we pray at all to begin with, as well as defining what prayer is anyway. This lofty vision is a more compelling impetus for prayer than merely staying in touch with God as we statically await the day of our glorification. The Orthodox vision gives us a goal, a purpose, whose arc is nothing less than sharing in the divine energies and being shaped and patterned according to the Son of God.

I encounter frequent talk about congregational revitalization, especially as Mainline Protestantism declines precipitously. Often, the suggested programs are ploys to increase numbers, or they are procedural remedies designed to bring about change and renewal through programmatic or legislative changes. While this technocratic problem-solving approach is common in government and in our larger society, I am apprehensive about such applications to

[232] Ibid., 32, emphasis in original.
[233] Ibid., 33.

the Church. Seeking congregational revitalization itself seems to be missing the mark, the wrong *telos* for the Church. As pastors, our focus should not primarily be on tinkering with systems, legislation, and organizations, but the focus should be on individuals and bringing them into contact with the living God who desires to divinize them and draw them to himself.

The fruit of this project is not a program or a resource, but an invitation to return to basics. Not just back to the admissible voices and boundaries of our various tribes and traditions; but I propose opening the narrow denominational gates and reaching back to the ancient Church, allowing those voices long forgotten to be heard again. We must test our ideologies against the "rule" of ancient Christianity—allowing our practices to be measured by the whole of the Church. I believe that such a return to the basic Tradition and traditions of the Church would be transformative for our local congregations.

The Orthodox spiritual ideal—*theosis* through praying the Psalms—if engaged properly, allows Protestants to pray with the whole Church, ancient and contemporary, thus taking their place in the long sweep of salvation history alongside the saints of the past. Kneeling beside St. John Cassian, St. John Chrysostom, and St. Gregory of Nyssa, Protestants, being "surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses," may "lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely," so they may "run with endurance the race that is set before [them], looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith" (Hebrews 12:1-2a).

Praying the Psalms—along with other ascetic practices recommended by Church Fathers—allows ordinary mortals to participate in God's uncreated grace, and by God's "precious and very great promises," we "may become partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). Giorgios Mantzaridis, a scholar of St. Gregory Palamas (1296-1357), argues that humans can truly experience *theosis*: "Those of the faithful who participate in the grace of the Spirit

achieve within themselves a lasting regenerative quality and are rendered 'spiritual.'"[234] *Theosis* comes about, typically, through prayer. "Prayer actualizes this union"[235] between the believer and God. "Prayer is not a magical method of bringing compulsion to bear on God but is the spiritual means whereby man is elevated towards Him."[236]

Pastoral Vocation Revisited

In the Protestant churches I have served over the years, I have found comfortable roles as teacher, preacher, counselor-listener, and leader. This has meshed well with what those congregations have needed in a pastor. Along with those vocational roles, I have also taken on the less-pleasurable roles of administrator and promoter of programs—advertising opportunities from local to national.

The sum of this project challenges me to re-think my self-understanding as spiritual guide for my congregation members. As promoter-of-programs, I have initiated Lenten and Advent schemes, hoping church members will catch a glimpse of the spiritual possibilities available to them, that they would grow in their faith and devotion. I have invited them to read through the Bible together in the New Year. I have implemented Bible studies and prayer groups. I have rotated through the Purpose-Driven/Alpha Course/Disciple Bible Study carousel.

In all these promotions, the emphasis has been on the *congregation as a monolithic unit*. I have approached everyone as a *singularity*, rather than diverse individuals with diverse spiritual needs, questions, and strengths. "Here is the program," I have announced. "Take it or leave it. I hope you get something useful out of it." Here is where my research and reading offer an ancient-yet-fresh vision for my pastoral vocation.

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[234] Mantzaridis, *Deification of Man*, 36.
[235] Ibid., 88.
[236] Ibid., 89.

The Orthodox tradition offers a very different paradigm for pastoral ministry as spiritual guide. While it is nearly impossible to comprehensively adopt Orthodox theology and practice into a Protestant setting while maintaining Protestant distinctives, we can still borrow significant portions that will enrich our practice. We can appropriate Orthodox gems into our lives, with the added bonus that we will draw nearer the ancient Tradition and develop kinship with our estranged sisters and brothers in Eastern churches.

To better glean from the Orthodox tradition, we must first briefly understand how they conceive what is wrong with humans, what the solution is, and how we facilitate that transformation. Here I am indebted to the vision forwarded by Metropolitan Hierotheos (Vlachos) of Nafpaktos in his authoritative work *Orthodoxy Psychotherapy*.

"Psycho-therapy," literally understood, is healing the soul. But how is the soul sick? Summarizing Orthodox teaching, Metropolitan Hierotheos explains that "human nature became 'sick' through its fall away from God. This sickness is mainly the captivity and fall of the *nous*."[237] In his distinctive Orthodox approach, the Metropolitan continues: "The ancestral sin is that man withdrew from God, lost divine grace, and this resulted in blindness, darkness, and death of the *nous*."[238] Unlike most Protestant summaries of The Problem with humanity—which usually center on sin, disobedience, and the need for forgiveness—the Orthodox depict our plight in terms of illness in need of a cure.

That cure comes from Jesus Christ. God, working through the Church and its manifold mysteries and ministries, can heal the person and bring them, ultimately, to union with himself. Besides our best efforts, Metropolitan Hierotheos declares, "if the Holy Spirit does not descend,

[237] Metropolitan Hierotheos, *Orthodox Psychotherapy*, 36.
[238] Ibid., 36.

the dead *nous* cannot be purified and brought to life."[239] There is a great variety of spiritual advice in Orthodox works from the Church Fathers, but they agree that the cure is possible: through baptism, through ascetic struggle, through the work of the Holy Spirit, and—relevant to this study—the work of a skilled "psychotherapist," a pastor.

According to Metropolitan Hierotheos, the "cure is in fact purification of the *nous*, heart, and image, the restoration of the *nous* to its primordial and original beauty, and something more: his communion with God. When he [i.e., the person] becomes a temple of the Holy Spirit, we say that the cure has succeeded. Those cured are the saints of God."[240] While this may seem foreign to Baptist or Presbyterian ears, it is a beautiful thought to understand the Christian journey as toward union with God and away from the sickness of the fallen away soul.

Crucial to this journey is the assistance of a skilled, wise spiritual physician. The Holy Trinity is the cure, and as Metropolitan Hierotheos avers, "the priest is a servant of this cure."[241] Various Church Fathers have developed this analogy. The physician of the *body* is obligated to assess the patient, offer a diagnosis, and then prescribe a program of healing that will restore the individual to full health and soundness. Likewise, the physician of the *soul* is obligated to evaluate the penitent person, offer an analysis of the individual, and then lay out a program of recovery that will restore the soul to health and the *nous* to its full faculty.

The physician of the soul, in this metaphor, is the pastor—the "priest" or "spiritual father" in Orthodox terminology. Metropolitan Hierotheos, once again summarizing a large body of patristic work, explains that the "therapist" or soul healer "recommends to his spiritual children an orthodox way, which is a way of orthodox devotion."[242] He goes on to outline "the

[239] Ibid., 41.
[240] Ibid., 42.
[241] Ibid., 62.
[242] Ibid., 47.

method which the sick person should follow under the guidance of his spiritual father in order to attain spiritual healing."[243] The physician of the soul uses the tools at his or her disposal—vigils, study, prayer, self-control, and practicing stillness—to apply them in a highly personalized program that will maximally benefit that person and aid him or her on the way of salvation.

Here at this point I find a great insight for my pastoral vocation. Instead of promoting this program or that gimmick, it would be more personal and profitable for me to meet with individual church members and guide them onto an upward spiritual path. Of course, this assumes that Protestant congregants would warm up to the idea of meeting regularly with a pastor (in the model of a spiritual director) who would then offer suggestions and interventions to enable them to draw nearer to Jesus Christ. But all things are possible with God.

This is also relevant for a program of praying the Psalms. Instead of recommending that everyone—young and old, mature and neophyte alike—follow the same pattern of praying through the Psalter, with this same paradigm, I would be more at liberty to suggest a more customized approach to the Psalms. This "prescription" would suit the individual's station in faith but also challenge that person to stretch to the next level. Metropolitan Hierotheos emphasizes that "a discriminating Orthodox therapist (physician-confessor) is essential for adjusting the medication and giving the appropriate therapeutic guidance."[244] These medicines include prayer, giving, serving, Scripture, fasting, and praying the Psalms.

There is yet more to this vocational vision. Being a physician of the soul is not merely a matter of technique—knowing which intervention is medicine and which is poison. It is a *way of life*. Metropolitan Hierotheos highlights the importance of pastors' spiritual healing: Pastors "who wish to cure the illnesses of the people must themselves have previously been cured of

[243] Ibid., 47.
[244] Ibid., 53.

these illnesses, or at least they have begun to be cured, and must feel the value and possibility of healing."[245] That is, pastors—including myself—who wish to undertake a vocation of healing must themselves participate in the Spirit's healing.

Saint Gregory the Theologian says it best: "It is necessary first to be purified, then to purify; to be made wise, then to make wise; to become light, then to enlighten; to approach God, then to bring others to him; to be sanctified, then to sanctify."[246] The saints remind me that doing pastoral work is not merely enacting my seminary training—as important as theological training may be. Being a pastor means first being an earnest seeker of the Great Physician (Mark 2:17) and to experience the healing available to us through the Holy Spirit.

The Next Horizon

There is still yet another horizon, a vision more sublime even than being healed of our spiritual sickness and subsequently conformed to the likeness of Christ. Many Church Fathers and Orthodox thinkers see a time when prayer books are no longer needed—so internalized is the prayer of the Church into the believer's heart. It is possible for someone to pray the Psalms so intently—submerged in the Spirit—that the Psalter itself could be discarded because it has become fused with the believer's soul. Saint Isaac the Syrian laid out his *telos* for Christians, as described by Brock. *Theoria* (θεωρία)—or contemplation or perhaps vision—is the goal. "When contemplation [θεωρία] is reached, according to Isaac, prayer actually ceases, and 'spiritual prayer' really consists in a momentary revelation and realization of the 'New World' which will only fully be experienced at the Resurrection. 'Spiritual prayer,' Isaac emphasizes, is granted only by grace, and solely to those who possess 'limpidity of soul.'"[247] This is the pure prayer

[245] Ibid., 62.
[246] Saint Gregory the Theologian, Oration 2.71, quoted in Metropolitan Hierotheos (Vlachos), *Orthodox Psychotherapy*, 61.
[247] Brock, *The Syriac Fathers*, xxxi.

referenced by many Fathers. Mantzaridis, commenting on *theoria*, says that a human being, "his heart purified of all passion and his intellect [νοῦς] emptied of all care and thought, presents himself to God through the practice of pure prayer…After pure prayer come the vision and mystical experience of God's secret mysteries."[248]

This is something I have never heard mentioned in a Baptist or Presbyterian Church, but perhaps it is time for such conversations to begin. This infusion of Orthodox Tradition and traditions into Protestant life could form the roots of a fruitful future study, bringing together Protestant understandings of prayer, along with Orthodox teaching on prayer, *theosis*, and *theoria*. Certainly, it is not sufficient to merely copy and paste ancient prayer practices into a Modern framework of prayer and worship, as we have concluded through this project. However, the very notion of prayer among Protestants needs to be challenged and recalibrated. There is not merely a need for Protestants to adopt the practices of the ancient Church, although that is a good starting point, and that was the animating principle behind this project. Protestants instead must rethink their relationship to the Tradition and traditions of the Church, East and West.

Praying without ceasing involves a constant conversation with God, in the Holy Spirit, every waking moment. Mantzaridis, referring to Origen's work, comments that unceasing prayer occupies "the whole of the believer's Christian life. The saint's entire life is one great prayer."[249] This unceasing prayer must be anchored by fixed prayer that gives shape to the Christian life, and it must be filled with the very words of God from Scripture.

"We must learn that there is always more,"[250] Metropolitan Anthony reminds us. We are rich because we are heirs of the Kingdom of God, but there are always more riches yet to be

[248] Mantzaridis, *Deification of Man*, 95.
[249] Ibid., 90.
[250] Metropolitan Anthony (Bloom), *Beginning to Pray*, 40.

revealed to us. The treasure of our inheritance is inexhaustible. "We should think…of an increasing progression from depth to depth…so that at every step we already possess something which is rich, which is deep, and yet always go on longing for and moving towards something *richer and deeper*."[251] Protestants should not be content to pray from the shallow end of the pool but must be courageous to go deeper in their relationship with Jesus Christ.

[251] Ibid., 39, emphasis added.

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Appendix 1: Instructions for Participants

Greetings in the name of Jesus our Savior!

I am thrilled that you are willing to participate in this project, praying the Psalms. Prayer is not merely making requests to God or thanking God, although it is both of those things. Prayer is an encounter with the living God and entering into the life of God. During the next 20 days, we will be praying through the Psalms in the Bible—offering God's own words to God in prayer.

Here's how to follow the program:

1. Starting on Friday, December 1, start praying through the Psalms according to the attached schedule. For instance, on Day One, pray through Psalms 1-3 in the morning, 4-6 at midday, and 7-8 in the evening. On Day Two, pray through Psalms 9-11 in the morning, 12-14 at midday, and 15-17 in the evening.
2. Before each prayer time, focus your attention on the task at hand. Light a candle if you like. Pray a simple prayer asking for God's help in prayer: "Lord, direct my will, teach me to pray. And you yourself, pray in me; through Christ my Lord. Amen."
3. After each set of Psalms, you may add your own requests as you feel led. Finally, pray the Lord's Prayer as you know it. And then, reward yourself! Make praying a positive experience. Reinforce yourself.
4. On the twentieth day, when you are finishing up your prayer journey through the Psalms, I will send out a survey through Google Forms. Please complete it and submit it. It is anonymous, so please be honest!
5. The following Friday, December 22, at noon, we will have a voluntary focus group to share any feedback about the project.

Here is a brief order for each prayer time:

- Spontaneous prayer for guidance
- Pray the Psalms
- Add any personal requests or prayers
- Pray the Lord's Prayer

Frequently Asked Questions:

- *How long does this take*? According to my practice, each prayer group takes about five minutes, for a total of 15 minutes each day.
- *What if I miss a prayer group*? If you miss one, you can make it up (for instance, praying two groups in the evening), or you can simply skip ahead and get back on schedule.
- *What version of the Bible should I use*? Whichever one is familiar to you!
- *How should I pray the Psalms*? I find it helps me to focus by praying them out loud. It also helps to minimize distractions and to make prayer the only thing you are doing at the time. Pray the Psalms deliberately, as a prayer. If you don't understand something at the time, you can ponder it, but the focus is always using the words of the Psalms as a prayer.
- *What about my usual devotional practice*? You can keep doing what you usually do, or you can set that aside for the 20 days while we are praying the Psalms.
- *What's in it for me*? Short answer: **more**. More God, more grace, more participation in the Holy Spirit. I believe that praying the Psalms will draw you into a deeper and richer relationship with Jesus Christ. Try it and find out!

Thank you for your participation in this project. I appreciate your assistance! May the Lord bless your journey and draw you to himself.

Pastor Ray

Appendix 2: Schedule for Praying the Psalms

Day	Morning Psalms	Midday Psalms	Evening Psalms
1	1-3	4-6	7-8
2	9-11	12-14	15-17
3	18	19-21	22-24
4	25-27	28-30	31-32
5	33-34	35-36	37
6	38-40	41-43	44-46
7	47-49	50-51	52-55
8	56-58	59-61	62-64
9	65-67	68	69-70
10	71-72	73-74	75-77
11	78	79-81	82-85
12	86-88	89	90-91
13	92-94	95-97	98-101
14	102-103	104	105
15	106	107	108-109
16	110-112	113-116:9	116:10-118
17	119:1-72	119:73-131	119:132-176
18	120-124	125-129	130-134
19	135-137	138-140	141-143
20	144-145	146-147	148-150

Appendix 3: Kathismata in the Septuagint and Masoretic Text Numbering[252]

Greek Numbering of Psalms			Kathisma	Hebrew Numbering of Psalms		
Stasis 1	Stasis 2	Stasis 3		Stasis 1	Stasis 2	Stasis 3
1-3	4-6	7-8	I	1-3	4-6	7-8
9-10	11-13	14-16	II	9-11	12-14	15-17
17	18-20	21-23	III	18	19-21	22-24
24-26	27-29	30-31	IV	25-27	28-30	31-32
32-33	34-35	36	V	33-34	35-36	37
37-39	40-42	43-45	VI	38-40	41-43	44-46
46-48	49-50	51-54	VII	47-49	50-51	52-55
55-57	58-60	61-63	VIII	56-58	59-61	62-64
64-66	67	68-69	IX	65-67	68	69-70
70-71	72-73	74-76	X	71-72	73-74	75-77
77	78-80	81-84	XI	78	79-81	82-85
85-87	88	89-90	XII	86-88	89	90-91
91-93	94-96	97-100	XIII	92-94	95-97	98-101
101-102	103	104	XIV	102-103	104	105
105	106	107-108	XV	106	107	108-109
109-111	112-114	115-117	XVI	110-112	113-116:9	116:10-118
118:1-72	118:73-131	118:132-176	XVII	119:1-72	119:73-131	119:132-176
119-123	124-128	129-133	XVIII	120-124	125-129	130-134
134-136	137-139	140-142	XIX	135-137	138-140	141-143
143-144	145-147	148-150	XX	144-145	146-147	148-150

[252] "The Division of the Psalter into Kathismas," Orthodox Church in America, last modified 2023, https://www.oca.org/liturgics/outlines/the-division-of-the-psalter-into-kathismas.

Appendix 4: Survey Questions after the Project Completion

These questions will be administered anonymously through an online survey.

- Thinking about the schedule of praying through the Psalms (20 days, three times each day), were you able to keep the schedule of praying? Why or why not?
- Thinking about the content of the Psalms, what was your experience using them for your prayers? How did you feel while praying through the Psalms?
- What did you gain, if anything, through this process? Please elaborate.
- How has this experience impacted your spiritual life, your relationship with God?
- Were you able to keep the schedule of praying? Why or why not?
- Would you consider continuing this pattern of praying the Psalms? Please explain.
- Before beginning this project, how would you describe your prayer practices? (E.g., devotionals, memorized prayers, Scripture, spontaneous)
- Is there anything else you would like to share about this experience?
- What is your age range? (Select one.)
    - Under 34
    - 35-49
    - 50-64
    - 65-79
    - 80+
- How long have you been a Christian and active in a church?
    - Fewer than ten years
    - 10-24 years

    - 25 years or more

- How would you classify your religious affiliation?
    - Baptist
    - Catholic
    - Christian (no denomination)
    - Lutheran
    - Methodist
    - Presbyterian
    - Other: _____
- What is your experience with the Bible? Select one.
    - I have hardly read the Bible on my own at all.
    - I have read some of the Bible.
    - I have read large portions of the Bible.
    - I have read the entire Bible.
    - I have read the entire Bible multiple times.
- What is your highest level of education?
    - Less than high school
    - High school
    - Some college, diploma, or associate's degree
    - Bachelor's degree
    - Master's degree or higher