



# CATHOLIC SCRIPTURE STUDY

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## SERIES V

### WISDOM LITERATURE AND NEW TESTAMENT LETTERS

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### THE CHURCH AND THE PSALMS The Book of Psalms 2 (42-72)

## INTRODUCTION

As we study and ponder the Old Testament, we find that there is a strong connection between the two testaments in the Bible, particularly in the amazing predictions and descriptions of Jesus as Messiah that Christians find in several Psalms. These are called Messianic Psalms, or Prophetic Psalms. They are usually laments.

A scholarly look at these Psalms reveals two levels, that of the Psalmist and his times and that of the Messiah to come, which we might call the level of the Holy Spirit revealing their Messiah to them. As we Christians sadly see, for most of these 2,000 years since Christ, the Jewish People of God still do not accept the fulfillment of the Old Testament in Jesus, a descendent also of Abraham, and a son of David's line. But, today, we see a powerful grace of the Holy Spirit in the "Jews for Jesus" movement among the Jewish People of God. Another movement of the Spirit has led Catholics and other Christians to develop what unity there is among themselves and with the Jewish community, the original source of all our knowledge in the Scriptures, even in the New

Testament. The Gospels were written, with two exceptions (Mark and Luke), by Apostles of Jesus whom He chose to "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations. Baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Teach them to carry out everything I have commanded you. And know that I am with you always, until the end of the world" (Matthew 28:18b-20). He prefaced this command with "all authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth" (all the universe).

Again, we Catholics are saddened by the nearly five-hundred year old division among Christians, especially when we know that the original Greek of the above text, included five times the word "Catholica," which meant "all." A careful reading of the adjectives in this text reveals that the word "catholica" was an early descriptive name of the Church and is recorded many times in Christian writings.

One last reflection on our divisions is the glad fact (Good News) that one of our Catholic Scripture members joined us when we were in the study of the Pentateuch. He, of the Jewish faith,

was married to a Catholic who was in CSS. He is now a Catholic who finished the Rite of Christian Initiation and was baptized on Holy Saturday (1989).

## I. A PROPHETIC LAMENT, A CAREFUL STUDY OF PSALM 22

**A. The Jewish Lament.** This Psalm came from a complaint of the writer. What is happening here?

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?  
(Psalm 22:2, Matthew 27:46)

What kind of emotion is in this cry? What is its origin? The cry of “Eli, Eli” comes from the fact of the Covenant with God: a solemn agreement. In this Psalm is a plea based on the Covenant, but somewhat turned around from what we might expect.

The Psalmist recalled the words that Jeremiah had heard God tell us:

“This is what I commanded them: Listen to my voice... Then I will be your God and you shall be my people” (Jeremiah 7:23a).

Devout and believing Hebrews acknowledged that as their covenant faith, for after liberating them in the desert, God made a covenant agreement with them. Among the nations, to break a covenant meant a revolt against an important legal agreement.

But this covenant is quite different from others in the early nations. This is a permanent covenant (Romans 12:1-12, 25-26). It is a commitment from God to “Hesed” (Love: faithful love). The Psalmist here is not one who has broken his covenant, but one who calls on his God to remember His commitment to keep His covenant with them. “You, my God, our God, have a commitment to me, to us!”

The Church sees our Baptismal promises as a covenant with God. Especially meaningful is another covenant between adult Catholics/Christians: the marriage covenant. This was brought out clearly in the Vatican II document, The Church Today: this teaching is the highest authority in the Church because it is drawn up and approved both by the bishops of the world and the Pope.

“The intimate partnership of married life and love has been established by the Creator and qualified by His laws. It is rooted in the conjugal covenant of irrevocable personal consent. Hence, by that human act whereby spouses mutually... accept each other, a relationship arises which by divine will and in the eyes of society is a lasting one... Thus a man and a woman in the marriage covenant of conjugal love ‘are no longer two, but one flesh’” (Matthew 19:6). Marriage and the Family in the Modern World, Section 48.

Today’s society does not believe the statement. Do you?

The Psalmist continues: “Yet you are the holy One” (Psalm 22:3). In His holiness, God is very different from all else in existence. He expresses Himself with power. Here the Psalmist tells God: “You are the one who consents to covenant with others, but also, One who is bound by your almighty word,” and he reminds God that the Psalmist’s own enemies reproach him because he trusts in his God. He mentions that the trust of the Hebrews puts God in a special relationship with them and they with Him. He adds to this a reminder that “You have been my guide from my first day; I was committed to you from my first day, at my birth!” (Psalm 22:7-9). “My enemies are like bulls, like lions, dogs... a pack of evildoers.” In other words, “I need help!” This is the situation and the lament of the Psalmist (Psalm 22:2-17a).

**B. The Suffering Messiah (Psalm 22:2-22).** All of the above was intended by Jesus when

he uttered the beginning sentence of Psalm 22 from the Cross. If we reread the cry from verses 2-17a, we will notice how much of it was true of both the Psalmist and of Jesus on the cross, but 17b becomes a startling prophecy only of Jesus.

They have pierced my hands and my feet:

I can count all my bones.

They look on and gloat over me:

They divide my garments among them.

And for my robe they cast lots

(Psalm 22:17b-19).

John, in his Gospel, quotes a Roman soldier saying, "Let's cast lots to see whose tunic it will be." "They said this in order that the Scripture might be fulfilled," adds the Apostle.

Part B of the Psalm (verse 23ff) is an invitation to the congregation in the temple. The Psalmist promises to speak, to proclaim God's name in praise "in the midst of the assembly," reminding all of God's mercy and goodness. Then he tells God of this: "They who seek the LORD shall praise him." Those who sought the Lord in that time, humbling themselves before Him, needing Him and clinging to Him, were called in their society the Anawim, the poor and lowly.

In history, one of these "Anawim," a young French nun, captivated the whole world as well as God, with her trust in God's "hesed" love. After her death at age 24, her account to her sisters of her childhood at their request was sent instead of a short obituary to the Carmelite convents and then lent to relatives and friends, who then lent it to relatives and friends, etc., until an avalanche of praise and demand arrived in the convent mail daily. Finally, the writing was published and this simple young French girl, St. Thérèse of Lisieux, was acclaimed by the Pope as "an exquisite miniature" of sanctity and by Thomas Merton as "not a Little Flower, but one having a will of steel." The Psalmist and Thérèse shared with their world this important truth: God's love is stronger than His justice.

In the case of the Israelites, time after time, God decided to be loyal to the Israelites: thereafter, His power, His help, His forgiveness was due them. Psalm 22 taught God's people to trust, to remind Him of His commitment. His power, His forgiveness was due them. Psalm 22 was teaching them and us how to pray.

As a Psalm of God's faithful love, how was it used in the New Testament?

**C. Psalm 22 in the New Testament.** The Gospels quote Psalm 22 nine times in their account of the Passion of Jesus, the Jews' Messiah. Did the Jews then, do they now, ever see that Psalm 22 happened in their history to Jesus of Nazareth? What did they understand of the Psalm, especially the Jews in Christian history? How did they interpret Isaiah's Suffering Servant (Isaiah 52:13 - 53:12) or Psalm 69:21-22? A Qumran text interpreted such accounts in the Psalms and Prophets as meaning an inspired teacher dealing with his community and seeing "a plan of God" in these texts on a Suffering Servant. We, however, were called to know and to live what and who this Psalm reveals.

The New Testament reveals a continuation of life after death. This was a "BIG, BIG" discovery, exclaims Reverend Enrique Nardoni, a University of Dallas scholar in Scripture. The risen Jesus was denied by the Jewish leaders of that time and by many of their people since. It was too much for them: "An incarnate God!" That was bad enough for the Jewish leaders, but a harder belief for them was the Trinity. Mohammed followed the Jews in this.

Isaiah's servant songs and Psalm 22 and 69 were fulfilled in Jesus, the Song of God (John 19:23-24). The Apostles taught this; Jesus was a universal God-Man, a much higher and larger idea than the Jews saw. God became a man and suffered for the whole race, a "Messiah" both for the Jews and our race. The Jews believed the oppo-

site—that the Messiah would not suffer but would bring peace and good fortune.

In this Psalm, who are the enemies? Who are the poor? Several scholars (Gelin, Krause) write that the term applies to a movement of spirituality. The old image saw affliction as a sign of enmity with God as Job did. The afflicted poor who are righteous, who live spiritual lives, are revealed in Isaiah 50:5-6, 52:13-20.

## **II. SIN OF THE HEART, A PENITENTIAL PSALM (Psalm 51)**

### **A. This Psalm easily divides itself into five actions:**

1. a Call for Mercy
2. Confession of Sin
3. Prayer for Forgiveness
4. Prayer for Moral Renewal
5. Thanksgiving

**1. A Call for Mercy (Psalm 51:1-3)** gives two qualities in God: Love (Hesed) and compassion (Pesha). Three times the Psalmist calls for God's saving action (Psalm 51:3b-4).

“Wipe out my offense: Wash me from my guilt, cleanse me of my sin.”

### **2. Declaration of Contrition (Psalm 51:5-7)**

“I acknowledge my offense,  
My sin is always before me,  
Against you only have I sinned and have done  
evil in your sight.”

In this acknowledgment there is not only awareness of shame, but a sense of having revolted against God, against His covenant of justice (holiness) (Genesis 9, 2 Samuel 12:13). A covenant has been broken by the sinner, David: an act against justice and goodness is done to Uriah and his wife, whom David violated. Since the Bible is about faith and unfaith, there is more than sexual sin and murder in such a case. Yes, an offense against sexual good and one's right to life (mur-

der) is involved, but all sin, to God, is prostitution and infidelity to God. This is the language of the prophets; prostitution with a wider meaning, a deeper meaning. Serious sin is against a covenant with God.

**3. Prayer of Forgiveness (Psalm 51:8-11).** As the Psalmist prays for forgiveness, he acknowledges God's teaching of “wisdom”—something deep inside us, a knowledge, an education in what sin is inside us. The full meaning of sin is an action of the mind and of the heart. It is a quality of “mortal” sin: an evil freely realized as sin and yet fully willed. For this sin, David pleads: “Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow” (Psalm 51:9).

In the New Testament, Jesus tells the Apostles on His resurrection night: “Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I send you. And He breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven; and whose sins you retain, they are retained’” (John 20:21-22).

What an awesome power to give to the Apostles and through them, to the Church! How were they to discern a sinner? How did they discern between “forgiven” and “retained”? The tradition of the church built on these Apostles, is that personal admission and personal statement of contrition is necessary by a self-accused sinner.

In the Sacrament of Reconciliation (of “Penance” or simply “confession”), the words “I absolve you... Go and sin no more” are said by a duly appointed priest. A priest, ordained by a bishop, becomes a successor of an Apostle in that room that Resurrection evening, who gazed upon a man whom they had seen dead and buried, standing now in triumph and joy before them—a truly fitting day for Christ to give such power to His church.

From spiritual death to a resurrected grace!  
 “And the joy of your salvation will sustain me...”  
 (Psalm 51:14).

**4. Prayer for Moral Renewal (Psalm 51:12-13).** The Psalmist now pleads for renewal within his heart and spirit, and more, he asks for God’s presence, and for His “Holy Spirit” to be with him. This should always be a result of repentance, a renewed relationship with God.

**5. Thanksgiving (Psalm 51:15-21)**  
 “O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall proclaim your praise” (Verse 17).

These words open the Divine Office said daily by vowed Christians and others. And David offers, not an animal holocaust, but “a sacrifice, O God, of a contrite spirit, and a contrite and humbled heart.” This too, is a natural action of true repentance.

### III. THE CHURCH AND THE PSALMS

#### A. At the Eucharist

**1. All Catholic community worship** began at the Last Supper of Jesus and His “community”—the Apostles. Over the centuries this sacrifice and sacrament added a preparation time, opening prayers, readings from the Word of God, instruction and direction in the homily of the priest or deacon. For centuries, this was in the privacy of homes, or in certain meeting places. When freed and recognized, churches were built and under freedom, the Eucharist was celebrated daily also.

**2. An Advent Daily Eucharist.** Catholics who are able to attend a daily Eucharist have a rich fare, especially in some special time such as Advent when each day’s scripture readings and Psalms and prayer all ring together in a spirit of longing, of expectation. How sad that many never participate in those daily Eucharists full of Scripture. In seasonal times, also in ordinary time

Scriptures include a continuous reading of a Gospel, of the prophets, or of some other book in the Bible. Here is a sample of an Advent daily Eucharist:

Entrance: “Come, Lord from your throne: let us see your face, and we shall be saved” (Psalm 79:4).

Reading from Isaiah 40:1-5: “Comfort, give comfort to my people” etc.

Response Psalm 80: “O Shepherd of Israel, hear us; Rouse your power and come to save us.”

Gospel Antiphon: “The king will come, the Lord of earth and He will set us free” (Isaiah 35).

Then Matthew’s Gospel: 18:12-14

The Communion Antiphon: Psalm 106:4-5

**B. The Divine Office.** An entirely new use of the Bible arose in the Christian history through the Book of Psalms. Early in the church, Christians continued the Jewish custom of praying at stated times of the day. Some began to vow their lives entirely to God, according to some Gospel counsels of Jesus: obedience, poverty, chastity through celibacy, following the example of Jesus and the Apostle Paul.

These vowed Christians and others met for daily prayer together of the Psalms, at least seven times during the twenty-four hours of a day. These divided their time into prayer and work, “Ora et Labora” as St. Benedict put it.

Their prayers became what we call the Divine Office (from Latin “officium”—work or schedule of work). Their work was manual labor on their farms, or teaching, in which they began the first “school system”: either the priest in a village or city, or the monks or nuns built schools around

their monasteries for the younger or for higher learning.

The Divine Office included the 150 Psalms chanted over a week's period. Gregory the Great, one of the followers of St. Benedict and also a Pope, developed the Divine Office into a daily arrangement of Psalms and Bible readings that has continued until this day. The Psalms of the day are still chanted all over the world each day of a monk's or nuns life.

Today at least three Psalms are included in each "hour" of the Office. In monasteries today, the Divine Office occurs six times during the day. Psalms are also prayed by the laity in groups before Mass or after, or privately at home. Some laity attend Vespers with the priest and a staff Sister. There has been almost a thousand years of chanting or saying the Biblical Psalms daily by vowed or committed Christians.

**C. The Rosary.** An interesting new development came when so many early Christians around the monasteries could not read. These finally devised their "150" Psalms in five groups of ten

"Hail Marys" as "background music" while they meditated on an event in Jesus' life, of joy, sorrow, or glory. Then and now the rosary has been the daily prayer of generations, even by priests and sisters, aware of the promises and requests of Mary, the mother of Jesus and of Christians.

As civilization developed and human progress increased, people of the Renaissance and the later Industrial Revolution lost the ideal of periods of prayers of Psalms each day. Instead, they spent their twelve hours of a day in work in the fields or shops and factories. Is this true of you? Of your parish? Is your work the main thing of each day?

If so, you might go to a religious bookstore and purchase a small book containing the morning Psalms and readings from scripture and the evening ones.

The Divine Office has developed in the Church as the most used of the Psalms either before or after Christ, for the Church today is worldwide. Indeed, the Book of Psalms is a much-loved and prayed book of the Bible.

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**QUESTIONS FOR LESSON 4**  
**Job 1 (1-19)**

Day 1      Read the notes on the Psalms

- a. Share a sentence or so that helped you to appreciate the Psalms.
  
  
  
  
  
- b. Did anything challenge you?

Day 2      Read Job 1-3, James 5:11, 1 Timothy 6:7.

- a. How true is Job 1:11 in human lives?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- b. What do you think of Job's answer in 1:21?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- c. Who was responsible for Job's trials?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- d. What can we learn from the story thus far?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- e. How do you feel about Chapter 3?

Day 3      Read Job 4-7. Along with Job 4:17, read Psalm 130:3; with Job 5:11, read 1 Samuel 2:7-11.

- a. How true is Eliphaz' opinion in 4:8?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- b. In Chapter 5, what is Eliphaz' conclusion about Job's plight?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- c. Choose one of Job's statements in Chapters 6 or 7 and give your opinion of his attitude.

Day 4 Read Job 8-10. After Job 10:9 read Genesis 2:7.

- a. What is Bildad's conclusion about Job's situation?
- b. Describe Job's attitude in Chapters 9-10.
- c. Choose lines in these chapters that please you or affect you most. Share these.

Day 5 Read Job 11-14.

- a. Read Zophar's speech and give your judgment about his attitude and his judgment of Job.
- b. Compare our society's attitude about Job 12:12-13 with Job's opinion of all old age.
- c. In these chapters, Job 11-14, choose some lines of poetry (all of Job is considered fine poetry) that have both words and thoughts that strike you.

Day 6 Read Job 15-19.

- a. In Chapter 16, look for lines that are descriptive of One-to-Come. Quote some lines that stand out for you.
- b. In Chapter 18, what do you think Bildad is saying to Job?
- c. In Chapter 19, what do verses 25-28 describe in the Life of Christ?