**St. Margaret’s English Community RCIA**

**The Book of Psalms**

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The *Book of Psalms* is unlike any other in the Bible. It is a collection of 150 sacred prayers and songs, and is more quoted in the New Testament, as well as used most frequently in the *Lectionary* (Book of Readings for Mass and Sacraments) than any other book from the Old Testament. The *Psalms* are a living heartbeat of the Church’s prayer. Catholics (especially clergy and religious) pray the psalms throughout the day in the *Liturgy of the Hours*, and because of the frequency of their usage in the prayer of the Church, understanding them is very important.

The word *psalm* comes from the Greek word for “song” [*psalmos*] which was used to translate the Hebrew word for song or melody [*mizmor*]. This Hebrew word in turn comes from the root *zamar* which means “to make music.” The music referred to with the word *mizmor* is almost always in terms of liturgical music. Another word at play here in the Greek Septuagint (LXX) is for a stringed instrument [*psalterion*] used to translate the Hebrew for “lyre” [*kinnor*] thought to be the instrument which accompanied these poems. In the Greek Septuagint these works were called *Psalmoi* and in Latin *Liber Psalmorum*.

To understand the Psalms we have to briefly look at their structure or technique since these are poems not prose. Unlike most forms of poetry there is no rhyme nor known rhythm (although as considered lyrical poems we can assume there was a form of music to accompany them). Scholars tell us that one of the essential qualities of this type of poetry is *parallelism of thought* between two or three verses or lines (the lines are called *cola* [plural] and *colon* [singular]). The typical structure for a Hebrew poem would be *bicola* although there are other examples of *tricola*.

**Types of Parallelism:**

1. *Synonymous Parallelism*: Lines of a *bicola* express the same or a similar meaning in two different forms, so *Psalm 2 v 1:*

*“Why to the nations conspire*

*And the peoples plot in vain?*

1. *Antithetical Parallelism*: When the idea or meaning expressed in the first line is contrasted or inverted in the second, so *Psalm 1 v 6:*

*“The Lord knows the way of the righteous,*

*but the way of the wicked will perish.*

1. *Synthetic Parallelism:* When the 2nd line completes, expands or further illuminates in some ways the meaning expressed in the first line. Here there are now “subcategories” such as a) *complementary parallelism* (where the 2nd line completes the thought of the first, so *Psalm 2 v 6*; or *b) Staircase parallelism*, when the following line builds on or augments the idea of the first line*,* and so *Psalm 29 v 1-2;* or *c) emblematic parallelism*, when one line states an idea in plain terms, while the other line(s) convey the same via a symbol, image, simile or metaphor, and so *Psalm 103 v 13:*
   1. *“I have set my king*

*On Zion, my holy mountain.”*

* 1. *“Ascribe to the Lord, O sons of God,*

*Ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.*

*Ascribe to the Lord the glory of his name.”*

* 1. *“As a father pities his children,*

*So the Lord pities those who fear him.*

And while the *bicola* is the dominant form here, occasionally you will see a single line (*monocolon*) standing alone, or the author uses a *tricola* or three lines to give the words a more solemn feel. So, *Psalm 1* begins with a *monocolon* followed by a more solemn *tricola*:

“*Blessed is the man*

*who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,*

*nor stands in the way of sinners,*

*nor sits in the way of the scoffers.”*

This *tricola* displays *synonymous parallelism*, although there is a progression of meaning with the sequence of words “walks” – “stands” – “sits” to show increasing comfort in the company of evildoers.

*An Outline of the* ***Book of Psalms****:*

The Psalms are divided into **five major sections**:

* **Psalms 1-41 (Book 1**):
  + **Introduction and Laments of David (Psalms 1-41)**
    - A) Introduction
      * Ps. 1: The Way of Blessing
      * Ps 2: Royal Messianic Introduction
    - B) The Laments of David – Psalms 3-41
* **Psalms 42-72 (Book 2**)
  + **The Rise of the Davidic Kingdom (Psalms 42-72)**
    - A) Psalms of the Sons of Korah (42-49)
    - B) Psalm of Asaph (50)
    - C) Psalms of David (51-72)
* **Psalms 73-89 (Book 3**).
  + **Fall of the Davidic Kingdom (Psalms 73-89)**
    - A) Psalms of Asaph (73-83)
    - B) Psalms of Sons of Korah (84-89)
* **Psalms 90-106 (Book 4**).
  + **Reflections on the Fall of the Kingdom and Exile (Psalms 90-106)**
    - A) Moses’ Plea for Mercy on God’s People (90)
    - B) Psalms of God’s Universal Sovereignty (91-104)
    - C) Concluding Reflection on History of Israel (105-106)
      * 1. God’s Faithfulness to Israel through History (105)
      * 2. Israel’s Unfaithfulness to God through History (106)
* **Psalms 107-150 (Book 5**).
  + **Rejoicing and Restoration of the Temple (Psalms 107-150)**
    - A) Introductory *Todah* for Return from Exile (107)
    - B) Cycle1 from Lament to Praise (108-118)
      * 1. David Psalms of Petition (108-109)
      * 2. Praise of Davidic Priest King (110)
      * 3. *Todah* Psalms (111-118)
      * 4. Interlude: Praise of God’s Law (119) *Former End*
    - C) Cycle 2 from Lament to Praise (120-136)
      * 1. Psalms of Ascent to the Temple of Jerusalem (120-134)
      * 2. Hymns of Praise (136-136)
    - D) Cycle 3 from Lament to Praise (137-150)
      * 1. Lament over Exile (137)
      * 2. Collection of Davidic Laments (138-144)
      * 3. Davidic Praise of God’s Kingdom (145)
      * 4. Concluding Hymns of Praise (146-150)

The division of the *Psalms* into 5 books or sections provides an overarching framework which gives an important KEY for interpreting the book in its final form. It’s important to also note that **David** (2nd King of Israel) is listed in the superscription of **73 psalms**. This does not necessarily mean that David wrote all of them, as the designation may mean simply that the psalm is about David. Moses is listed as the author of Psalm 90, and Solomon is listed as the author of Psalms 72 and 127.

Other authors listed in the psalm titles include Asaph (12 psalms), descendants of Korah (11 psalms), Heman the Ezrahite (Psalm 88) and Ethan the Ezrahite (Psalm 89).

**Hymns and Hebrew poetry**

There are some very interesting things to note about the construction and style of the Psalms. The root meaning of the title of the book in both Hebrew and Greek is **to play instrumental music and to sing to musical accompaniment**. Services at God’s temple involved the singing of these hymns with the accompaniment of stringed and wind instruments. In one sense, the book of Psalms was like a hymnal for God’s temple services.

There is another feature of the construction of the book of Psalms that makes it stand out from the rest of the Bible. The book of Psalms is actually what we might call **Hebrew poetry**. This is already mentioned above in the mention of the use of parallelism, meaning there is **a balance within one or more sentences of similar phrases or clauses that have the same grammatical construction**.

This construction of parallelism is important to remember so we can understand what the words are saying. A word or phrase on one line may be clarified and explained by what is said on the next line. The key to fully understanding the message of a particular psalm is to make sure we read the entire section or psalm. The Psalms tend to place thoughts, concepts and ideas concerning doctrine together.

**The greatest benefits of Psalms**

The 150 psalms are much more than beautiful literary compositions. The greatest benefits to the seeker of truth from the book of Psalms are not found in its construction or musical origins, but the timeless and uplifting truths it offers to people of every nation and age.

Eternal truths are written in a form that challenges the human intellect and touches the human heart. The words, phrases, lines and sentences with their recurring thoughts are able to teach us and reach us in ways that few things can. This is the book of Psalms’ greatest appeal.

Nearly all of life’s important questions are addressed in these 150 psalms:

* How to remain godly in the face of great trials.
* Questions about the injustices of the world.
* Dealing with depression and despair.
* Facing our own mortality at the end of our lives.
* Why God allows suffering.
* Repentance, forgiveness, mercy and the reconciliation of the whole world to God.
* The glory and grandeur of God.

**Overall themes**

There are certain overall themes that appear many times in the Psalms. In various commentaries on the Psalms, these themes are noted as always standing out.

**First**, the Psalms show an awareness of God’s presence in people’s everyday lives. God was not just a doctrinal issue to people, but Someone who was interested in everything they did.

We see this principle continued in the New Testament in what Jesus taught His disciples: “Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things” (Matthew 6:31-32).

**Second**, man’s duty to serve and obey God is emphasized throughout the Psalms. Mankind must do more than just praise and talk about God; we must obey God’s law. It’s wonderful to be stirred by singing beautiful hymns about God, but what really matters is that we are moved to live a certain way—God’s way.

**Third**, the Psalms speak often of Israel and Zion. Mount Zion is Jerusalem, and Jerusalem is a type of the [***Kingdom of God***](http://lifehopeandtruth.com/prophecy/kingdom-of-god). We often read of Israel being the “chosen people,” but in Psalms and the New Testament, it is clear that this never had the purpose of promoting an attitude of superiority. Peter said in the book of Acts that God is no respecter of persons (Acts 10:34, King James Version).

**A note of salvation for all the nations of the world is deeply embedded in some of the psalms**.

In reference to Zion, which represents God’s Kingdom, we read, “I will make mention of Rahab and Babylon to those who know Me; behold, O Philistia and Tyre, with Ethiopia: ‘This one was born there.’ And of Zion it will be said, ‘This one and that one were born in her; and the Most High Himself shall establish her.’ The LORD will record, when He registers the peoples: ‘This one was born there’” (Psalm 87:4-6).

Thus Psalm 87 proclaims that people of all nations are going to become citizens of God’s Kingdom.

Commenting on verse 5 in Psalm 87, Dr. A. Cohen writes that the phrase “this man and that” means, “More idiomatically ‘each and every’ nation, not only those enumerated in the preceding verse will be entitled to claim citizenship in the universal Zion” (*The Psalms,* p. 284). One of the great truths of the Scriptures is that [God’s plan](http://lifehopeandtruth.com/life/plan-of-salvation/gods-plan) is to save the entire world.

The book of Psalms is certainly a section of the Holy Scriptures that has much to offer any student of the Word of God. In its 150 messages there is encouragement, instruction, inspiration, truth and solutions to the great issues facing mankind. The needs of the human heart and mind are cared for in this unique book.

**A Table of Psalms by Theme**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| God the Creator. | [8](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps8.htm), [19](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps19.htm), [33](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps33.htm), [65](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps65.htm), [111](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps111.htm), [104](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps104.htm), [145](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps145.htm), [147](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps147.htm). |
| God the Redeemer. | [15](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps15.htm), [33](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps33.htm), [102](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps102.htm), [103](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps103.htm), [111](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps111.htm), [113](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps113.htm), [114](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps114.htm), [126](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps126.htm), [130](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps130.htm), [138](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps138.htm). |
| God the Judge. | [1](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps1.htm), [7](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps7.htm), [11](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps11.htm), [46](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps46.htm), [50](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps50.htm), [62](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps62.htm), [75](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps75.htm), [76](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps76.htm), [82](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps82.htm), [90](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps90.htm), [96](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps96.htm), [97](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps97.htm), [98](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps98.htm). |
| God’s Glory. | [18](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps18.htm), [29](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps29.htm), [99](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps99.htm), [36](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps36.htm), [46](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps46.htm), [148](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps148.htm), [150](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps150.htm). |
| God’s Sovereignty. | [24](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps24.htm), [46](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps46.htm), [47](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps47.htm), [72](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps72.htm), [89](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps89.htm), [93](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps93.htm), [96](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps96.htm), [97](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps97.htm), [98](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps98.htm), [99](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps99.htm), [112](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps112.htm), [146](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps146.htm), [145](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps145.htm). |
| God’s Wisdom. | [33](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps33.htm), [104](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps104.htm), [111](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps111.htm), [113](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps113.htm), [139](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps139.htm), [145](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps145.htm), [147](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps147.htm). |
| God’s Law. | [19](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps19.htm), [50](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps50.htm), [62](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps62.htm), [111](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps111.htm), [119](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps119.htm), [147](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps147.htm). [23](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps%3C/td%3E%3C/tr%3E%3Ctr%3E%3Ctd%3EGod%E2%80%99s%20Providence.%3C/td%3E%3Ctd%3E%3Ca%20href=), [33](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps33.htm), [34](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps34.htm), [37](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps37.htm), [89](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps89.htm), [121](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps121.htm), [124](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps124.htm), [139](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps139.htm), [145](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps145.htm), [146](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps146.htm), [147](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps147.htm). |
| God’s Mercy. | [23](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps23.htm), [32](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps32.htm), [57](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps57.htm), [61](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps61.htm), [62](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps62.htm), [63](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps63.htm), [73](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps73.htm), [77](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps77.htm), [85](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps85.htm), [86](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps86.htm), [100](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps100.htm), [103](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps103.htm), [118](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps118.htm), [130](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps130.htm), [145](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps145.htm). |
| The Incarnation. | [2](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps2.htm), [8](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps8.htm), [85](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps85.htm), [89](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps89.htm), [102](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps102.htm), [110](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps110.htm), [111](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps111.htm), [113](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps113.htm), [132](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps132.htm). |
| The Passion. | [22](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps22.htm), [40](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps40.htm), [42](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps42.htm), [54](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps54.htm), [69](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps69.htm), [88](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps88.htm), [116](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps116.htm), [130](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps130.htm). |
| The Church. | [46](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps46.htm), [48](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps48.htm), [84](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps84.htm), [111](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps111.htm), [122](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps122.htm), [133](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps133.htm), [147](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps147.htm). |
| Worship. | [5](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps5.htm), [26](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps26.htm), [43](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps43.htm), [63](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps63.htm), [65](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps65.htm), [66](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps66.htm), [67](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps67.htm), [84](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps84.htm), [96](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps96.htm), [100](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps100.htm), [102](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps102.htm), [116](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps116.htm), [122](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps122.htm), [138](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps138.htm). |
| Thanksgiving. | [30](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps30.htm), [65](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps65.htm), [67](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps67.htm), [92](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps92.htm), [98](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps98.htm), [100](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps100.htm), [111](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps111.htm), [103](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps103.htm), [107](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps107.htm), [116](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps116.htm), [134](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps134.htm), [138](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps138.htm), [145](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps145.htm), [147](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps147.htm), [148](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps148.htm), [150](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps150.htm). |
| Prayer. | [4](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps4.htm), [5](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps5.htm), [17](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps17.htm), [20](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps20.htm), [28](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps28.htm), [31](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps31.htm), [54](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps54.htm), [61](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps61.htm), [84](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps84.htm), [86](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps86.htm), [102](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps102.htm), [141](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps141.htm), [142](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps142.htm). |
| Trust in God. | [27](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps27.htm), [31](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps31.htm), [57](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps57.htm), [62](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps62.htm), [63](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps63.htm), [71](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps71.htm), [73](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps73.htm), [77](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps77.htm), [91](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps91.htm), [118](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps118.htm), [121](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps121.htm), [123](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps123.htm), [124](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps124.htm), [125](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps125.htm), [143](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps143.htm), [146](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps146.htm). |
| God our Refuge. | [4](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps4.htm), [17](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps17.htm), [20](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps20.htm), [37](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps37.htm), [46](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps46.htm), [49](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps49.htm), [54](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps54.htm), [61](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps61.htm), [71](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps71.htm), [91](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps91.htm), [103](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps103.htm), [121](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps121.htm), [146](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps146.htm). |
| Divine Guidance. | [25](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps25.htm), [43](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps43.htm), [80](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps80.htm), [85](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps85.htm), [111](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps111.htm), [112](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps112.htm). |
| In Time of Trouble. | [3](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps3.htm), [11](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps11.htm), [12](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps12.htm), [13](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps13.htm), [18](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps18.htm), [20](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps20.htm), [30](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps30.htm), [40](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps40.htm), [46](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps46.htm), [49](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps49.htm), [57](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps57.htm), [62](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps62.htm), [63](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps63.htm), [80](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps80.htm), [85](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps85.htm), [86](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps86.htm), [90](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps90.htm), [107](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps107.htm), [118](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps118.htm), [144](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps144.htm),[146](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps146.htm). |
| Righteousness. | [1](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps1.htm), [11](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps11.htm), [12](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps12.htm), [15](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps15.htm), [18](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps18.htm), [19](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps19.htm), [26](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps26.htm), [34](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps34.htm), [40](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps40.htm), [92](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps92.htm), [111](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps111.htm), [112](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps112.htm). |
| Peace. | [29](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps29.htm), [46](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps46.htm), [76](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps76.htm), [85](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps85.htm), [98](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps98.htm), [100](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps100.htm), [124](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps124.htm), [125](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps125.htm), [126](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps126.htm). |
| The Transitoriness of Life. | [39](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps39.htm), [49](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps49.htm), [90](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps90.htm), [102](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps102.htm). |
| The Hope of Immortality. | [16](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps16.htm), [30](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps30.htm), [42](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps42.htm), [49](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps49.htm), [66](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps66.htm), [73](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps73.htm), [103](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps103.htm), [116](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps116.htm), [121](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps121.htm), [139](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps139.htm), [146](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps146.htm). |
| Morning. | [3](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps3.htm), [5](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps5.htm), [20](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps20.htm), [63](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps63.htm), [90](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps90.htm), [143](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps143.htm). |
| Evening. | [4](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps4.htm), [13](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps13.htm), [16](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps16.htm), [17](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps17.htm), [31](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps31.htm), [77](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps77.htm), [91](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps91.htm), [121](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps121.htm), [134](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps134.htm). |
| Penitential Psalms. | [6](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps6.htm), [32](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps32.htm), [38](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps38.htm), [51](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps51.htm), [102](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps102.htm), [130](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps130.htm), [143](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps143.htm). |
| Preparation for Holy Communion. | [23](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps23.htm), [25](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps25.htm), [26](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps26.htm), [36](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps36.htm), [41](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps41.htm), [43](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps43.htm), [63](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps63.htm), [84](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps84.htm), [85](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps85.htm), [86](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps86.htm), [122](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps112.htm), [130](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps130.htm), [133](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps133.htm), [139](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps139.htm). |
| Thanksgiving after Holy Communion. | [8](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps8.htm), [15](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps15.htm), [18](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps18.htm), [19](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps19.htm), [27](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps27.htm), [29](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps29.htm), [30](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps30.htm), [34](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps34.htm), [100](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps100.htm), [103](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps103.htm), [110](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps110.htm), [118](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps118.htm), [145](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps145.htm), [150](http://bookofhours.org/psalms/Ps150.htm). |