

Sunday Message Notes – Better Bible Reading in 2026

Psalms Part 2: Psalms and Spirituals

Today, 1) we will look at the lament psalms and their connection with Negro Spirituals - and 2) highlight the vast theological diversity within the Psalter. The Psalms deeply resonant with the language of suffering enslaved Black communities utilized through spirituals. The lament psalms give voice to fear, grief, abandonment, injustice, and longing for God's deliverance. Many African American spirituals (and gospel songs) express suffering while holding onto hope.

I. Negro Spirituals

“Kum Ba Yah” / “Come by Here” often rendered from Gullah/Geechee-influenced language as “Come by here, my Lord.” **Ps. 102:1** “Hear my prayer, O LORD; let my cry come to you. Do not hide your face from me in the day of my distress. Incline your ear to me; answer me...”

“Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” → **Ps. 68’s** divine chariot imagery - “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot, Coming for to carry me home” → God bears up and gives escape from death” – “I looked over Jordan, and what did I see? A band of angels coming after me” → reflects heavenly/divine procession language in Psalm 68.

“Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen” echoes the loneliness and sorrow of lament psalms while ending with trust in God (similar to Ps. 22, 42, and 69).

“Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child (A long ways from home)” — profound expression of abandonment and exile (similar to Ps. 22, 88, and the exile psalms).

“Go Down, Moses (Let My People Go)” — a cry for liberation from oppression, echoes communal laments found throughout the Psalms (e.g., “When Israel was in Egypt’s land, Let My people go! Oppressed so hard they could not stand, Let My people go! Go down, Moses, Way down in Egypt’s land; Tell old Pharaoh To let My people go!”).

II. Traditional Gospel

While gospel music often emphasizes joy and victory, many songs begin in lament before moving toward hope.

Precious Lord, Take My Hand (Thomas A. Dorsey) was written after Dorsey lost his wife and infant son. This is a prayer for God's guidance through grief (similar to Ps. 23 and 143).

His Eye Is on the Sparrow - speaks to anxiety and trust despite hardship (similar to Ps. 121 and 139).

Consider the progression in Richard Smallwood’s “Healing:”

Ps. 42:11 Why are you cast down, O my soul (**Don’t be discouraged**)?

Ps. 30:5 Weeping may linger for the night, but **joy comes with the morning**.

Ps. 34:18 The Lord is near to the brokenhearted (**Know that God is nigh**)

Ps. 46:10 Be still, and know that I am God (**Stand still and look up**)!

Ps. 27:13 I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD (**God is going to show up**).

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Ps. 147:3 He heals the brokenhearted, binds up wounds (**There's healing for your sorrow – healing for your pain**).

Ps. 51 - renew a right spirit within me (**Healing for your spirit**).

Ps. 91 - He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High (**There's shelter from the rain**).

A. Theological Similarities - lament psalms and the spirituals **name suffering honestly rather than hiding it and hold together despair and hope instead of choosing one or the other**. Many scholars have noted that the African American spiritual tradition functions as a modern counterpart to Israel's biblical laments. Both traditions transform suffering into prayer and preserve hope without denying pain.

III. The Psalter's Textual Tensions

Ps. 82 A Plea for Justice (A Psalm of Asaph). **1** God has taken his place in **the divine council**; in the midst of the gods (Elohim – plural) he holds judgment: **2** How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked?

-Here we must sit with the tension of an assumed monotheistic Judaism using the divine plural name Elohim and being brought into question regarding evil

Ps. 88 is perhaps the darkest psalm because unlike most laments, it ends without hope: "Darkness is my closest friend." Many people expect biblical prayers to conclude with renewed confidence in God, yet Ps. 88 refuses that pattern. For many theologians, this is precisely its gift: Scripture makes room for faith that cannot yet find resolution.

Ps. 51 Prayer for Cleansing and Pardon To the leader (A Psalm of David)

1 Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions. **4 Against you, you alone, have I sinned** and done what is evil in your sight,

5 Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me. 16

For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, **you would not be pleased. 17** The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

19 then you will delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings; then bulls will be offered on your altar.

-Here we find a cry for mercy and an erasure of Bathsheba's victimization. We also discover Davidic hyperbole regarding his sinfulness and a contradiction around sacrifices.

IV. The Danger of Christological Readings

Critical scholarship does **NOT** read Jesus into the text, but rather resists treating the Psalms as if their primary purpose were to predict Jesus. **Ps. 2, 45, and 110** are best understood first within ancient Israel's royal theology: they speak about kingship, divine authorization, political hope, and the struggle for justice in Israel's own historical world. Later Christian writers found these psalms deeply meaningful for interpreting Jesus, but that is a later rereading, not the original meaning of the texts. The distinction is important: Christ resonates with the Psalter but it is not predicted by them.

V. Counter-testimony and Multi-vocality

The Psalter is **not a systematic theology**. It's a library of prayers written over centuries by different authors in different historical circumstances. As a result, it often places different theological perspectives side by side without trying to harmonize them.

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Rather than labeling the tensions contradictions many scholars speak of **creative tensions** or **polyphony**—multiple faithful voices speaking to different experiences. The Psalter **does not resolve these tensions**. It doesn't end each debate with "here is the correct theology." Instead, it gives space to different voices, trusting that faith can encompass certainty, doubt, praise, lament, confession, protest, and wonder. For someone exploring deconstruction, that's an important insight: the Bible itself invites generative conversations, not conclusions.

Humans are sinful from birth vs. humans are wonderfully made

Ps. 51:5 "Surely I was sinful at birth..." versus **Ps. 139:13–14** "You knit me together in my mother's womb...I am fearfully and wonderfully made."

The righteous prosper vs. the wicked prosper

Ps. 1 "The righteous flourish. The wicked fade away" versus **Ps. 73** "I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked."

God always protects the faithful vs. the faithful suffer terribly

Ps. 91 "No evil shall befall you." Versus **Ps. 44** "For your sake we are killed all day long."

God is always near vs. God seems absent

Ps. 23 "You are with me." Versus **Ps. 22** "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

The world is stable vs. everything is chaos

Ps. 93 The world is firmly established. Versus Many lament psalms where creation itself appears to unravel.

God's justice is immediate vs. delayed

Ps. 37 The wicked soon disappear. Versus **Ps. 73** The wicked thrive for decades.

Sacrifice matters vs. sacrifice doesn't matter

Ps. 20 Sacrifices are welcomed. **Ps. 40** "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire."

Ps. 51 "You do not delight in sacrifice." Yet ends: "Then you will delight in sacrifices."

The innocent suffer because of others vs. suffering comes from personal sin

Ps. 44 "All this has happened though we had not forgotten you." Versus **Ps. 51** David's suffering is clearly tied to his own sin.

Joy is constant **Ps. 50** vs. **Ps. 88** Ends in darkness.

God never sleeps (**Ps. 121**) vs. God seems asleep (**Ps. 44**)

God delights in vengeance (**Ps. 18**) vs. God delights in mercy (**Ps. 103**)

God's law is easy (**Ps. 1**) vs. impossible (**Ps. 119**)

God is hidden (**Ps. 10**) vs. God is everywhere (**Ps. 139**)

VI. The 3 Worlds of the Text: Behind, Of, In Front

A. The world BEHIND the text - The Psalter belongs to the wider literary world of the Ancient Near East (long before the Psalms reached their final form).

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