

The Transforming Power of the Psalms

ELIZABETH F. MEYER



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INTRODUCTION

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth (“Betsy”) Meyer has been a member of the Religious Society of Friends for over 35 years. She is a member of Sandy Spring Meeting in Maryland and has served that Meeting in a number of capacities including as Clerk. She has served Baltimore Yearly Meeting as part of the leadership of the Spiritual Formation Program and as Clerk of Interim Meeting. Betsy now serves as the Presiding Clerk of Baltimore Yearly Meeting. Betsy is an experienced workshop, retreat and Bible Study leader.

Cover photo: Scott W. MacKay

*My heart is steadfast, O God,
my heart is steadfast.
I will sing and make melody.
Awake, my soul!
Awake, O harp and lyre!
I will awake the dawn.
Be exalted, O God, above the heavens.
Let your glory be over all the earth.*

These words appear in two Psalms: 57 and 108, and they have become my wake-up words. When my alarm clock tells me it is time to get out of bed, but the bed entices me to snuggle under the covers, this prayer helps me rise with a steadfast heart that is willing to face “the day that the Lord has made” (Psalm 118:24a). But I do not want wakefulness in body only; I want my soul to be fully awake to God’s presence. “Awake, my soul!” It is the Psalms that have awakened my soul.

Nine years ago, I had a leading to devote myself to the Psalms. I began to commit them to memory, beginning with the shortest one. Sometimes I felt like a sponge soaking in the lines, greedy to learn more and more. Often, I felt like I was full and could not learn another line, but a few days later, I was ready for the next line. Learning the Psalms has not been an easy task for me; I do not have a photographic memory. It has required steadfastness and devotion to stick to it, but I did not learn the Psalms through my labor alone. God has given me the gift of the desire and ability to do it and so many sweet consolations for my labors. It took me nine years, but I finally learned all 150 Psalms.

After I began my memory work, I discovered that the Psalms had connected me with an awesome spiritual power. Somehow, just by taking these verses into my memory, and my heart, I had tapped into a spiritual connection with all the people of

faith who have prayed the Psalms for over two thousand years. And I found that the Psalms and their spiritual power were working within me to transform me according to God's will. In the second half of this talk, I will address some of the ways in which the power of the Psalms transforms. First, I would like to give some background on the Psalms and discuss some of the characteristics of the Psalms that present difficulties for contemporary Friends.

The terms "psalms" and "psalter" are Greek words, *psalmoi* meaning songs sung to a stringed instrument and *psalter* meaning harper. So this collection of prayer/songs became the Psalms or the Psalter when the Hebrew scriptures were translated into Greek, the translation known as the Septuagint, in the third century B.C.E. In Hebrew the book of Psalms is called the *Tehillim*, which means praises (from the Hebrew verb *halal*, to praise; and from that same verb comes *hallelujah*, which means praise the Lord). The *Tehillim* are the songs of praise that the ancient Israelites used as they worshiped together. The 22nd Psalm says, "Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel." (Psalm 22:3) These ancient people saw God as enthroned on their praises.

The Psalms were composed by various people from the time of David (and perhaps contain remnants from earlier times) up through the time of the Babylonian exile or shortly thereafter, so roughly 1000 to 400 years B.C.E. Then the post-exilic community, who rebuilt the temple and reestablished worship in Jerusalem, pulled the Psalms together to be their hymnbook.

At some point, the authorship of the Psalms became attributed to David. It is clear right on the face of the Psalms that King David could not have written them all (for example, the 137th Psalm—"By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion"—refers to the Babylonian exile, which happened a long time after David's

death). However, David might have composed the 18th Psalm. 2 Samuel Chapter 22 records David singing almost exactly the same words to the Lord when he was delivered from the hand of Saul. "The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold." (Psalm 18:2) By the time the Gospels were written, the general belief was that David wrote all of the Psalms. In a discussion with the Pharisees found in Matthew's gospel (22:41-46), Jesus quoted from Psalm 110 as the words of David, and the assumption that David wrote all of the Psalms is implicit there. This assumption generally prevailed up until modern scholarship brought a different view. We do not know the names of the Psalms' authors, but from their words, we certainly can know the authors' hearts. They were human beings just like we are.

I like to imagine many different people composing Psalms over many years as they received spontaneous insights from God and expressed them in prayer and praise. I imagine a humble woman hoping in the Lord as she rocks her young child to sleep, and from her lips comes the words of Psalm 131:

*O LORD, my heart is not lifted up,
my eyes are not raised too high;
I do not occupy myself with things too great
and too marvelous for me.
But I have calmed and quieted my soul,
like a weaned child with its mother;
my soul is like the weaned child that is with me.
O Israel, hope in the LORD
from this time on and forevermore.*

I imagine Psalms 111, 112 and 119, which are acrostics, as being written by scribes, enamored with the gift of the alphabet, and praising the Lord with word games. In my imagination,

these various authors brought their words of praise to the temple to be shared in worship and sung by the whole community, sort of like we would share a message in meeting for worship.

When the Psalms were being pulled together for worship, liturgical notes were added. At the beginning of some of the Psalms, a note will attempt to explain the origin. For example, Psalm 51 bears the note, “A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.” Because these notes were added at this later time, they are not believed to really explain the origins of the particular Psalms. Other notes seem to be telling the choir director what tune should be sung. For example, Psalm 45 bears the note, “To the leader: according to the Lilies.” Also in this post-exilic period, the Psalter was divided into five books, and *amens* were added between the books. *Amen* comes from the Hebrew verb to be true and means let it be true or let it be so (but, to me, it means “and that’s the truth!”).

Another liturgical direction is the word *Selah*, which appears 71 times in the Psalms. It comes from the verb “to lift up” so it may mean that the singers should lift up their voices or that there should be an interlude for instrumental music to be lifted up, but we do not know for sure what its purpose in worship was, so it is not translated but simply transliterated from the Hebrew.ⁱ Rufus Jones gave a sermon on the topic of *Selah*, postulating that it means “It’s wonderful! Think of that! Think of what has been said!”ⁱⁱ

The 119th Psalm says, “Your statutes have been my songs

wherever I make my home.” (Psalm 119:54). And this is what the Psalms are: they are song/prayers that help us understand God’s statutes, that difficult to discern thing—God’s will, and they make God’s law available to us wherever we go. The 19th Psalm expresses how elusive discernment is, and at the same time God’s work is clear and plain before us, and God’s law is wonderful.

*The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.
In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun,
which comes out like a bridegroom
from his wedding canopy,
and like a strong man runs its course with joy.
Its rising is from the end of the heavens,
and its circuit to the end of them;
and nothing is hid from its heat.
The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul;
the decrees of the LORD are sure,
making wise the simple;
the precepts of the LORD are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the LORD is clear,
enlightening the eyes;
the fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever;
the ordinances of the LORD are true and
righteous altogether.*

i In the Septuagint, *Selah* is translated into Greek as *diapsalma*; *dia* is a preposition that means through, throughout, during, by reason of. *Psalma* means a tune played on a stringed instrument. Because the Septuagint translation was made at a time when the Psalms were being sung as part of the liturgy, in my opinion, it gives us the best guess as to what *Selah* meant: during a tune; that is, an instrumental interlude.

ii Elizabeth Gray Vining, *Friend of Life*, p. 209 (1959).

*More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey,
and drippings of the honeycomb.
Moreover by them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.*

*But who can detect their errors?
Clear me from hidden faults.
Keep back your servant also from the insolent;
do not let them have dominion over me.
Then I shall be blameless,
and innocent of great transgression.
Let the words of my mouth
and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you,
O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.*

Believe it or not, I have not always loved the Psalms. When I first tried to read them, I found them very difficult. There were some good lines here and there, but for the most part, they left me cold. The Psalms present some obstacles that modern readers have to get beyond before we can tap into their power. I would like to talk about some of those obstacles for me and how they became not obstacles at all but rather characteristics of the Psalms that drew me into them.

The male language of the Psalms presented the first obstacle for me. It is important to me that I not think of God as masculine or as having communion only with men. This is one of the reasons I use the New Revised Standard Version (“NRSV”) of scripture. For the most part, the NRSV provides a more inclusive translation than some—for example, humankind rather than mankind. This is a more meaningful translation when the scripture is referring to humanness or mortality. So the third line of the 90th Psalm in King James, “Thou turnest man

to destruction; and sayest, Return, ye children of men.” becomes in NRSV “You turn us back to dust and say turn back you mortals.” This 90th Psalm is all about human mortality; to me saying “mortals” rather than “children of men” gets to the heart of the matter. Of course, many people are attached to the King James Version for various reasons, and I myself can never say the 23rd Psalm in anything but King James. I encourage you to read whatever translation speaks to you personally.

Despite its attempt to be inclusive, the NRSV uses the word “Lord,” and at first that really bothered me. I kept thinking that “Lord” meant the lord of the manor of feudal times, and it rubbed me the wrong way. But after a while, I found myself using the word “Lord” in my own spontaneous prayers. I realized that in my mind “Lord” had lost its masculine gender and prior definitions. For me “Lord” had been redefined as the word the Psalms most often use for God. In Hebrew the word “lord” is *adonai* which means lord in the sense of master or boss, director, supervisor, superior in rank. If you are praying the Psalms in Hebrew and you come upon the word *Yahweh*, the unpronounceable name of God, you are not supposed to say *Yahweh*, you have to say *adonai*.ⁱⁱⁱ So the word “Lord” in the Psalms is really just a substitute word anyway. It is a word that fills in as a poor approximation because we cannot possibly name or describe God. To use the word “Lord” or “*adonai*” is to recognize that we cannot give God a name or a gender or describe God linguistically, but we can only begin to know God through our experience of seeking God.

Another initial difficulty for me was the repetition in the Psalms. The poetic device of the Psalms is not meter or rhyme, but repetition and redundancy. For example, Psalm 27 begins:

ⁱⁱⁱ When not praying, more traditional Jews read *Yahweh* as *ha Shem*, which means “the name.”

*The LORD is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?*

*The LORD is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?*

*When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh—
my adversaries and foes—
they shall stumble and fall.*

*Though an army encamp against me,
my heart shall not fear;
though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident.*

At first, my reaction was, “all right, you made your point!” But as I worked with the Psalms, I realized that the redundancy is part of the Psalms’ spiritual power. The repetition works within to make the point not to the intellect, but to the heart. We must hear the same point over and over again so our hearts may truly be converted. The redundancy provides our hearts and minds with different ways of hearing the same message. If we cannot accept it in one way, we may be able to accept it when it is phrased differently.

Knowing that the Psalms are intentionally repetitious—this literary technique is called “parallelism”—can help us find new meaning for concepts that we may find difficult. For example, the 33rd Psalm says: “Truly the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love,” (Psalm 33:18), and the 147th Psalm says (and I love this line because I am a very slow runner), “His delight is not in the strength of the horse, nor his pleasure in the speed of a runner; but the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love.” (Psalm 147:10-11) These lines tell us, then, that fearing the Lord is in some way equivalent to hoping in God’s steadfast love. You may feel uncomfortable with the concept of the fear of the Lord (and I will talk more about this concept

later), and you may want to understand the concept because as Psalm 111 says, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;” (Psalm 111:10a). So perhaps you would like to begin to be wise, but cannot get your mind around the fear of the Lord. Well don’t worry about it, because according to Psalms 33 and 147, hoping in God’s steadfast love is somehow equivalent, so just start there and you can begin to be wise.^{iv}

The parallelisms in the Psalms can give us food for meditation. You might want to meditate on how fearing the Lord is like hoping in God’s steadfast love. Or you might take this line from Psalm 119 into meditation: “Let your steadfast love come to me, O Lord, your salvation according to your promise.” (Psalm 119:41) A query for meditation might be: how is God’s steadfast love like salvation?

From talking to many Friends about the Psalms, I find that the biggest objection contemporary Friends have to the Psalms is the “kill the wicked enemies” language found in many of them. When I first began working with the Psalms, I had that problem too. We want the Psalms to be beautiful, comforting prayers. We want pious words not angry, violent words to share with God. It does not feel right to be saying to God things like:

*Let the wicked fall into their own nets,
while I alone escape.*

Psalm 141:10

*May my accusers be clothed with dishonor;
may they be wrapped in their own shame
as in a mantle.*

Psalm 109:29

^{iv} Psalm 112 says, “Happy are those who fear the Lord, who greatly delight in his commandments.” (Psalm 112:1), so delighting in God’s commandments is somehow like fearing the Lord as well.

*The righteous will rejoice when they see vengeance done;
they will bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked.*

Psalm 58:10

“Why should we pray such prayers?” you may ask in disgust. But how many times has each of us had uncharitable thoughts about others? Not as gruesome as bathing feet in blood, perhaps, but uncharitable nevertheless. Then suddenly, you may think, “I am a Quaker; I should not think such uncharitable thoughts!” Of course you don’t really mean them, but you can’t keep uncharitable thoughts from crossing your mind. It is human. The creators of the Psalms were fully human and fully honest with God. They were able to express these uncharitable thoughts to God without embarrassment. They did not pretend that the world was sugar-coated.

Psalm 104 is a beautiful hymn to creation. It recognizes the food chain and the ecology of the earth and praises God for the wonders of land and sea, of birds and beasts.

*O LORD, how manifold are your works!
In wisdom you have made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures.*

Psalm 104:24

Yet, near the end of this beautiful hymn to the glories of creation, we find:

*Let sinners be consumed from the earth
and let the wicked be no more.*

Psalm 104:35a

The hymn to creation extols the ecology of the earth, but it does not pretend that the earth is the Garden of Eden; yes it is lovely, but there is a dark side. There is wickedness on this lovely earth, and the Psalmist will not pretend otherwise. The Psalmist

tells it like he sees it.

Near the end of the moving Psalm about God’s intimate searching and knowing comes:

*O that you would kill the wicked, O God,
and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me—
those who speak of you maliciously,
and lift themselves up against you for evil!
Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD?
And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?
I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies.*

Psalm 139:19-22

The Psalmist knows that the searching God finds the innermost negative thoughts as well as positive ones, and therefore why not be honest about them? The Psalms teach us to open our innermost negative thoughts so that God’s Light may cleanse them. Thus, Psalm 139 ends:

*Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my thoughts.
See if there is any wicked way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.*

Psalm 139:23-24

The Psalms come to us from a time when civilization was young. Humans were just beginning to understand how to get along together as societies for mutual protection and advantage. “Thou shalt not kill” was a fairly new concept. Before the Mosaic Law, excessive revenge killing was the norm. We get a sense of this rough justice from the story of the rape of Dinah found in the 34th chapter of Genesis. Jacob and his large nomadic family, traveling in the land of Canaan, came to the city where Shechem, the local prince, lived. Shechem fell head over heels in love with Jacob’s daughter Dinah, and he decided he had to have Dinah

for a wife. It did not help Shechem's cause that he had taken Dinah first by force before asking her family for her hand. In fact, Dinah's brothers Simeon and Levi considered the rape of their sister to be a personal affront to them. Though Shechem, in good faith, negotiated for Dinah's hand in marriage, her brothers took their revenge by killing Shechem and all of the men of his tribe, and they took possession of the tribe's women and flocks and wealth. Merely killing Shechem would not satisfy Dinah's brothers; they had to wipe out his whole tribe.^v

The story of the revenge on Shechem illustrates the sense of blood-revenge justice felt by ancient peoples: you hurt me and I will not only kill you, but I feel the need to wipe out your whole family. As Psalm 109 says, "May his posterity be cut off; may his name be blotted out in the second generation." (Psalm 109:13) Compared to Simeon and Levi's justice, the "eye for an eye" of the Mosaic Law (Exodus 21:24; Leviticus 24:20; Deuteronomy 19:21) does not sound so bad. At least it limits the revenge to something proportionate to the offense. The Mosaic Law looked to compensating the injured and limiting revenge.^{vi}

For an ancient person who had suffered a wrong, full

v As gruesome as the story is, we see in it the seeds of human understanding that violence begets violence. It dawned on Jacob that the kind of revenge his sons exacted would not ultimately benefit his own tribe, because they might expect similar treatment. He told his sons, "You have brought trouble on me by making me odious to the inhabitants of the land." (Genesis 34:30)

vi To illustrate, here is an example of an intentional tort and of a negligent tort treated in the Exodus case law:

When individuals quarrel and one strikes the other with a stone or fist so that the injured party, though not dead, is confined to bed, but recovers and walks around outside with the help of a staff, then the assailant shall be free of liability, except to pay for the loss of time, and to arrange for full recovery. (Exodus 21:18-19)

If someone leaves a pit open, or digs a pit and does not cover it, and an ox or donkey falls into it, the owner of the pit shall make restitution, giving money to its owner, but keeping the dead animal. (Exodus 21:33-34)

compensation under the Mosaic Law may have satisfied intellectually, but a desire for Simeon and Levi's revenge may have lurked within his heart. What was he to do with his rage? God, through Moses, gave the laws that limit revenge, so the least God could do in return is to listen to the rage of a heart that does not feel adequately avenged. Many of the Psalms pour out rage; they are vicious and venomous. But they always turn the rage over to God. They leave the final vengeance work for God, but humans must, as Psalm 37 says, "Refrain from anger and forsake wrath. Do not fret—it leads only to evil." (Psalm 37:8) The angry Psalms were a way for these ancient people to honestly express their rage to God and to accept God's law for them. The Psalms helped the people transform their personal anger so that they could live with their neighbors.

The Psalms also express the anger of an oppressed people against national enemies, calling on God to help them according to God's will. They helped a people who could not fight back against their oppressors transform their rage so that they could survive. But, as much as the Psalms spew forth venom against other nations, the *goyem*, they recognize that the Lord is the God of all, and they call on all nations to praise him:

Praise the Lord all you nations!

Extol him all you peoples!

*For great is his steadfast love toward us,
and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever.*

Praise the Lord.

Psalm 117

I hope that Friends will begin to see these angry Psalms not as inciting violence but as transforming rage in order to prevent violence. The angry Psalms take the first baby steps toward peaceful civilization. It was not just the ancients who needed help with rage. The anger of Simeon and Levi lurks in modern

hearts too. Examples in today's world abound: from road rage, gang slayings and disgruntled employee revenge to terrorism and genocide. I pray that the hurt, angry people of this world will turn to the Psalms to find the way to be honest with their deepest, basest feelings and to turn them over to God. We have to turn our rage over to God before we can make the next step in the process, the step that Jesus would have us make: to love our enemies.

The Psalms help us to open our darkest thoughts to God, to cleanse us of our rage and to transform us so that we can obey God's will. Let us now sample some other ways in which the Psalms can transform.

When I was a little girl, maybe five or six years old, my mother took me outside one clear night. As we looked at the stars in the sky, my mother told me the story of Orion the hunter. She pointed out the constellation—there was his belt, there was his shoulder. Suddenly, I was seized with fear. I told my mother I was afraid, and my mother said, as mothers do, “Oh, it's just a story, there's nothing to be afraid of.” But it wasn't that kind of fear. It wasn't a feeling that I had to go in and hide from some hunter in the sky. I didn't want to hide at all. It was fear; it was deep; I felt it down to my bones. But it felt good. It was a sense of awe and wonder at the vastness of creation compared to the smallness of myself, and it was a sense of connection with every human who had ever looked at the heavens in wonder. It wasn't until years later that I realized that what I felt that starry night was the fear of the Lord. Adults with sophisticated emotions and vocabularies call this feeling “awe” or “reverence,” but to a little child, it felt like fear.

When we experience the awe that is the fear of the Lord, there is no room in our hearts for anxiety. Instead, our hearts are amazed at the power of God and the vastness of creation. We deeply understand our own smallness—small, yet connected to

the awesome power. We know our right place. We are lower than God, but with an important job that God has ordained for us: to be good stewards of the earth, the part of creation God has entrusted to our care.

Whenever I say the 8th Psalm, I feel in my heart once again that wonderful fear I discovered on a starry night so long ago. Psalm 8 is a Psalm of transformation from anxiety to fear of the Lord, and to wise stewardship of the earth.

*O LORD, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens.
Out of the mouths of babes and infants
you have founded a bulwark
because of your foes,
to silence the enemy and the avenger.
When I look at your heavens,
the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?
Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honor.
You have given them dominion over
the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet,
all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field,
the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.
O LORD, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

The Psalter contains many lamentations: long lists of all the bad things that have happened to the Psalmist; he is in the depths

and feels forsaken by God. But out of the depths and darkness, the Psalmist longs for God's presence and never loses faith. The Psalmist knows that God is near, even when not perceptible.

The Psalms give us permission to lament too, without fear that we will separate ourselves from God or lose our faith. When we are beset by troubles, pain, suffering and grief, we need not keep up that mask of cheerfulness, the stiff upper lip. We can pour out our troubles, and God hears our pleas and suffers with us. We can be real, fully experiencing our pain, suffering and darkness. It has recently become public that Mother Teresa had periods of darkness in which she felt God had abandoned her. And Jesus, himself, lamented from the cross with Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Psalm 22:1a)

When we call upon God out of the depths of our despair, we are asserting ourselves to God, but we also are asserting God to ourselves. Even if our suffering is keeping us from feeling God's presence, we are recognizing God's presence simply by calling upon him. The Psalms of lamentation transform us from despair to closeness to God.

*How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I bear pain in my soul,
and have sorrow in my heart all day long?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?
Consider and answer me, O LORD my God!
Give light to my eyes,
or I will sleep the sleep of death,
and my enemy will say, "I have prevailed";
my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.
But I trusted in your steadfast love;
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.*

*I will sing to the LORD,
because he has dealt bountifully with me.*

Psalm 13

Psalm 51 is a prayer of transformation from sin to salvation. Many Friends today have trouble with the word "sin," but in Hebrew, the word sin—*hata*—means to miss the mark or misstep; as in archery to be off target, or as in walking to stumble and fall. I think of "sin" as being off center, or not centered. I sin when I put myself at the center of my universe, rather than centering myself on God. To sin is to be self-centered. Salvation is to be God-centered.

Biologically, we are self-centered; we have to be for survival in the natural world. Motherhood has taught me that self-centeredness begins before birth—almost from the moment of conception, I felt the self-centeredness of my baby from her effects on my body. And it continues to the infant demands for attention, and so on. Our self-centeredness, or sin, is original in our biology; it is our biological heritage. But God, through grace, helps us become God-centered; that is salvation.

Of course, salvation is not a one-time event: put God at the center of my life, and I am saved for good. Our life's work is to continually turn back to God, that is, repent, when we become off-center. As we continue to turn to God, we become more able to accept God's will; a willing spirit grows within us. Psalm 51 tells us that a willing spirit and the joy of salvation go together: "Restore to me the joy of salvation and sustain in me a willing spirit." One ordinary day, nothing special had happened, while riding the subway on my way home from work, I was overcome with a feeling of joy in my heart, a gift of God. I found myself thanking God for this joy, and telling God that I was willing to do whatever the Lord required of me, even traveling among Friends to preach about sin. The joy of salvation makes us

willing to do the most difficult things.

Psalm 51 is a prayer of repentance, of transformation from sin to salvation:

*Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.
For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.
Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence
and blameless when you pass judgment.
Indeed, I was born guilty,
a sinner when my mother conceived me.
You desire truth in the inward being;
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.
Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.
Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.
Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.
Then I will teach transgressors your ways,*

*and sinners will return to you.
Deliver me from bloodshed, O God,
O God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing aloud
of your deliverance.
O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.
For you have no delight in sacrifice;
if I were to give a burnt offering,
you would not be pleased.
The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God,
you will not despise.
Do good to Zion in your good pleasure;
rebuild the walls of Jerusalem,
then you will delight in right sacrifices,
in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings;
then bulls will be offered on your altar.*

Psalm 91 is a prayer of transformation of attitude from feeling like we are being punished to feeling delivered by God's love. This Psalm contains the scripture that the devil quoted to Jesus when he dared Jesus to jump from the pinnacle of the temple because "He will command his angels concerning you . . . on their hands they will bear you up so that you will not dash your foot against a stone." (Matthew 4:6; Luke Luke 4:10-11) Anyone, even the devil, can quote scripture.^{vii} Jesus knew not to take the Psalm literally, and answered that one must not put the Lord to the test. The devil would have us take scripture literally, but God wants us to let the Holy Spirit help us find the Truth in scripture.

vii As Shakespeare said, "The Devil can cite Scripture for his purpose." *The Merchant of Venice*, Act 1, Scene 3.

But does God really send his angels to guard us in all our ways? Do the hands of angels really bear us up so that we do not dash our foot against a stone? If that is so, why do bad things happen to good people? We suffer human tragedy when our own ambitions fall apart, when the world we struggled so hard to build shatters. If we ask God to be present with us to work through the tragedies for God's will, then we live, as the Psalm says, "in the shelter of the Most High." Our attitude is changed: we no longer feel like a victim, now we have an opportunity to know God. We do not feel punished, we feel protected.

Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, who died in 1996, was someone who lived in the shelter of the most high. In the last three years of his life, he faced tremendous difficulty, but he did not struggle against the difficult events, he embraced them as opportunities to deepen his spirituality.

In 1993, he was falsely accused of sexually abusing a young man. He said, "I was being emptied of self in a way that I never could have anticipated, and I wanted to let go and place myself and my cares in the hands of the Lord."^{viii} Eventually, the young man recanted his accusation. Cardinal Bernardin was moved by concern for this troubled young man, and ended up being reconciled and worshiping with him.

Then, Cardinal Bernardin learned that he had cancer of the pancreas. He faced surgery and chemotherapy. Instead of seeing himself as a victim of cancer, he embraced the situation as an opportunity to begin a ministry to the sick. When his cancer was pronounced terminal, he embraced the opportunity to show his flock how to die peacefully. He said:

By embracing the pain, by looking into it and beyond it, I have come to see God's presence in even the worst

situations.^{ix} God really does help us live fully even in the worst of times.^x

When bad things happen to us, if we embrace the events as opportunities to become closer to God, and reject any thought that we are victims or being punished, then we come into the shelter of the Most High; we have no fear because God's loving presence protects us no matter what happens.

*You who live in the shelter of the Most High,
who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,
will say to the LORD, "My refuge and my fortress;
my God, in whom I trust."*

*For he will deliver you
from the snare of the fowler
and from the deadly pestilence;
he will cover you with his pinions,
and under his wings you will find refuge;
his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.
You will not fear the terror of the night,
or the arrow that flies by day,
or the pestilence that stalks in darkness,
or the destruction that wastes at noonday.*

*A thousand may fall at your side,
ten thousand at your right hand,
but it will not come near you.
You will only look with your eyes
and see the punishment of the wicked.
Because you have made the LORD your refuge,
the Most High your dwelling place,
no evil shall befall you,*

ix Id. p. 95.

x Id. p. 96.

viii Joseph Bernardin, *The Gift of Peace*, p. 27 (Loyola Press 1997).

*no scourge come near your tent.
 For he will command his angels concerning you
 to guard you in all your ways.
 On their hands they will bear you up,
 so that you will not dash your foot
 against a stone.
 You will tread on the lion and the adder,
 the young lion and the serpent
 you will trample under foot.
 Those who love me, I will deliver;
 I will protect those who know my name.
 When they call to me, I will answer them;
 I will be with them in trouble,
 I will rescue them and honor them.
 With long life I will satisfy them,
 and show them my salvation.*

Psalm 91

One morning a few years ago, I was sitting at the breakfast table reading the newspaper. The news that day, both local and global, seemed to be filled with stories of people perpetrating acts of violence upon others without regard to the consequences. Suddenly, I felt overwhelmed with how stupid people can be. Why didn't these people realize that violence begets violence; that their acts will eventually come back to bite them? I found myself exclaiming in prayer, "O Lord, how can people be so stupid?" Then I had a vision. It was as if the sky opened, and a shaft of pure light came upon me. I was filled with God's pure love. This love was not like anything I have ever felt before or since. I'm a pretty loving person, but this was just so much beyond my capacity. It was not human affection; it was God's pure, unconditional love. It was the love of Jesus, and it had the power to heal by its touch. The vision lasted only for an instant,

but at that moment I knew that God loves everyone, even people who do stupid things. What I felt was God's compassion for all humans, no matter how misguided they may be.

The vision helped me understand that peace among human beings cannot be won with intellectual arguments. Only compassion brings peace, and compassion begins with understanding the pain of those who feel oppressed and feel that they have no recourse other than to violence. When we feel compassion, we can pray that in some way we can be instruments for God's healing love to work.

Psalm 137 has helped me to feel compassion for oppressed peoples and to understand the pain and rage that results from unspeakable atrocities. Everyone loves the beginning of this Psalm, but we may be shocked or embarrassed by its end which expresses the desire to do unto others the atrocities that were done unto them. Yet the 137th Psalm has given me the deep understanding that has enabled me to pray for peace, not with my intellect, but with the compassion in my heart. For me, it has been a Psalm of transformation from well-meaning intellectual to compassionate peacemaker. I would like to close with Psalm 137 and my prayer for peace in response.

*By the rivers of Babylon—
 there we sat down and there we wept
 when we remembered Zion.
 On the willows there we hung up our harps.
 For there our captors asked us for songs,
 and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
 "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
 How could we sing the Lord's song
 in a foreign land?
 If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
 let my right hand wither!*

*Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,
 if I do not remember you,
 if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.
 Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites
 the day of Jerusalem's fall, how they said,
 "Tear it down! Tear it down!
 Down to its foundations!"
 O daughter Babylon, you devastator!
 Happy shall they be who pay you back
 what you have done to us!
 Happy shall they be who take your little ones
 and dash them against the rock!*

O Lord, we know that the roots of violence are deep.
 Injustice begets injustice; and atrocities beget more atrocities.
 We know we cannot bring peace through our own work.
 But we offer ourselves to your service;
 that we may be instruments of your peace.
 Lead us in your way, in the Spirit that takes away
 the occasion for war.

Amen.

Citations:

Bernardin, Joseph Cardinal. *The Gift of Peace*, Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 1997.
 Vining, Elizabeth Gray. *Friend of Life: the Biography of Rufus M. Jones*.
 London: Michael Joseph, 1959.

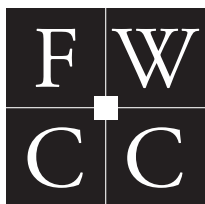
QUERIES

Following are some queries about the text, which you may wish to use for reflection or study, individually or with others.

1. Betsy writes, "It is the Psalms that have awakened my soul." What has awakened your soul?
 2. The first example of the Psalms' transforming power concerns anger, particularly the helpless person's rage against enemies or situations. Did this discussion help you understand some of those difficult passages in the Psalms?
 3. There is a lot of educational background in this talk, but also an acknowledgment that our intellect can only take us so far. "...peace among human beings cannot be won with intellectual arguments. Only compassion brings peace, and compassion begins with understanding the pain of those who feel oppressed and feel that they have no recourse other than to violence." Is it easier for you to engage your mind or your emotions when reading the Psalms?
 4. Have you ever experienced the transformation of attitude from feeling persecuted or abandoned to feeling "delivered by God's love"?
 5. Do you have a favorite Psalm, maybe one that you've memorized?
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Friends World Committee for Consultation Section of the Americas
Friends Center, 1506 Race Street, Philadelphia, PA 19102 USA
tel: 215.241.7250, email: wqf@fwccamericas.org