

Making Sense of the Psalter

Renee Rust*

The Psalms emerged out of the experiences of people who lived life to the full. These prayers therefore reflect the jumble of human experience. One day we can be extraordinarily pleased about how well the children are doing in school; the next, one of them is hospitalized and we are lost to anxiety. Sometimes the psalms remind me of the stock market: quick shifts from despondency to confidence and back again.

My first encounters with the inconsistency in these old oral prayers swiftly brought me to realize that they did not originate in some academic outline; they reflect real human mood swings. From moment to moment they change because of indecisiveness or because of new information – just as we change our minds. The psalms of lament, for instance, accent doubt in the midst of trouble. We could raise similar questions: “How long, O God, before you do something to cure me?” “Have you even noticed the way other countries are mocking our nation?” “How can you save me when my sin is so great.?” Then all of a sudden the tide turns and waves of confidence wash over the crisis: “O God, you have come to rescue me in the past and will do so again.” “You did promise to be with your people, and we are depending on your promise and your steadfast love.” “I don’t know exactly how you will do it, God, but I can already see you have the wisdom to end my/our troubles.” Such alternations between doubt and faith continue to accompany upheavals in our lives.

The psalms are jumbled prayer because they are full of human life. Psalm 43 demonstrates in five short verses how many moods can coexist in a single prayer. Trace the verse-by-verse progression from panic to doubt to confidence to anticipated joy to hope.

Psalm 43

Do me justice, O God, and plead my cause
against a faithless people;
from the deceitful and unjust, rescue me.

For you, O God, are my stronghold.
Why do you keep me so far away?
Why must I go about mourning,
oppressed by the enemy?

Send forth your light and your truth –
they shall guide me;
let them bring me to your holy mountain,
to your swelling place.

Then will I go to the altar of God, the God of my
delight and joy;

Then will I praise you with the harp,
O God, my God!

Why are you so downcast, O my soul?
Why do you sigh within me?
Put your hope in God,
For I shall be thankful
in the presence of my savior and my God.

(Psalm 43:1-5)

* From Making the Psalms your Prayer: Insights • Exercises • Resources by Renee Rust