

PRAYERS FOR LENT

-- from the Psalms --

by

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PRAYERS FOR LENT

—FROM THE PSALMS—

St. Benedict's ideal for Lent is: "We exhort all during these days of Lent to lead lives of the greatest purity, and to atone during this holy season for all the negligences of other times. This we shall do in a worthy manner if we refrain ourselves from all sin and give ourselves to prayer with tears, to reading, to compunction of heart and to abstinence." (Holy Rule Chapter 49).

Since the ideal of St. Benedict is to live the Christian life as the first Christians lived it, his exhortations are applicable to everyone who is really desirous to fill up by the full Christian life what is wanting in the sufferings of Christ.

Then, when we look for material to bring about this prayer with tears, this reading and this compunction of heart in our lives, the most perfect means to do this can be found in the words of the Holy Spirit. If we open the official prayer-

book of Holy Church we find that she has picked out seven prayers which she calls "The Seven Penitential Psalms" and she encourages us to use these as choice prayers for the holy season of Lent.

To understand more fully these seven God-inspired prayers, it is useful to see who is their human author, and, if we put ourselves into the circumstances of his life, we find that our experiences are quite similar to his; in fact he seems to be taking our places.

It is generally conceded that David is the man whom God used as His instrument to write five of the seven penitential psalms. The other two were written at the time of the Babylonian captivity of the Jews. Hence, by using all seven, we find expressions that an individual can use during the time of penance, and also we become big enough to go beyond our own little needs and pray for society and thus help the Body of Christ on earth, namely His Church.

To understand the words which the Holy Spirit inspired David to write, let us see just why he was penitent. We know from the words of Holy Scripture that the man of God, David, committed at least four most grave sins, and it was for these

crimes that he was repentant all the days of his life. Three of the mortal sins are described in the Second Book of Kings, chapter eleven, and his conversion is told in chapter twelve. The heading of chapter eleven, in the Douay version of Holy Scripture, has: "David falls into the crime of adultery with Bethsabee, and not finding other means to conceal it, causes her husband Urias to be slain." This, of course, gave grave scandal to his people.

The other grave sin is told in the Second Book of Kings, chapter twenty-four. For numbering the people, which was contrary to the ordinance of God as given in the book of Exodus and in the book of Deuteronomy, David sinned. We can understand the gravity of this offense when we read the verse of the Second Book of Kings, chapter twenty-four: "And the Lord sent a pestilence upon Israel, from the morning until the time appointed, and there died of the people from Dan to Bersabee seventy thousand men."

How good it is of the Holy Spirit to have David write out for us the reactions of his soul at the various happenings of his life. These five penitential psalms, then, tell us how he did penance for his sins. Surely, God will be pleased if we make use of the words which are really His.

PSALM 6

THE PART WHICH SICKNESS PLAYS IN THE LIFE OF THE SINNER

Jesus very pointedly tells us the part which sickness plays in the life of the sinner when He said to the man who had labored thirty-eight years under his infirmity: "Behold, thou art cured. Sin no more lest something worse befall thee." In Psalm 6, David tells us his experience with sickness, and how he prayed and made the best of his sickness.

Lord, I acknowledge my sickness as chastisement for my sins.

○ Lord, do not reprove me in thy anger
nor chastise me in thy wrath.

Have pity on me, O Lord, for I am languishing;
heal me, O Lord, for my bones are weakened;
My soul is severely terrified;
but thou, O Lord—how long?

Of myself, I waste away.

Return, O Lord, and deliver me;
save me, for thy kindness sake,
For among the dead no one remembers thee;
in the nether world, who gives thee praise?

Indeed, I am most miserable.

I have wearied myself with groaning;
every night I flood my bed with weeping;
I water my couch with my tears.
My eye is wasted away with sorrow;
I am grown old because of all my enemies.

*Still, my confidence in God is such that I
know that I shall be saved.*

Depart from me, all evil doers;
For the Lord has heard the sound of my weep-
ing.
The Lord has heard my pleading;
The Lord accepts my prayer.
All my enemies shall be put to shame and greatly
confounded;
They shall withdraw suddenly in great shame.

*If only we, too, use sickness in the spirit in
which God permits it! Are we not tempted to say
oftentimes, "Why should I have all these ail-
ments? I've been trying to be good, but the
more I try the more I have to suffer." Listen,
dear soul, are you any better than David? Look
how he used sufferings to make good his sins.
Let sickness have the same effect on you as it
had on him.*

PSALM 31

MEDITATION LEADS TO REPENTANCE; DAVID TELLS OF HIS CONVERSION

Jesus also says that it is necessary to watch and pray: "Watch, then, praying at all times, that you may be accounted worthy to escape all these things that are to be, and to stand before the Son of Man." Especially is this the case for the sinner. Very many books have been written of the sinner's road to Rome; in Psalm 31 David tells of his road back to God.

David meditates on the happiness of the pardoned sinner; or better still, the man who hasn't sinned.

Happy are they whose transgressions are forgiven,
whose sins are covered.

Happy is the man to whom the Lord does not impute guilt,
and in whose spirit there is no guile.

He tells of the effects of sin upon him, and his conversion. Cf. II Kings 12, 13.

When I was silent my bones wasted away,
I roared all the day.

For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me;
I tossed about in my anguish; meanwhile the thorn sank deeper.

My sin I made known to thee,
my guilt I did not conceal.

I said, "I will confess against myself my transgression to the Lord,"
and thou didst pardon the guilt of my sin.

David encourages others to do as he has done.

This is the common experience of every holy one
who prays to thee
at an opportune time

Truly, when the deep waters overflow
none shall reach him.

Thou art my shelter from the trouble that sur-
rounds me;
my joy, rescue me from those that beset me.

David gives God's promise and admonition.

"I will instruct thee and direct thee in the way
thou shouldst walk;

I will keep my eyes on thee.

Be not like a horse and a mule, without under-
standing;

With bit and bridle thou must constrain their
jaws so that they come near thee."

Conclusion; an eternal truth expressed.

Many are the scourges of the wicked,
but him that hopes in the Lord kindness shall
encompass.

Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, you just;
be jubilant, all you upright of heart.

Then, I look at my soul. I, too, have sinned. I know from experience that sin is really the only evil that makes a person unhappy. Why, then, should I not turn to God, acknowledge my sin, and have Him tell me, through His priest, "I absolve you from your sins?" Then, if I learn the lesson of the Psalm 31, does not the Holy Spirit assure me: "Kindness shall encompass him that hopes in the Lord?"

PSALM 37

WHAT TO DO IN EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL SUFFERINGS WHICH COME IN THE WAKE OF SIN

When we pick up the Books of Kings and read David's life do we not find our own lives mirrored there? We do not read very long until we wonder, "Why did David have to suffer all these things?" He suffers mental anguish at the treachery of Saul, the ingratitude of his beloved son, Absalom, the perfidy of his trusted friend, Achitophel, and the rascality of Doeg; the Philistines cause him untold troubles; old age brings on no blessing—only bodily ailments so that he cannot even keep his body warm. Some of these sufferings are expressed in Psalm 37.

The arrows of God are our sins. How often we cry out under the weight of our sins!

O Lord, rebuke me not in thy anger
nor correct me in thy wrath.
For thy arrows stick fast in me:
thou hast brought down thy hand upon me.
There is no soundness in my flesh, because of
thy anger;
there is no health in my bones, because of
my sins.
For my iniquities have passed over my head;
they are like a great burden that is too heavy
for me.

What were the sufferings of Jesus but the sting of our sins?

My bruises are corrupting and festering,
because of my folly.
I am depressed and bowed down profoundly;
all day long I go about in mourning.
For my soul is filled with burning pains;
there is no soundness in my flesh
I am afflicted and severely crushed;
I groan in the anguish of my heart.

Internal sufferings. "Thou hast made us for Thyself, O God, and our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee."

St. Augustine

O Lord, all my desire is before thee;
my sighing is not hid from thee.
My heart quakes; my strength has forsaken me,
and the very light of my eyes fails me.
My friends and companions come near me, but
keep aloof;
my neighbors stand afar off.
But they who seek my life lay snares for me;
They that plot my ruin speak destruction and
plan treachery all the day long.

What do I do? "Lead kindly light, lead thou me on. One step enough for me."

Newman

But I, like a deaf man, hear not;
I am become like a dumb man who opens not
his mouth.

I am become as a man who hears not,
on whose lips is no retort.
Because for thee, O Lord, do I wait;
thou wilt answer me, O Lord, my God.
For I say, "Let not my enemies rejoice over me:
Let them not glory over me when my foot slips."
For I am ready for a collapse,
my pain is ever with me.

*What do I do? I acknowledge my guilt and
pray. Naked I stand before you in my guilt.
Clothe me, O God, with the garment (cloak)
of your mercy.*

Yes, I acknowledge my guilt;
I grieve over my sin.
But my enemies live and are numerous against me;
they are many that hate me without reason.
They that repay evil for good
oppose me for pursuing that which is right.
Forsake me not, O Lord;
my God, do not depart from me!
Make haste to help me,
O Lord God, my savior.

*Then, my soul, what do you expect after all
the sins which you have committed in your life?
You, too, will have to trust in the Lord after
you have grieved for your sins; and when the
external and internal sufferings come as an
aftermath of your sins, do as David did and
turn to your God; pray and abandon yourself
to God's will.*

PSALM 50

THE PSALMIST'S ACT OF CONTRITION

From our knowledge of David, as gleaned from Holy Scripture, we know that he was a man who had intense love for his God. How would such a God-fearing soul pour out his heart when he realized that he had offended God seriously? We have the answer to this question in Psalm 50. We must remember that David did not have any Sacrament of Penance to take away his sin, hence the only possibility of bringing it about that Nathan could say, "The Lord also hath taken away thy sin," was through perfect contrition or perfect love. This is the way the psalmist put it:

Stand with the Publican and say, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, a sinner." David begs for the remission of his sins.

Have mercy on me, O God, in thy great mercy,
And in the abundance of thy compassion blot
out my transgression.
Wash me yet more from my iniquity and cleanse
me of my sin.

*He acknowledges that he has sinned; yea,
that he was born in sin.*

*God does not hear the prayer of many words.
cf Holy Rule*

For I acknowledge my transgression
and my sin is ever before me
Against thee alone have I sinned
And I have done evil in thy sight;
That thou mayest be found just in thy words
and be vindicated when thou judgest.
Behold I was brought forth in iniquity
and in sins did my mother conceive me;
But lo, thou delightest in the sincerity of the soul
and thou teachest me wisdom in the depth of
my heart.

*He asks that he be restored again unto grace.
"If your sins be as scarlet, they will be made
white as snow."*

Is. 1:18

Sprinkle me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
Make me hear of joy and gladness,
and let the bones that have been crushed
rejoice.
Turn away thy face from my sins
and blot out all my guilt.

*Petition for a good and persevering spirit.
Make from my nothingness Lord, a heart to
love You, a will to serve You forever.*

Create a clean heart within me, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit in my breast.
Cast me not away from thy presence,
and take not away thy holy spirit from me.
Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation,
and strengthen me with a willing spirit.

*David gives his zeal to convert sinners and
his contrite heart as reasons why God should
forgive him.*

*Love God who forgives your sins; forgive
your brother that God may love him.*

I will teach transgressors thy ways,
and sinners shall return to thee.
Deliver me, O God, thou God my savior, from
the guilt of blood,
and let my tongue extol thy justice.
O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth shall declare thy praise.
For thou didst not desire a sacrifice,
thou wouldst not receive a burnt-offering even
if I offered it.
The sacrifice to God is a contrite heart;
a heart, crushed and contrite, O God, thou
wilt not despise.

*David adds a prayer that Jerusalem be built
up and sacrifice be offered again.*

In thy goodness, O Lord, show kindness to Sion,
that the walls of Jerusalem may be built up.

Then shalt thou be pleased with the sacrifice of
justice,
Burnt-offerings and holocausts;
Then shall they lay bullocks upon thy altar.

O my soul, here is an immense lesson for you. These words of David are the outpourings of a contrite heart; we know, in fact, that they produced or were the effects of perfect love in his soul. If I, too, succeed in bringing my heart to perfect love, sin will no longer be able to stay in my soul. O happy me! And all who read, learn this important truth: perfect love and mortal sin cannot exist together in any one soul.

PSALM 142

THE PENITENT'S PRAYER WHEN OLD DIFFICULTIES RE-OCCUR

After the sinner has returned to God and has made his peace with Him, how often do not the enemies of the soul bring up difficulties anew and seek to discourage him in his path of repentance! Satan is not like men. He never gives up; he returns again and again to regain the soul he has lost. In Psalm 142 David tells us what to do in such circumstances.

David turns to God when the going is hard.

O Lord, hear my prayer;
hearken to my supplication according to thy
faithfulness; answer me in thy justice
And enter not into judgment with thy servant,
for before thee no man living is just.

The enemy tempts.

For the enemy pursues me;
he would crush my life to the ground,
He has tried to make me dwell in dark places
like those who are long dead.
And my spirit is faint within me;
my heart within me is desolate.

But the psalmist confides.

I recall the days of old;
I meditate on all thy doings;
the works of thy hands, I ponder.
I stretch out my hands to thee;
my soul before thee is like parched land.

His prayer for speedy help.

Haste to answer me, O Lord;
my spirit fails me.
Hide not thy face from me,
lest I become like those who go down in the pit.
Let me soon hear of thy kindness,
for in thee I trust
Show me the way in which I should walk,
for to thee I lift up my soul.
Rescue me from my enemies, O Lord,
for with thee I take my refuge.

He wants only God's will, and lets Him take care of the enemies.

Teach me to do thy will,
for thou art my God.
Let thy good spirit guide me
on even ground.
For thy name's sake, O Lord, save my life.
in thy justice bring my soul out of distress.
Yes, in thy kindness, destroy my enemies
and bring to nought all my foes, for I am
thy servant.

And now, I have followed David through his life of repentance and have learned his lessons. Now, with God's help, let difficulties come, I shall treat them as David did; then I, too, shall die as David died—beloved of God.

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And now we come to the social penitential psalms. The Christian must not be content to pray for himself alone; he owes it to the other members of the Mystical Body that he do his part to relieve social evils. The two psalms which Mother Church has chosen as penitential psalms for society were both written during the Babylonian captivity. The first of the two, Psalm 101, has an inscription: "A prayer of one afflicted, who, being weary, pours out his trouble before the Lord." Israel in exile prays for the restoration of Sion, and asks that the name of the Lord be praised again in Jerusalem and that all peoples may fear and serve Him. Hence, every Christian may ask when he prays this psalm:

PSALM 101

THAT SOCIETY BE RESTORED ACCORDING TO THE NORM OF THE EARLY CHURCH

Plaintive cry.

O Lord, hear my prayer,
and let my cry come to thee.
Hide not thy face from me;
in the day of my distress incline thy ear to me.
Hear me speedily when I call upon thee.

Literal expression of my troubles.

For like smoke my days vanish,
and my bones burn like embers.
My heart is smitten and withers like grass;
I forget to eat my bread.
Because of the violence of my groaning
My bones cleave to my flesh.

Symbolical expression of the same

I am like a pelican in the wilderness,
like an owl in a ruined house;
I am sleepless and I am become
like a sparrow alone on the roof.
All the day my enemies reproach me,
and they who revile me, curse against me.
Yes, I eat ashes like bread;
my drink I mingle with tears.

Because of thy wrath and thy anger
thou didst lift me up only to cast me down.
My days are like a lengthening shadow;
I wither like grass.

*Considering the sad plight of Jerusalem, the
psalmist begs God to restore the people and
the city.*

But thou, O Lord, abidest forever;
thy name remains through all generations.
Thou wilt arise and have compassion on Zion,
for it is time to pity her;
the appointed time is come.
For her stones are dear to thy servants
and her dust moves them to pity.
Then the nations shall fear thy name, O Lord,
and all the kings of the earth, thy glory,
When the Lord shall rebuild Zion,
and shall appear in his glory,
When he shall regard the prayer of the destitute
and shall despise not their pleading.
Let these things be written for a future generation
and let a people that shall be created praise
the Lord.
For the Lord looked down from his high sanctuary,
from heaven he looked upon the earth
To hear the groans of the captives,
to release those doomed to death;
That the name of the Lord might be declared in
Sion, and his praise in Jerusalem.
When the peoples shall be gathered together,
and the kingdoms, to serve the Lord.

Returning to his own affliction, the psalmist asks that he be not called from this life before his time.

My strength is brought low in the way;
he has shortened my days.
I say: "O my God,
Take me not away in the midst of my days;
thy years endure throughout all generations.
Of old, O Lord, thou didst establish the earth,
and the heavens are the work of thy hands.
They shall pass away, but thou shalt endure;
all of them shall grow old like a garment;
Like clothing thou reparaest them,
and they are repaired,
But thou art the selfsame,
and thy years have no end.
The children of thy servants shall dwell untroubled,
and their posterity shall be established forever."

My soul, do you wish to learn to pray as the early Church prayed? The petitions of the first Christians were very social: they really understood how the needs of their fellow-Christians were their needs too: their prayers tended to be socially-minded. That is one of the reasons why they so loved the psalms. I, too, must learn this angle of prayer and use it more.

PSALM 129

MAN'S SIN—GOD'S MERCY

In this penitential psalm, we have three aspects from which we can view and pray the psalm. First, we place ourselves with the Jews in Babylon; realizing that it was the sins of the people that led God to forsake His people, we ask His mercy to bring the people back to their land. Secondly, the two elements of humble confession of guilt and complete trust in God's mercy are best suited to obtain mercy for the suffering souls in purgatory. Thirdly, we know that sin has made us exiles from God; we too acknowledge our guilt and hope for forgiveness from Him.

Psalm 129 is one of the most used of the psalms. Make it known and use it as our prayer even more

The psalmist immersed in the depths of sin calls on God.

Out of the depths I cry to thee, O Lord;
Lord, hear my voice.
Let thy ears be attentive
to the voice of my supplication.

We too are all sinners; only the pardon of God can save us.

If thou, O Lord, shouldst remember sins,
Lord, who shall stand?

But with thee is forgiveness of sins
so that people may serve thee with love.

*Now I with trust and desire expect this
pardon.*

I trust in the Lord,
My soul trusts in his word;
My soul waits for the Lord
more than the watchman waits for the dawn.

*And all the people look to this God for par-
don and redemption.*

Let Israel long for the Lord
more than watchmen wait for the dawn,
For with the Lord there is mercy
and with him plenteous redemption.
And he will redeem Israel
from all her iniquities.

*And now, my soul, we have come to the last
of the penitential psalms. Wouldn't it be interest-
ing to know how many times this Psalm 129 has
been said since the time of its composition?
Many devout souls say it every day in connec-
tion with the evening angelus as a prayer for
the Poor Souls in Purgatory; others say it as
penitential psalm for their own souls. How effect-
ively could it be said, in these times, that all our
displaced persons find peaceful homes again! I
owe it to my fellow Christians and to myself
to say it frequently. Lord, give me the grace
to be a penitent in every sense of the word!*

