

# Excerpts

## Excerpt from Chapter 1

### **The Strength, the Passion, and the Fire**

My first introduction to the study of the Psalms took place long ago in a Sunday school class in the basement of a church in Minnesota. The teacher was a small woman with dark hair and a bright smile, the mother of one of my best friends. She handed out a stack of worn, black King James Versions. "Now take your Bible," she said, "and open it right to the middle. There you will find the Psalms."

Since that time I often have quoted her instructions, as I've taught the Psalms in settings ranging from mountain retreats and lakeshores to classrooms, convents, and even the basement of a city hall, where a group of policemen were working on a college degree.

I think it fitting that the Psalms are located in the middle of the Bible, between accounts of holy wars and conquests on the one side and the good news on the other. That is because, in the years since first being introduced to them, I have encountered the Psalms in the middle of life, giving expression both to the sorrows and the joys that mark our days.

One December morning, for instance, a half dozen of us walked through the mist and fog at Dachau, the concentration camp where thousands of Jews and political prisoners died. As we made our way to the crematorium, I remembered author Elie Wiesel telling about the gentle Hasidic Jews of Eastern Europe, old people and children, walking toward the gas chambers and singing the Hebrew Psalms as they went. I stepped into a memorial chapel and saw the words of Psalm 130 on the wall, "*aus der tiefe rufe ich, herr, zu dir,*" and I could imagine hundreds, thousands, millions of prayers ascending to heaven: "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord."

The Psalms reflect the good times, too. An aged widow, living alone in a small Midwestern town, was telling me about her children. "Then there was Lambert," she said, "but of course he's gone now. He always said the horses plowed best for him because he sang the Psalms to them in Dutch." Think of the ingredients in that scene: psalms that originated in Hebrew in Israel, sung in Dutch by the grandson of an immigrant from the Netherlands, as he plowed with horses on a prairie in America.

Another scene: One summer I was teaching the psalms to campers in the Black Hills of South Dakota. They all learned to sing a Hebrew song based on the first line of Psalm 133. Translated, the words mean, "How very good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity." Several years later I received a postcard from one of those campers, at that time a counselor at a camp in the state of New York. "I thought you'd like to know," he began, "that I taught my campers that Hebrew song. We were hiking through the woods singing it when we ran into another group of hikers who heard us and joined right in! They were Jewish kids from New York City. That psalm brought us together." How good and pleasant indeed, I thought, when Christians and Jews meet out in the words and join together in singing a psalm.

These prayers and hymns, found in the middle of the Bible, have a way of turning up in the middle of our lives. The book *Occasional Services: A Companion to Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1982) assigns psalms to a variety of life's situations: sickness and gratitude, childbirth and stillbirth, loneliness, and the blessing of a dwelling. That the Psalms should be invited to such occasions is not surprising, since they originated in similar situations. They come from the depths of sorrow (130) or the heights of celebration (150). They reflect the pain of loneliness (42) or the joy of community (133). They allow us to hear the prayer of an old person, worried about what lies ahead (71), or to look in on the everyday life of a young family, happily gathered around their table (128).

These Psalms in the middle of our Bibles originated in the midst of life and continue to speak to us, and for us, in the midst of our lives. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who loved the Psalms, quoted Luther: ". . . Whoever has begun to pray the Psalter seriously and regularly will soon give a vacation to other little devotional prayers and say: 'Ah, there is not the juice, the strength, the passion, the fire, which I find in the Psalter'" (*Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1970], 25).

The pages that follow are offered as an invitation to the Psalms. We begin with Psalms 1 and 2, which have been placed at the beginning of the book of Psalms as an introduction, and continue by considering five groups of psalms: laments, psalms of trust, pilgrimage psalms, hymns, and creation psalms. My hope is that through this exploration of the Psalms you will discover for yourself what Luther found in them: "the juice, the strength, the passion, and the fire."