

# Praying with the Psalms

Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi

*Preface by Pope Francis*

NOTES ON PRAYER

Volume 2





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## Introduction

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The sound of the trumpet rang out through the streets of the cities and villages, its echo spreading across the countryside: it was the signal of the fiftieth year, proclaiming “liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants.” This act, as found in the book of the priests of ancient Israel, Leviticus (ch. 25), marked the year of jubilee, named after that trumpet, in Hebrew *jobel*. Also in Christianity, in different forms and at different times, similar events have taken place, and we too are now heading towards the Jubilee of 2025. For biblical Israel it was a time in which the inhabitants and the land rested, refraining from any agricultural activity, eating of the spontaneous gifts of nature. The rest that we now experience with the Holy Year has another dimension: it is an intense time, dense with spirituality. Filled with two fundamental acts.

The first is that of prayer and meditation. The great seventeenth-century French thinker and believer Blaise Pascal cautioned, “The ancient philosophers said, ‘Go

back within yourselves! That is where you will find your peace.' But this is not true. Others say, 'Go out! Seek happiness in amusements.' But this is not true. Happiness is neither outside of us nor inside of us. It is in God, and then it will be outside and inside of us" (*Thoughts*, no. 391). Here, then, is the meaning of the pages of this volume: it is an invitation to enter the Jubilee Year holding in one's hands the Psalter, which is the quintessential book of the Bible meant for prayerful pause and contemplative silence. It is a guide to "singing to God with art" through the Psalms. As St Augustine said, "the great work of men is to praise God" (*Magnum opus hominum laudare Deum*).

But there is a second act that blossoms from prayer and makes this holy time a "year of the Lord's favour." Already in ancient Israel it was the time for setting slaves free. This is what Jesus was suggesting in His sermon in the synagogue of His village of Nazareth, quoting the prophet Isaiah. Prayer, singing, the liturgy do not close us off within a sacred oasis amid incense, candles and rituals, but beckon us to go out into the community and history. Here, in fact, are the words of Christ: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" (*Luke 4:18-19; Isa 61:1-2*).

It is the commitment to keep our steps far from the paths of evil, aggression, hatred and injustice, to make firm the path of love and solidarity that leads us to recognise the face of Christ in our suffering and marginalised brothers and sisters. In fact, as will be seen, the Psalms do not drive the worshipper to take flight from everyday reality towards heavens of fantasy or of vague mysticism, but to travel the roads of history, including the rocky ones, and to live the faith in the day of celebration but also in the dark night of trial. The Psalter throws its songs open wide to the hubbub of social existence, to the works and days, to the laughter and tears, to the personal dramas and national tragedies. Always, however, with one certainty: even if “father and mother forsake me, the LORD will receive me” (*Ps* 27:10).

This little guide to the Psalms includes four cardinal points: a general reflection on prayer, the breath of the soul; a panoramic look at the psalmic texts; a portrait of the two protagonists, God and the worshipper, but also the intrusion of the presence of evil; and finally, an anthology of brief commentaries on the Psalms most dear to tradition and the liturgy. The hope is that all the faithful may draw fully from this “wonderful treasury of prayers,” as Vatican Council II called the Psalter (*Dei Verbum*, 15).