

PSALMS:
THE PRAYER BOOK
OF JESUS

Session 8: The Penitential Psalms

PSALM 6, *Domine, ne in furore*

O Lord, rebuke me not in your indignation, *

neither chasten me in your displeasure.

Have mercy upon me, O Lord, for I am weak; *

O Lord, heal me, for my bones are racked.

My soul also is greatly troubled; *

but, Lord, how long will you punish me?

Turn, O Lord, and deliver my soul; *

O save me for your mercy's sake.

For in death no one remembers you, *

and who will give you thanks in the grave?

I am weary with my groaning; *

every night I flood my bed and drench my couch

with my tears.

My eyes have become dim because of trouble, *

and worn away because of all my enemies.

Away from me, all you who work wickedness, *

for the Lord has heard the voice of my weeping.

The Lord has heard my petition; *

the Lord will receive my prayer.

All my enemies shall be confounded and greatly vexed; *

they shall be turned back and put to shame suddenly.

THE PENITENTIAL PSALMS

- The Penitential Psalms are a traditional group of seven psalms (6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143) that express sorrow for sin, confession, and the longing for forgiveness and renewal. It is identified by subject matter rather than a fixed form.
- They have been used for centuries in both Jewish and Christian devotion, particularly in times of repentance and Lent.
 - The Book of Common Prayer draws heavily on these psalms for penitential collects, Ash Wednesday, and the daily offices.
 - Psalm 51 ("Miserere mei, Deus") is often said or sung at Morning Prayer, during Lent, and in the Litany of Penitence.
 - Psalm 130 ("De profundis") has been an alternate canticle in Evening Prayer, in Compline, and at funerals, uniting penitence with hope in redemption.

THE PENITENTIAL PSALMS

- Characteristic Themes of the Penitential Psalms:
 - Confession of sin and acknowledgement of guilt.
 - Appeal to God's mercy and steadfast love.
 - Desire for cleansing and renewal of the heart.
 - Hope in forgiveness and restoration to joy.

THE PENITENTIAL PSALMS

Psalm	Focus	Tone	Key Verse
6	Plea for mercy under discipline	Mourning	"Heal me, O LORD, for my bones are troubled."
32	Joy of forgiveness	Grateful	"I said, 'I will confess my transgressions...'"
38	Burden of guilt	Sorrowful	"My guilt has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear."
51	Cleansing and renewal	Contrite	"Create in me a clean heart, O God."
102	Suffering and restoration	Hopeful	"You, O LORD, are enthroned forever."
130	Mercy and redemption	Trustful	"With the LORD there is steadfast love."
143	Guidance and deliverance	Reflective	"Teach me to do your will, for you are my God."

THE PENITENTIAL PSALMS

“The psalms of penitence remind us that repentance is not groveling but the movement of a heart that still knows it belongs to God.”

– C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*

PSALM 6 – A CRY FOR MERCY

- *“O LORD, rebuke me not in your indignation, neither chasten me in your displeasure.”*
- **Theme:** Physical and spiritual anguish under divine discipline.
- **Background:** One of the earliest psalms to express repentance in personal terms. The psalmist—traditionally David—feels the weight of God’s displeasure and the frailty of his own mortality.
- **Key Motifs:** Sickness as metaphor for sin; divine anger; human frailty; plea for healing and deliverance.
- **Theological Focus:** This psalm unites bodily suffering with spiritual distress—showing that sin affects the whole person.
- **Use in Worship:** Read during **Lent** or times of illness; often linked with prayers for **healing** and **absolution**.

PSALM 32 – THE JOY OF FORGIVENESS

- *“Blessed is the one whose unrighteousness is forgiven, and whose sin is covered.”*
- **Theme:** The happiness of forgiveness after confession.
- **Background:** A wisdom psalm reflecting David’s experience after repentance (possibly after his sin with Bathsheba). It moves from silence and guilt to confession and joy.
- **Key Motifs:** Confession brings release; concealment brings torment; God’s forgiveness brings peace.
- **Theological Focus:** True blessedness lies not in innocence, but in forgiven sin.
- **Use in Worship:** Has been used as an alternate canticle in **Morning Prayer** and **Lenten** services; central to Christian teaching on confession and grace (cf. Romans 4:6–8).

PSALM 38 – THE BURDEN OF SIN

- *“There is no health in my flesh, because of your displeasure; neither is there any rest in my bones, by reason of my sin.”*
- **Theme:** The crushing weight of guilt and alienation.
- **Background:** Another “sickness psalm,” blending moral guilt with physical suffering. The psalmist feels deserted by friends and besieged by enemies.
- **Key Motifs:** Sin’s physical and social consequences; divine discipline; isolation; repentance in pain.
- **Theological Focus:** True repentance does not deny the pain of guilt, but endures it in hope of mercy.
- **Use in Worship:** Recited during times of penitence or illness; echoes in **Lenten** and **Passiontide** devotions.

PSALM 51 – THE PRAYER FOR A CLEAN HEART

- *“Have mercy upon me, O God, in your great goodness...”*
- **Theme:** Heartfelt confession and desire for inner renewal.
- **Background:** Traditionally linked to David’s repentance after his sin with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11–12). The psalm articulates the inner work of grace: contrition, cleansing, renewal, and restoration.
- **Key Motifs:** Sin acknowledged before God alone; cleansing with hyssop; creation of a new heart; renewal of the Holy Spirit.
- **Theological Focus:** The most profound statement of repentance in Scripture — sin is not just wrong behavior, but a broken relationship needing divine re-creation.
- **Use in Worship:** Central to **Ash Wednesday** and **Lenten** liturgies (“Miserere”); has been used as an alternate canticle in **Morning Prayer** and **Compline**; often sung to plainsong or choral settings.

PSALM 102 – THE PRAYER OF AN AFFLICTED SOUL

- *“Hear my prayer, O LORD, and let my cry come unto you.”*
- **Theme:** Lament and penitence in suffering and exile.
- **Background:** A community lament from the time of exile, later adapted for personal use. It expresses desolation but turns to confidence in God’s enduring mercy and sovereignty.
- **Key Motifs:** The brevity of human life vs. God’s eternal faithfulness; lament for Zion; plea for restoration.
- **Theological Focus:** Suffering and repentance intertwine with hope — God’s unchanging nature grounds our restoration.
- **Use in Worship:** Used in **Holy Week**, **funerals**, and times of national lament; a bridge between personal penitence and communal hope.

PSALM 130 – OUT OF THE DEPTHS

- *“Out of the deep have I called unto you, O LORD...”*
- **Theme:** Desperate cry for mercy and forgiveness.
- **Background:** A “Song of Ascents,” yet deeply penitential; pilgrims ascending to Jerusalem confess sin as they seek God’s presence.
- **Key Motifs:** The depths (spiritual despair); God’s forgiveness; waiting and hope; redemption from iniquity.
- **Theological Focus:** Shows that hope arises only when we reckon fully with sin’s depths. God’s mercy is the foundation of all faith.
- **Use in Worship:** Common in **Lenten** services, **Compline**, and **funerals** (“De profundis”); sometimes paired with the Magnificat in **Evening Prayer**; said or sung at **burials** to express both penitence and hope.

PSALM 143 – A PLEA FOR MERCY AND GUIDANCE

- *“Enter not into judgment with your servant, for in your sight shall no one living be justified.”*
- **Theme:** Seeking forgiveness, deliverance, and divine guidance.
- **Background:** A late Davidic psalm blending lament, trust, and penitence; traditionally seen as David’s prayer in distress from enemies and conscience alike.
- **Key Motifs:** Awareness of universal sinfulness; seeking God’s teaching and Spirit’s leading; remembrance of past faithfulness.
- **Theological Focus:** Repentance includes not only sorrow for sin but a renewed desire for obedience.
- **Use in Worship:** Has been used as an alternate canticle in **Morning Prayer**; often used during **Lent**; often a closing prayer among the seven penitential psalms.