



### It's the thought that counts!

Have you ever heard that saying when you opened a gift that was nice but not quite right for you? I remember being 12 and opening a Christmas gift consisting of a plastic play tool set. A very uncool gift when you are 12. But, my great-grandmother meant well, and as I reflect back on it as an adult, it really was the thought that counts! She is long gone now. I don't remember many of the gifts she gave me. But I remember that set of plastic Fisher Price tools and I know that she loved me.

In much the same way, our gifts back to God are indicators of where our thoughts are. Our gifts are never that terribly impressive to God, but it is the thought that counts. God loved us so much that he gave us the gift of the Son. Our gifts are always a response to that gift – a simple “I love you” back to God.

The book of Acts provides good examples for gifts and giving. What you won't find there or elsewhere in the Bible is the idea that our giving is a private matter between an individual and God. In the Bible giving is highly personal, but not private. Take, for example, the model of laying out 100% of one's assets as recorded in **Acts 2:44-45** “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.”

Or again a few chapters later, **Acts 4:32-35** “Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. <sup>33</sup> With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. <sup>34</sup> There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. <sup>35</sup> They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.”

And, of course, chapter 5 goes on to tell the chilling story of Ananias and Sapphira. Peter tells Ananias, (**Acts 5:4**) “You did not lie to us but to God!” right before Ananias drops dead. The problem for Ananias and his wife Sapphira was that for them it wasn't the thought that counted. Their thoughts were of looking good in front of the rest of the Christian community. Their motive for giving had nothing to do with sending God an “I love you” back.

For twenty-first century Christians like us, claiming that our giving (and spending) is a private matter is still just as big a problem as it was for Ananias and Sapphira. The biggest problem with my giving being a private matter between myself and God, and why scripture is against it, is that the Old Adam in me tries to make it a one-way conversation! Usually, we only end up lying to God and justifying our lack of giving.

Instead, as a community of faith, we are commanded to hold each other accountable for 100% of the resources God has given us. How and what are you giving? How and on what are you spending? We are called to love each other enough to question how we are using or abusing all the resources God has given us. We have to love each other enough to hold each other accountable. If our motivations are right, we can probably say, “It's the thought that counts.” And we will be engaged in the “cheerful giving” that God loves so much.

Peace,  
Pastor Chris

### ReadTogether Bible Study

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

We are now over half way through the calendar year. Many of you have been participating in our Virginia Synod's **Read Together Bible Study** since January. If you have not been participating, or have let it lapse, I want to encourage you to join with Lutherans from all around the Synod by starting up with the Psalms. The calendar for the ReadTogether Bible Study is now available on our Synod website at [www.vasynod.org](http://www.vasynod.org) click ReadTogether Bible Study.

Different Pastors from around the Synod have been writing the introduction to each book of the Bible (I wrote the intro to I Samuel). Pastor Mark Briehl's introduction to the Psalms is included below. At the end of his remarks he gives a wonderful and very achievable plan for reading and praying through the Psalms by the end of the year. God will bless your reading of the Word.

Peace,  
Pastor Chris

## THE PSALMS

Introduced by Mark Briehl, Pastor

In her book Amazing Grace, Kathleen Norris recalls conversing with a friend who expressed concern about how she was getting along during a difficult time. “What are you doing for yourself? Are you seeing a counselor? Did you get someone to give you a prescription for tranquilizers?” “No,” I replied, and then I startled myself by saying, “I’m OK; I’ve been praying the Psalms” (p.33).

To the psalmists, an open memo:

To be honest, this Bible student avoided reading you for a very long time. And I have a hunch that I am not the only one. You contain so much poetry, row after row of rhyme and meter. How much reading of poetry can a person take? Your 150 psalms comprise the longest book of the Bible. Thumbing through its pages one encounters them—it is akin to happening upon a great forest thick with trees. For many years I skirted your edges mainly because the going was easier elsewhere. OK, there were some occasional trips into the psalm forest. There were walks along well worn paths in order to gather familiar fruit. There were visits to random trees in search of spiritual firewood. A Sunday worship reading might lead to a spot of thoughtful observation, but without much time to consider its meaning. And speaking of meaning, did you know your harsher words are usually excised from a reading? So a nagging question began to occur for this student at least: How does one find a way through your imposing and important landscape?

That is a little bit confessional but it is pretty much true. One looks for ways to be at home in the psalm forest; not only to visit the place but to know and love it. Notes in a study Bible do offer helpful observations for getting around. For example, they group the psalms into categories according to use. One such grouping in The Learning Bible (Contemporary English Version) by the American Bible Society is: *Laments, Prayers & Pleas for Help, Thanksgivings, Praises, Worship Songs* (p.1024). They provide explanatory footnotes with helpful ideas about psalm titles, obscure place, name & word meanings, guesses about ancient liturgical use, biblical references, variant texts and so on. They mention strong internal evidence about the Psalms being organized into five books, and much more information.

In her crisis, Kathleen Norris, after startling herself by saying “I’m OK; I’ve been praying the Psalms”, remembers her friend’s

comment. “And that’s enough?” she replied, incredulous. The funny thing is, it was enough.

Here is a hint for getting into the Psalms! How to walk in this forest where God encounters us? How to unwrap this gift? By doing what the Hebrews and what Jesus did--by praying the psalms. In doing so we discover the gift that will unwrap and open us. A very good commentary on Psalms is found in Eugene Peterson’s Working the Angles, chapter two. He speaks of the Psalms as providing “schooling in prayer.” He calls “strategic” the ancient editor’s arranging of Psalms into five books which correspond to the first five books of Hebrew scripture. “The word of God is not complete simply by being uttered; it must be answered. For the five books of God’s creating/saving word to us there are five books of our believing/obeying word to God. Five is matched by five, like fingers of two clasped hands” (p.55). Peterson makes a convincing point that the Psalms teach God’s language for prayer, quoting the 4<sup>th</sup> century Athanasius: most of Scripture speaks *to* us; the Psalms speak *for* us (p.55).

So. . . here is a practical way to *pray the Psalms*. It is kind of fun. And it is forgiving with regard to discipline, though it rewards faithful use. It requires 5-15 minutes a day, a quiet place, a Bible and pencil. It helps us hear the Creator’s voice as address and find words to answer. The Psalm-A-Day Path goes past each branch of every tree in the forest. God knows what we may encounter or where it will lead. (A learning for me which you may already know is how the final three verses of Psalm 22 read. Jesus used the opening verse, “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” to cry out on the cross. What do want to bet that he knew how the Psalm ends?)

### Psalm-A-Day Path

1. On August 4th, read Psalm One.
2. As you read, put a check mark by a verse or phrase that speaks to you.
3. Reflect back on the psalm. Let the verse you marked lead you into prayer.
4. On August 5, read Psalm 2; on August 6, read Psalm 3, etc. (noting on a calendar helps). Wind up the church’s half-year with Psalm devotionals, and build through Advent to praying Psalm 150 on New Year’s Eve.
5. It’s a great way to *pray the psalms*. When you miss a day or two let it go and pick up at the current day’s psalm. Maybe you’ll catch the other psalm next year.