

The Thursday Psalm

READ IT BEFORE YOU READ ANYTHING I SAY ABOUT IT.

To the choirmaster: according to The Gittith. Of Asaph.

- 1 Sing aloud to God our strength; shout for joy to the God of Jacob!
- 2 Raise a song; sound the tambourine, the sweet lyre with the harp.
- 3 Blow the trumpet at the new moon, at the full moon, on our feast day.
- 4 For it is a statute for Israel, a rule of the God of Jacob.
- 5 He made it a decree in Joseph when he went out over the land of Egypt. I hear a language I had not known:
- 6 “I relieved your shoulder of the burden; your hands were freed from the basket.
- 7 In distress you called, and I delivered you; I answered you in the secret place of thunder; I tested you at the waters of Meribah. *Selah*
- 8 Hear, O my people, while I admonish you! O Israel, if you would but listen to me!
- 9 There shall be no strange god among you; you shall not bow down to a foreign god.
- 10 I am the LORD your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it.
- 11 “But my people did not listen to my voice; Israel would not submit to me.
- 12 So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts, to follow their own counsels.
- 13 Oh, that my people would listen to me, that Israel would walk in my ways!
- 14 I would soon subdue their enemies and turn my hand against their foes.
- 15 Those who hate the LORD would cringe toward him, and their fate would last forever.

16 But he would feed you with the finest of the wheat, and with honey from the rock I would satisfy you.”

We were in Melbourne, visiting friends, and travelling had put my reading out of its usual place in the day. Late in the afternoon, on the ferry home to Devonport, I sat with my wife in the lounge and caught up on the day’s reading.

Psalm 81 was the psalm set down for the day. I stopped at the heading.

According to The Gittith. I did not know the word. We had been talking recently about the different kinds of psalm, the words that sit above the first line, so I went to the glossary on this site to look it up. It was not there.

That is the whole of it. A man on a ferry, catching up on his reading, stopped by a word in a heading and going to his own glossary to find it missing.

Gittith is a dead end. It appears above three psalms – 8, 81 and 84 – and nobody knows what it means. It may come from *gat*, a winepress, and the Greek translators took it that way. It may be a tune or an instrument from Gath. It may be something else entirely. The lexicons say so plainly, which I did not expect; I had assumed the answer existed and I simply had not learnt it.

But looking for it, I found something else.

Psalm 81 is the psalm for Thursday.

Not Thursday this year, or Thursday in a lectionary somewhere. Every Thursday. It has been the Thursday psalm since the Temple, and it is still said on Thursday mornings in synagogues now. There are seven of them, one for each day of the week:

SUNDAY – PSALM 24

The earth is the LORD’s, and the fullness thereof.

MONDAY – PSALM 48

Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised in the city of our God.

TUESDAY – PSALM 82

God has taken his place in the divine council.

WEDNESDAY – PSALM 94

O LORD, God of vengeance, shine forth.

THURSDAY – PSALM 81

Sing aloud to God our strength.

FRIDAY — PSALM 93

The LORD reigns; he is robed in majesty.

SABBATH — PSALM 92

A psalm. A song for the Sabbath.

Seven psalms out of a hundred and fifty, fixed to the days, said every week.¹

Fifty-two times a year. And it does not reset — a Jewish man who says the morning prayers from his bar mitzvah to his old age will have said Psalm 81 something over three thousand times.

Not read it. Said it, out loud, standing in a room with other people, most of it from memory, on an ordinary Thursday with nothing else marking the day.

Reading them twice a year is not the same as knowing them.

I have a reading plan of my own. In recent years I have read all hundred and fifty psalms twice a year — every psalm, in order, nothing skipped. I have thought of that as thorough, and in one sense it is. Psalm 81 has come round in it more than once. It went past.

I have been a Christian since 1981. I could count on two hands the number of times I have read this psalm, and until that afternoon on the ferry I could not have told you a single thing about it.

I could have read over this Psalm and thought nothing about it. A Jewish person can't.

Go back to the seven and read down them.

The earth belongs to God. He has put himself in a city. He stands among the judges and tells them they will die like men. How long shall the wicked exult. Would that my people would listen. The LORD reigns, and the floods have lifted up their voice. It is good to give thanks.

Three of the seven are about justice — who owns the world, who is failing to judge it rightly, and how long the wicked will get away with it. One is God's grief that his own people will not hear him. Only the last is quiet.

They are not seven comfortable psalms. There is no Psalm 23 in the list.

Whoever set this down was not choosing favourites. They were deciding what a people ought to have in their mouths every week for the rest of their lives, and they chose a week that will not let a person forget that the world is out of order, or conclude from that that God has lost hold of it.

I have spent much of my working life inside the justice system. I know what it is to need both of those things said in the same week.

I am not going to start praying the seven. That is not what this is, and taking up someone else's discipline because it impressed me would be a way of not hearing what it actually said.

What changed is smaller, and harder to admit.

I did not know this existed. Forty-five years of reading, a plan that gets me through the whole Psalter twice a year, a website with a glossary of Hebrew words on it – and I did not know that seven of these psalms have been said every week, by name, on the day, for two thousand years. The word I went looking for was not in my glossary. Neither was any of this.

So I have a question to ask myself, and I am not going to answer it here. If I could miss that, what else have I been reading past?

The tradition that has prayed these psalms longest knows things about them I was never taught. That is not a complaint about how I was raised, or about the church I have served in for forty-five years. It is simply where I have read from.

I have read them. I have not lived with them.

¹ The list is set down in the Mishnah, *Tamid* 7:4, as the psalms the Levites sang in the Temple. The Talmud (*Rosh Hashanah* 31a) reads the seven as a week of creation, day by day, and finds a reason in each: Thursday belongs to the creatures of sea and air, whose variety moves people to praise. Whether that is why the seven were chosen, or a reading laid over a choice already made, is anyone's guess. Wednesday's portion does not stop at the end of Psalm 94 but runs on into the opening verses of Psalm 95 – a reminder that the chapter divisions came later than the roster.

This article did not begin with artificial intelligence. It began with years of ministry, reading, prayer, suffering, and conversation.

During the development of this article, AI became a conversation partner. It challenged assumptions, tested arguments, suggested structures, and helped refine expression. Many of the words that follow emerged through that dialogue.

The experiences, convictions, interpretations, and conclusions remain my own.