

Psobriety

*A Journey of Recovery
through the Psalms*

Jeff Dafler

Contents

Introduction	1
The Daily Readings	5
Works Cited	157

Introduction

The book of Psalms has always been close to the heart of my spirituality. Whether near or far from a Higher Power, I turned to the Psalms at various points throughout my life as I searched for truth, freedom, and hope. So, when I finally decided to get serious about sobriety, I returned to this spectacular collection of Hebrew poetry to help sustain me on my journey of recovery.

On my first day of sobriety, an idea occurred to me that would help see me through my first five months without a drink—read one psalm each morning. Simple, right? But what a precious gift this was! As I worked my way through the book, while also beginning my work on the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, I found the full range of emotions that I was feeling and experiencing: fear, hope, struggle, praise, thanksgiving, anger, loss, compassion, humility, and victory.

These beautiful, stirring songs of faith bolstered my resolve, channeled my anguish, and comforted me. They gave voice to my soul, which, especially in that first month without a drink, was often too broken to speak for itself. Sometimes I cried, sometimes I laughed, but I kept coming back to them every morning. And there, in those words, I gradually found the God of my liberation.

I write this book with the newcomer in mind, but I hope the readings might be of value to anyone in recovery. I write

specifically about my experience with alcohol, my drug of choice, but the Psalms can be a wellspring of hope for anyone who wants to break free from the shackles of addiction. While the substances we turned to as a solution to our problems might differ, we share a common bond in the hopelessness and despair we felt while in the grip of our disease—and the healing that awaits us when we accept our own powerlessness over alcohol or drugs and lean into the strength of a Higher Power.

About the Psalms

The Psalms originated as holy texts of the Jewish faith and became an integral part of the Christian canon. While I am a Christian, I have a deep respect for all faiths and the foundational principle of Alcoholics Anonymous that each one of us must build a personal relationship with the God *of our own understanding*. This book is not an endorsement of any one religion, denomination, sect, or creed over another, but simply a tool for those who seek to improve conscious contact with a power greater than themselves, as the eleventh step of the program of Alcoholics Anonymous suggests that we should do. Throughout these devotions, you will notice I use “God,” “God of our understanding,” and “Higher Power” interchangeably, as is common in many recovery programs. These terms are intended to be inclusive of any particular understanding of a power greater than ourselves that can help us develop and maintain a sober way of living.

In the first three words of Psalm 1, “Happy are those,” we get right to the point of the book of Psalms. At their core, the Psalms provide a compelling guide to happy, God-centered living. These beautiful poems collectively suggest a set of principles that share a remarkable consistency with the steps of recovery outlined in the program of Alcoholics Anonymous. They call us to recognize and accept a Higher Power as the creator who is in charge of all things. We must submit our will to this Higher Power, learn God’s teachings and live in harmony with God’s plan for our lives.

When we follow this path, we will experience joy, freedom, strength, and peace. When we choose our own way over God’s,

things tend not to turn out so well. As a whole, the Psalms describe the striving of individuals and the broader community to live in faithful response to this Higher Power. The terms “righteousness” and “wickedness” are often used to describe what life looks like when lived in sync (righteousness) and out of sync (wickedness) with God and God’s teachings or will. In the simplest of terms, righteous living, which for this alcoholic equates entirely with sober living, begins with acknowledgment that God is in control. The righteous are those who see God as the all-powerful source of everything good and seek to stay close to God, trying more each day to follow God’s will and way for their lives.

The psalmists also readily admit that while God is perfect, we are not. Many of the Psalms include the anguished cries of those who have fallen short in their efforts to live in harmony with God’s teachings. Bad things happen to good people, and good people sometimes do bad things. The psalmists, like all of us, try to take control back from their Higher Power and run their lives into the ditch. They suffer the pain of attempting to live life on their own terms and call out to the God of their understanding for rescue, forgiveness, comfort, and guidance. Their honesty and openness can be breathtaking in their celebration of God’s good gifts, and gut-wrenching in their portrayal of the pain of human tragedy. Across the full range of victory and loss they describe, however, we see God hear their cries and restore them to physical, emotional, and spiritual health, setting them back on the righteous path that leads to happiness. God gives them the hope and strength they could never find alone, bringing them together in community to love and support one another. The God of the Psalms is always and forever the God of recovery.

About the Readings

Each of the following 150 readings is based on the corresponding psalm from the Bible. I recommend that you read one each day as part of your time of reflection and meditation. Each reading begins with a brief, one- or two-verse passage from the day’s psalm, but I suggest reading the whole psalm for that day. In

many Christian Bibles they can be found near the middle, or you can pull the Psalms up on a Bible app or Bible website. The verses quoted in this book are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible, but you can choose whatever translation suits you. Just be aware that there could be some minor wording differences between the translation you are reading and the NRSV quotations in this book.

After reading the psalm, prayerfully pause before moving to the corresponding daily reflection for that psalm. In the reading for each day, I reflect on the challenges of sobriety and how the Psalms offer wisdom for those in recovery. I share stories from my own journey and principles I have learned from the program and fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous. I draw heavily from the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*, affectionately known as the “Big Book” in AA circles, the *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, and the pamphlet the *Four Absolutes*.

I am not a biblical scholar, and there are certainly many people who know more about twelve-step recovery programs than I do. One of the important lessons I must learn as a recovering alcoholic is that I do not and cannot know everything. What I have also learned is that sharing my experience, strength, and hope with other alcoholics and addicts is important to maintaining my own sobriety. These writings are offered in that spirit.

At the end of each daily reflection is a suggested prayer. You can pray it silently to yourself or out loud. I am fairly confident your Higher Power will hear it either way! Each prayer ends with a request that God will keep us sober today. I believe there is no more important prayer for an alcoholic or addict.

The Daily Readings

Psalm 1

Happy are those
who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
or take the path that sinners tread,
or sit in the seat of scoffers;
but their delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law they meditate day and night.
(vv. 1–2)

This first psalm begins with a powerful word: Happy! How elusive happiness seemed on my first day without alcohol. I was very sick—physically, emotionally, and spiritually. My hands were shaking, my head throbbing, my stomach churning. I had lost my job, badly hurt the people who loved me most, and turned my back on the very idea of a Higher Power. I was broken, alone, and filled with despair.

I felt miles away from anything even remotely close to happy. Yet in the first words of the psalm, “Happy are those,” was a glimmer of hope. There *are* those in the world who are happy. I saw them at an AA meeting I went to the evening of that first day without a drink. And I desperately wanted to feel what they felt.

There in verse 2 was a clue that I didn’t fully understand yet. Those happy people find their delight in meditating on God’s teachings “day and night.” At this point, I was willing to try anything to stop the pain. So, I started reading a psalm, a section from the Big Book, and praying every day. It was the first step in a long journey of recovery. A journey toward happiness.

God of happy people, thank you for giving us a glimpse of a better way. Please keep us sober today.

Psalm 2

I will tell of the decree of the LORD:
He said to me, “You are my son;
today I have begotten you.
Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,
and the ends of the earth your possession.”
(vv. 7–8)

This psalm opens with earthly rulers plotting and planning ways to increase their power and control. For years, I thought I had to control everything and everyone in my life. I obsessed over it almost constantly, full of anxiety and fear that my carefully crafted plans would fall apart, that my plots would be in vain, as verse 1 says.

The more I tried—and failed—to control things, the more I drank. Sometimes I drank to calm my anxiety and quiet my racing mind. Other times I drank to console myself when my grand schemes fell apart. Like many addicts and alcoholics, I found only temporary relief. Alcohol and drugs might give us a momentary escape from troubles of our own making, but they always make things worse in the long run.

In Psalm 2, we read a magnificent promise from God: “You are my child; today I have begotten you.” This God, our Father, has all power. No longer do we need to worry or be afraid, no longer do we need to plot in vain. The God of the Psalms invites us to find our rest and refuge in him. All we have to do is let go.

*All-powerful Creator, thank you for making us your children.
Help us to let go of our need to control everything, and instead,
turn it over to you. Please keep us sober today.*

Psalm 3

I cry aloud to the LORD,
and he answers me from his holy hill.

.....
I am not afraid of ten thousands of people
who have set themselves against me all around.
(vv. 4, 6)

When we first stop drinking and using, it can feel as if the whole world is conspiring against us like the foes in Psalm 3. Old friends want us to go out and party. Every commercial on television seems to be about alcohol. Even that little voice inside is saying, “Come on! Just one. No one will know!”

Sitting in my first AA meeting, I started thinking about two bottles of beer I still had at home in the fridge (I had drunk everything else). I thought maybe I should just polish those off when I got home, and *then* I would quit. I mean, I already paid for them, right?

As the meeting ended, a nice couple came up to me, introduced themselves and told me they were glad I had come. They said all I could do was just not drink, one day at a time. And then, the woman gave me a “healing spirit” coin with a small prayer on the back.

When I got home, I prayed the prayer on that coin and repeated the small prayer I had said the day before: “God, please help me!” Somehow, God answered my prayer. I felt a rush of strength come over me. I went to the fridge, got the two bottles of beer, opened them, and poured them down the sink. To me, that was evidence that God has the power to defeat alcohol, my biggest enemy.

All-powerful God, thank you for saving us from our relentless foe. Please keep us sober today.

Psalm 4

You have put gladness in my heart
more than when their grain and wine abound.
I will both lie down and sleep in peace;
for you alone, O LORD, make me lie down in safety.
(vv. 7–8)

The psalmist here is suffering some ongoing trouble and asking God to rescue him. It would be nice if all our problems would disappear when we stopped drinking and using, but that's not usually how it works.

For most of us, the lies we told, the hurt we caused, and the damage we did—to ourselves and others—weren't magically wiped out when we put down the bottle. We come to realize that years of destructive behavior take a long time to overcome.

We learn to accept, though, that those wounds can only heal if we stop doing more harm. Getting drunk, getting high, no matter how badly we might want to, would only make things worse. We must begin to trust that the happiness that comes from our Higher Power is greater than when the “grain and wine abound.” And, God won't give us a hangover!

Help us to turn to you, God, instead of the bottle when the urge to drink or use hits. May we sleep in peace knowing that you will never abandon us. Please keep us sober today.

Psalm 5

Lead me, O LORD, in your righteousness
because of my enemies;
make your way straight before me.
For there is no truth in their mouths;
their hearts are destruction

(vv. 8-9a)

There are many voices trying to tell us there is an easier, softer way than the Twelve Steps and total reliance on a power greater than ourselves. These may be the voices of our friends or the people with whom we used to drink or use. They may be the voices of enablers who made excuses for us and tried to protect us from the consequences of our addiction. For me, the voices came mostly from within.

We learn from the Big Book that alcohol (like any drug) is cunning, baffling, and powerful. Once it has us in its grasp, it doesn't want to let us go. The good news is that there is a power greater than alcohol or drugs—a power that can “cast them out,” as the psalmist writes in today's poem.

I found that the more meetings I attended, the more I prayed, the more I read the Big Book and surrounded myself with sober people, the quieter those voices became. I doubt they will ever leave me for good, but I hear them less frequently with each passing day. If I turn to my Higher Power for help and listen for this voice alone, whether in the words of a psalm or the encouragement of a friend in recovery, I can stay sober one more day.

God, we ask that you would silence the voices that call us back to misery and despair. May we listen only for your voice calling us to a life of freedom, peace, and joy. Please keep us sober today.