

## Psalm 143: A Cry for Grace for True Repentance

In *The Great Litany*, we are given words to use to ask for *true repentance*:

We sinners beseech you to hear us, O Lord God: That it may please you to rule and govern your holy Church universal in the right way, **We beseech you to hear us, good Lord...**That it may please you to *give us true repentance, to forgive us all our sin, negligence, and ignorance; and to endue us with the grace of your Holy Spirit to amend our lives according to you holy Word, We beseech you to hear us, good Lord.* (*The Book of Common Prayer, quotes are from 91 and 95 of The Great Litany on 91-99*)

In the same way that *The Great Litany* models humility in asking our “good Lord” to give us the gift of true repentance, to forgive us of all categories of sin, and to fill us with the Holy Spirit to empower change, the speaker in **Psalm 143** (“of David”) models humble dialogue with YHWH about his struggles with sin and brokenness and his hope for grace to keep serving YHWH.

As the last of the *seven penitential psalms* (**6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143**), **Psalm 143** occupies the last step on the *medieval ladder of repentance*:

Step 7. Prayer Against the Final Judgment, *Psalm 143:2*

Step 6. The Distrust of Self, *Psalm 130:6*

Step 5. Longing for the Heavenly Jerusalem, *Psalm 102:16*

Step 4. Love of a Cleansed Soul, *Psalm 51:7-8*

Step 3. Hope for Pardon, *Psalm 38:15*

Step 2. Sorrow for Sin, *Psalm 32:5*

Step 1. Fear of Punishment, *Psalm 6:1*

**1. Psalm 143** is an individual lament “of David,” with similarities to **Psalms 6** and **38**. **Psalm 143** is in Book Five, the last division of the Psalms, in the last collection of psalms “of David,” **Psalms 138-145**. Perhaps this group of psalms underscores the reality that, even after the destruction and exile and return of Israel—even without a king—the promises of the Davidic Covenant, emphasized in the introduction (Psalms 1 and 2) in **Psalm 2**, still stand.

Look for *three themes*, interwoven in **Psalm 143**: God owes us nothing; We can only cry to God in our desperation; We cry with confidence as we know and trust God’s covenant promises. Read **Psalm 143**.

**2.** Continue exploring the *three themes*:

(Theme 1) The psalmist is deeply conscious that *God owes him nothing*; he has no righteousness (work of God in him) that is intrinsically his own. If current troubles foreshadow judgment to come, he has no hope in himself. (143:1-2) What do you notice about how the psalmist sees God and how he sees himself?

(Theme 2) It follows from this awareness of God owing him nothing, that he can only—and must—*cry to God out of a desperate sense of need*. (143:3-6) What words and images stand out for you in the psalmist's description of the *experience of desperation*? When have you felt desperation or seen others in desperation? What “modeling” by the psalmist might help you in your next personal experience of desperation or experience in supporting another in desperation?

(Theme 3) The grand motif of all of **Psalm 143** is the psalmist's knowledge of and trust in the *covenant promises* of God. In his desperation, he prays with confidence, using *God's covenant name*, “the LORD,” using *the matching covenant title for himself* in 143:2 and 12, and using *covenant words*: *righteousness* in 143:1 and 11, *faithfulness* in 143:1, and *unfailing love* in 143:8 and 12.

3. Notice the urgency of 143:7a, “Answer me quickly, LORD; my spirit fails.” The psalm's poetic structure “pivots” on 143:7. This is *the central cry of the psalm* and leads the crescendo of *eleven petitions* for deliverance and guidance in 143:7-12. Because our ongoing needs are many and often urgent we pray for the LORD to preserve our lives and guide us in his ways. We cry for his energy (grace) to keep changing us and growing our dependence—to gift us with grace for true repentance.

Identify the *petitions* for deliverance and guidance by listing or underlining them. Also notice the *reasons* given for each request.

Here are the first two petitions and reasons as examples:

**Answer me quickly** because my spirit fails

**Don't hide your face (presence, favor) from me** lest I go down to the pit

Which one(s) might form your prayer for yourself or someone else right now and why?

4. Because of these sure covenant promises, David and other Old Covenant believers could long confidently for the “morning” to come, in which the unfailing love of the Father for them would be confirmed. They knew that “morning” in various interim ways, but only Jesus experienced it in all its fullness, on that first Easter day, when bodily resurrection brought Him finally

and decisively out of the realm of “the darkness of those long dead” (143:3), “the pit,” (143:7) and all “trouble” (143:11).

In his identification with sinful and suffering humanity, Jesus leads us now in **Psalm 143's** cry for deliverance and guidance. Christ prays in us, and we pray in Christ.

As you understand **Psalm 143** as a penitential lament and share in both its desperation and confidence, what does it mean to you now to join Jesus Christ as he leads you in this prayer for yourself and others?

Think about what stands in your way of actually making this prayer your own. Will you make the heart decision to join in with others in the Body of Christ and make this prayer your prayer?

As we enter Holy Week, we determine to walk through it with Christ and in Christ. We hear the crowd's intense voices change from the praises and blessing of Palm Sunday's Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem to cries for crucifixion and death on Friday.

How do you think praying the penitential psalms as part of your Lenten devotion has prepared you for journeying with Christ through his crucifixion and death?