

How to Chant the Psalms

The psalms are intended for singing. Singing engages us much more deeply – heart, mind, soul, and strength – with these profound and ancient songs of prayer and praise. Singing the psalms is also a significant part of our Reformed liturgical heritage.

Anyone can learn to chant the psalms, and can incorporate this practice into daily prayer. It doesn't take advanced musical training or special expertise. These videos are designed to help you learn to chant the psalms on your own.

You'll need a "pointed" text to learn to chant the psalms. Simple signs in the text of the psalm indicate where the melody changes, and how the words should follow. The Psalter (or collection of psalms) that is included in the Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1993; pp. 559-783) and the *Book of Common Worship – Daily Prayer* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1993; pp. 167-390) is pointed for chanting.

Here is an example of a two-measure psalm tone, along with the first verse of Psalm 150. The vertical line below the asterisk (*) is the bar that divides the two measures.

Please note that in these printed examples and in the accompanying videos, the original points (small red dots above the letters) are replaced with underlined text – less elegant, but easier to reproduce and see.



Hallelujah! Praise God in the holy temple; *
give praise in the firmament of heaven.

Prepare to sing by humming or playing the melody (the top line in the music) on an instrument such as a piano or recorder. If you can't play an instrument or don't have one handy, just listen to the cantor sing the first few lines of this psalm in the video for Psalm 150.

When you have the melody firmly in your mind, you're ready to start singing the words of the psalm. You should be comfortable enough with the melody that you don't have to look back at the music after you start singing the words.

The first note in the musical phrase (it looks like a hollow circle with vertical lines on either side) is the reciting tone. Sing the first part of the phrase on this note. In the case of the example above, that would be the following words: "Hallelujah! Praise God in the." Sing the words simply and freely, with the same rhythm, pace, and stress you would use if you were speaking them.

At this point in the text, you come to the word "holy," the first syllable of which is underlined. Here the melody changes: you leave the reciting tone, and you sing one syllable ("ho – ly") for each of the next two notes in the musical score (the two filled-in circles in the first measure of the music above). Don't slow down or change your rhythm here; just keep singing as though you were speaking these words.

Now you have arrived at the final note in the first measure (a filled-in circle with a small dot beside it). You sing the remaining word(s) of the first line of text on this note. In this case, it

is the two-syllable word “temple.” You sing both syllables of this word on the final note of the measure: “tem – ple.” Again, don’t slow down; keep a natural speaking rhythm.

When you get to the asterisk (*) take a breath and repeat the same pattern with the notes of the second measure, using the second line of text. (In this case the reciting tone for the second measure is simply a hollow circle without the vertical lines around it.) You sing “give praise in the firma – ” on the reciting tone; then “– ment of” on the next two notes; and finally “heav – en” on the final note of the phrase.

If this sounds complicated, don’t despair! It’s actually much harder to explain than it is to simply *sing*. Try listening to the video example once or twice, perhaps singing along with the words on the screen. Then read the instructions again. You’ll catch on in no time.

In the *Book of Common Worship*, every other verse (two lines of text, in this example) is printed in **bold face** type.

Hallelujah! Praise God in the holy temple; *
give praise in the firmament of heaven.
Praise God who is mighty in deed; *
give praise for God's excellent greatness.

If you are chanting the psalms with another person, you can alternate – taking turns singing the non-bold and bold lines. Or with larger groups, the congregation can be divided into two parts, singing antiphonally. When there is an odd number of verses, the two cantors or groups sing the final verse in unison.

The bold **R** (not included in the video) indicates where a musical refrain may be added as desired. This is especially effective when chanting the psalm as an element in public worship on the Lord’s Day. Psalm refrains are provided in the *Book of Common Worship*.

An appropriate psalm prayer follows each psalm. This is a tradition adopted from the Scottish Psalter, which is the source for some of these prayers. Psalm prayers collect the primary images or themes of the psalm and reframe them as Christian prayers, offered to God in Jesus’ name. Ideally, a brief time of silent reflection follows the psalm and precedes the prayer.

The accompanying videos provide a demonstration of this practice of chanting using the “Laudate Psalms” – Psalms 145 through 150. (Laudate is Latin for “praise,” the primary theme of these psalms, and often the first and/or last word: “Hallelujah!”) These six psalms are traditionally associated with the seven days of the week in the liturgy for Morning Prayer, distributed as follows (Psalm 147 is divided over two days):

Sunday	Psalm 150
Monday	Psalm 145
Tuesday	Psalm 146
Wednesday	Psalm 147:1-11
Thursday	Psalm 147:12-20
Friday	Psalm 148
Saturday	Psalm 149

The full texts and musical tones for the seven Laudate Psalms are available as a separate resource to download. Feel free to embed the accompanying videos (or sound files) on other websites as a resource for prayer.