

AN ILLUSTRATED JOURNEY  
INTO THE PSALMS

# Landscape of Hope

HEATHER HOLDSWORTH

MOODY PUBLISHERS

CHICAGO

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HEATHER HOLDSWORTH

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*Printed in China*



*For Adrian—  
still can't believe I get to live life with you*



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# Introduction

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In the book of Psalms, there is beauty that lifts our souls from weary valleys to hilltop praise. Words flow across the pages like the swaying grasses of the lowlands; they climb the valley sides to become forests and rise on the updraft as soaring birds. These poems from a shepherd writing notes on a ridge carry us up to the heights. But he also writes of darkness that lurches into the landscape, that descends to hell's gates and cloaks communities with dread.

The Psalms are raw. They are bold. They peel off our well-formed layers, leaving us exposed. They invite us to explore the tensions of our souls—our hiddenness, failures, prayer-poverty, praise—they ask much of us. This sacred collection of poetry speaks *for* us, takes us to the essence of being human, moves us through seasons, and makes us more real.

The poet is not giving us a recipe for living—he *is* living.

Athanasius, fourth-century church father and philosopher, wrote of these poems:

I believe that a man can find nothing more glorious than these Psalms; for they embrace the whole life of man, the affections of his mind, and the motions of his soul. To praise and glorify God, he can select a psalm suited to every occasion, and thus will find that they were written for him.<sup>1</sup>

To help these writings enter into our days, the author adds notes above each work. He wants more for his ideas than for them to be wrapped up in parchment. King David brings breadth to his writing by placing it in an altogether different dimension: he turns his words into song. He gives instructions to choirmasters about which voices are needed, where to use sopranos or basses. There are nine musical instruments listed in the collection, adding their unique rhythm and tone. David moves his poetry from quiet lines on parchment into the breath and heart of a choir, into the fingers and lungs of musicians. His words that were once flat on a page now leap into chords and harmonies that fill the air!

As we come to the book you hold in your hands, you'll find David's poetry taken into another domain. Here the poems



are interpreted visually. Their tone and drift is shown in shapes laid down in pen.

For more than a decade, I have filed drawings like these safely in binders on shelves. I've been hesitant to show them. It felt too personal to share these visual explorations with the Bible's scribes. The tension and unwashed faith they disclosed felt, if anything, confidential. A decade of requests from my husband, my sister, and a dear friend to open the binders and let the joy out finally wore me down! What you hold is a record of engagements with the author of Psalms and the Almighty.

It is perhaps unexpected to meet the Lord with a pencil and a sketchbook. For you, it may be hiking boots, a plectrum, or a bass. We can meet Him as He made us. What a freeing invitation.

Anselm of Canterbury puts such meetings into words . . .

Come now, little man! Flee for a while from your tasks, hide yourself for a little space from the turmoil of your thoughts. Come, cast aside your burdensome cares, and put aside your laborious pursuits. For a little while give your time to God, and rest in him for a little while. Enter into the inner chamber of your mind, shut out all things save God and whatever may aid you in seeking God; and having barred the door of your chamber, seek him.<sup>2</sup>

I have been helped by the subjects we consider in these next few pages to better engage with the Psalms. The eight sections below will better prepare us to delve into the main text and images. They will move us beyond cherishing just the beautiful verses we put into frames to more, much more! We'll explore David's **friendship** with God and the ancient methods of **meditation, prayer**, and protesting grief (**lament**) that have strengthened this bond.

There's a section on **structure**, with fresh findings from scholars on the surprising and beautiful arrangements of these poems. We'll take time to consider the creative mediums of **poetry** and **art** and their part in the journey. There is also a brief personal account of the unexpected events that birthed this **illustrative approach** to the Bible and to God.

### **Entering into Friendship**

When we hear of a friendship that's "uneven," where one party is powerful and the other is weak, there seems little chance it will succeed. If *we* are the lower one in the pecking order, we tend to choose smarter clothing for meeting our friend—the shirt without the wrinkles, the scarf without the rip. We feel the need to present ourselves in a favorable light and not divulge our shortcomings. And if conversation flows and they suggest we meet again, we mark that up as a win.

What is quite unmissable in the record of David's friendship with God is that there's no posturing or pretense. The shirt may be crumpled and the sandals scuffed, but that doesn't seem to concern either one. The dialogue is exposing, yet it's filled with rare trust; there's no anxiety in its tone. It's as if they've dispensed with the first decades of friendship and jumped right into those deep late-night talks.

To be transformed by the psalms, one has to be willing to be engaged in a relational dialogue, phrase-by-phrase, image-by-image, stanza-by-stanza, book-by-book, and beyond... unlike literature merely telling us to "do this" or "do that," and thus placing a distance between us and the text, the psalms become a twirling dance anyone may join. The free-for-all invitation to participate.<sup>3</sup>

We are invited into that dance, brought into friendship. Is this our purpose; is this why we're here? What *is* "the chief end of man" that the Shorter Catechism asks us about? The astonishing idea comes in the liturgical reply: "Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever."<sup>4</sup> Surely the chief purpose of those who follow God is to do lots of good stuff—live sacrificially, be the most generous, excel on mission, and surrender their lives.

The surprising welcome of the Psalms is to live carefree in God's bliss,<sup>5</sup> to have fun delighting in the Eternal! And what's more, this relationship is reciprocal—God delights in

us. Oh, let's get a head start on "forever" and live untroubled, enjoying Him now!

The glory of God is a human being who is fully alive.<sup>6</sup>

### **Meditation**

There is joy to be found in the Bible, in meeting its characters, in pondering its wisdom. But our approach to the text and to connecting with God can become dull. Obscured by comparison and guilt, busyness and pain, the relationship with God that began with vitality can lose its bloom. We may try to fix it with activity and shiny projects, but that conflicts with the invitation of Christ to His followers:

"Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly." (Matthew 11:28–29 MSG)

Contentment in a life with God isn't achieved by bustle. It is slower; it is birthed over time by pondering His thoughts, allowing God to finish His sentences. Praise and thanksgiving, requests and lament—all of these emerge from a contemplation of God, from pausing with Him in our days.

Selah.

At times, these pauses are planned, giving us space to think. At times, they arrive uninvited. They daze us.

It was 2009, during the disorienting days of losing my mum and my dad, when I found that the words from the Bible I studied each morning wouldn't stay in my head. It's my practice to read and speak to God in prayer, but in the numbness, nothing stayed inside. At a time when I needed the solace of God, the words that normally brought strength flew away.

My brother told us that you see more animals on a safari when you go 10 mph rather than 30. The animals are all there, but the faster speed doesn't allow your eyes to settle, and you miss out on the wonder of it all.

We are not made for rushing. In the slower lane of these artistic ponderings, the discoveries have filled me with wonder and hope.

The years ticked on, and for my husband, Adrian, and I, life after my parents' passing became fuller. We changed country, jobs, homes, and community. Then right in the middle of my purposeful living, the world arrived at the pandemic of March 2020. I became gravely unwell with Covid-19, and the illness decided to stay. During days and months of extraordinary weakness, I turned to the psalms of lament. Restricted to the couch for nearly a year, with a small fold-out table to draw on, I opened to King David's

dialogue with his powerful Friend. It was profound and moving. As I sat each day drawing and meditating on his words, my fears were stilled by the peace of God and the room was crammed with bliss.

Slow reading and creative meditation have been the steadying joy in both these seasons of disorientation.

### **Prayer**

We could be forgiven for thinking that for faith to be done "right," it needs excitement and proclamations. Our ordinary days seem a bit unexciting; they lack banners of triumph and euphoric praise. We may think that for faith to *really* work, it needs shiny people who are more "put together."

So, we concentrate on service, on what we can do. We make meals for the sick or drive Sunday school kids to camp—measurable things that allow us to feel like we've still got some skin in the game. But inside we retreat to silent spaces because faith that seems to work for the people on the stage clearly doesn't work for us. The friendship we once enjoyed with God feels beyond our reach.

In the early 1800s, Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard spoke of those who found themselves in this place. He said that they were becoming a "gentle Christian,"<sup>7</sup> resigning themselves to a life without the living waters of Christ.

We can grow up to be tidy, more acceptable, less real. Our messy prayers are hidden in journals in the attic along with old toys and broken things. We didn't get it right.

But we did.

If you want a boring prayer life, practice being good in it.<sup>8</sup>

From the earliest story where the Creator walks with Adam, to the wide-open exchanges David has with Jehovah, the people of God have prayed. Prayer is built into every dimension of Jewish living, it's not simply for festivals and sacred events. From the kitchen to the bathroom, from daybreak till darkness falls, each location, time, and emotion are lived with the Author of life. Prayers are recorded for all situations.

I give thanks unto You, Adonai, that, in mercy, You have restored my soul within me. Endless is Your compassion; great is Your faithfulness. I thank You, Adonai, for the rest You have given me through the night and for the breath that renews my body and spirit.<sup>9</sup>

God is interested in our ordinary routines—there's something reorienting in that. The Alpha and Omega being attentive when we pick up kids, meet with a manager, deliver groceries to a neighbor, install a sink. There's no delay until

we're presentable and no need to wait until Sunday. The conversation happens right where we are. It is earthy and honest and real.

There, in the stuff of our everyday living, we bump right into God. And we finally realize He isn't looking for show.

We can nowhere evade, the presence of God. The world is crowded with Him. He walks everywhere incognito.<sup>10</sup>

### Lament

To my amazement, as I started to draw the first fourteen psalms, I found eleven laments. *David, did you plan to drown us in gloom, to cover your readers with your questions and doubts? Surely you should lead with conviction, with steady belief and show us how to meet with God.*

I hadn't noticed his lamenting before because I was looking for the good bits, for verses I could underline and write on notes above my desk. But David takes us along alleys, past groups of men ensnared in vice. There's danger in the darkness that makes us want to run. But in the middle of distress, while we're looking for exits, he stumbles right into hope. David finds courage and faith in the anxiety of

the small hours, before anyone has turned on a light. And it is glorious.

It makes us think that this could be our story. And as we read on through the Bible books, we're given more hints that it could be true.

God's arrival into our world was without ritual and style. Born to an unwed teenager in a farm shed, He began His life under the shadow of shame. Hounded from birth by those resenting His power, He was no stranger to pressure. Friends who were close, walked away; some mocked, others fawned. He lived the full array of human emotions till that Easter week, alone in the darkness, He faced His end. God in the dust, God as dust. He has been where we live, where we wander and walk; He knows who we are. He never asked us to impress Him, to meet Him with pretense. David's songs of lament make that clear. Over seventy of the one hundred and fifty songs are shaped this way, with the poet calling to God, explaining his problem, making requests, recalling the past, and moving, despite danger, toward trust. He gives us the shape of hope.

The Psalms are a reality check to keep prayer from becoming sentimental, superficial, or detached from the real world.<sup>11</sup>

David charts an untidy relationship with the Almighty that, were we to jump to the comforting "hug verses," would ring pretty false. He studies four themes: God, the wicked, the righteous, and himself. He asks questions, makes observations,

and meets each subject head-on; his frustrations aren't pushed underground. There is room to shout, to tremble, to ask questions, to stay real. It's a path of mess, yes, and a path of hope. For if God works in this space, then He works!

He *has* lead with conviction, with steady belief. He *has* shown us how to meet with God.

### **Structure**

Having thought about processing real life through poems, the book of Psalms might feel like a jumble. It is cluttered with authors from King David to songsters to the sons of a rebel priest. It doesn't stick to one theme but sings songs of praise then switches to lament and protest; there are lyrics of trust in difficult times and then bursts of exuberant thanksgiving. It seems to lack a linear movement or a clear narrative journey.

We may think our task, if we're giving a talk or leading a meeting at church, is to smooth the rough edges of this confusing work; choose a few of the highlights and tidier parts that will bring order and peace to the gathering. For the Psalms can beautifully enhance church programs and punctuate learning with spiritual depth. Shouldn't we find where the poet moves from angst to praise, and read out the bits where he's fixed, so we can feel better too?

But is the purpose of the songbook to decorate our worship and tie our faith up with a bow?

Much inspiring research over recent years has taken a long look at the Psalms and has found that there is strikingly more.

When a wonderful book is recommended to us, we arrive at its pages with expectations. There'll be a beginning to intrigue, a middle to surprise, and an ending to impress! Beginning, middle, end—this is what we've known since C followed B, since 4 followed 3, since we were seven.

When we open a Bible book it's no different. We expect Genesis to flow from Eden to Egypt, and for Judges and Kings to move us through time. In the stories of Jesus, Matthew, Mark, and Luke start with His birth and end with resurrection, water to wine; and good Samaritans are found in the middles.

But when we open the Psalms, our expectations are different. We tend not to ask too much of them. We could be forgiven for thinking that serious theologians would not choose this material for their life of study. For centuries it's been the go-to place for those who are wounded, not for those on the up-and-up. There's a slight feeling that the authors aren't coping too well; at times David doesn't seem all that stable. When we're looking for theology, we go to Paul for legal argument; and for accurate history, Dr.

Luke is the one. These are reliable people to build our faith on, their arguments are easy to follow. With the Psalms, well, it's different.

But what if there is more? What if the Psalms have a shape and a plot, with edited movement and a rising storyline. What if the editorial team committed to say something through the positioning of each poem? What if Psalm 8 follows 3–7 and 14 follows 9–13 so that we grasp something subtle and brilliant? What if the charting of friendship between a dust creature and his Maker is profound, not only in content but in where each entry is placed?

What if this book was put together with more intricate intention than *The Lord of the Rings*? Just as we don't hear of Sauron before Frodo leaves the Shire, or of the importance of the quest until he embarks on the journey? What if the book of Psalms has movement, plot, blossoming revelation, intention, and heat? What if it is more than a convenient spot to offload emotion?

If the Psalms are more than a music storeroom, where (if you're lucky) the scores have been returned to the right shelves . . . if it's a place to find theology, to grow faith, to see God—well, that changes things.

It changes everything! The Psalms are filled with intention. This book is not organized in chronological order, for the young shepherd-nobody defeating Goliath is placed after

David has been crowned king; and the death of his infant son in the palace comes when the monarch is in exile, far from his home. The timeline is all jumbled up. No, it's not in order of years; it isn't meant to be. The editor is doing something extraordinary: he weaves artistry, symmetry, and absolute wonder into this remarkable collection.

You may wonder what prompted my choice of fourteen psalms—Why have such an obscure number for a book?

A dozen seems more pleasing, or, as this is written in Europe, perhaps keep things metric and choose a multiple of ten! Below you will find the reason: the outline of the first fourteen chapters of the book of Psalms. And while insight and wisdom permeate the poems, the symmetry adds layers of beauty. Here we see hints that the Psalms are curated, a collection put together with care and intent.

<b>Significant Arrangement of the Psalter<sup>12</sup></b>			
<b>Instruction in the Godly Life under the Reign of God</b>			
BOOK I : PSALMS 1–41			
<b>Ps 1–2</b>	Introduction, framed by two <b>ashre</b> ('Blessed is/are') declarations 1 Evokes instructions of Torah [Law] and Hokmah [Wisdom] 2 Evokes Former and Latter Prophets (Yahweh and his anointed, Israel's only hope in the turmoil of history)		
<i>Thus</i>	1. <i>The Psalter must be read in the context of the rest of the OT canon.</i> 2. <i>As portal to the temple of the Psalter, these two psalms teach that those who would appropriate the prayers and praises of the Psalter must fit the profile of the framing declarations; their lives must be shaped by Law and godly Wisdom, and they must "take refuge" in Yahweh and his anointed—the two components of "the fear of Yahweh."</i>		
<i>64 lines</i>	<b>Ps 3–14</b> 3 Plea for deliverance from foes 4 Plea for relief in time of drought 5 Plea for deliverance from foes 6 Plea for healing 7 Plea for deliverance from foes <b>8 Praise of the Creator (the glory of God bestowed on humans)</b>	9 Plea for deliverance from hostile nations 10 Plea for deliverance from the wicked 11 Trust in Yahweh's righteous rule 12 Plea for help in an ungodly time 13 Plea for deliverance from serious illness and enemies <b>14 The folly of humankind ("The LORD looks down ... to see ... all have turned aside")</b>	<i>64 lines</i>

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The foundation stones are laid with Psalms 1 and 2. They speak of wisdom and royalty, of blessing and prayer. There are parallel movements to Psalms 8 and 14 with a symmetry of lines in the Hebrew text.

From Psalms 3 to 8, there is movement toward Zion and the longed-for presence of God: the psalmist first sees a holy hill on the horizon, a distant temple, and then, with dignity and exuberant praise, he arrives in the courts of God.

Then in Psalms 9 to 14, we chart his withdrawal as descriptions of evil intensify and the situation grows ever bleaker. We end up far from Zion where the arrogant rule and humanity is disgraced.

We aren't told who organized the songs in this way, who decided what went where. But what we see in this grouping from 3–14 is a need for proximity, an ache to be close to God. This flow is embedded in the text.

The Psalter isn't intended as a database of quotes to augment our worship and decorate our days; it has far more to say.

## **Art**

Adrian and I had been in the city of Chicago for a couple of months when we set out to meet some new friends. The GPS said it'd take five minutes less if we took its suggested

route. We walked halfway down the street, too far to turn back, when we heard the shouts of rage. Teenagers flew out of the house to our left, expelled by the tempers behind them. They vented loud frustration on yesterday's beer cans, and kicked their way down the street. I glanced up at Adrian. We were silent, eyes wide. This wasn't the shortcut we expected. He squeezed my hand to look ahead. Just past the fences and burned out apartments, young men on the curb began to move into a circle. Power and vice congealed around them; their shoulders were up, hoods shadowed their eyes. Goodness, we should have turned right.

Our eyes searched the block ahead to assess its danger as we picked up our pace. And there it was. We came upon it by accident. At the heart of the landscape, inside of the gloom, was a startling piece of art. Shredded cloth and plastic bags were intricately woven into a chain link fence. The font was beautiful but the word—the word took our breath away.

It read, "Hope."

There was stillness in this spot that changed the climate all around. We forgot our race for safety; we were quiet, stood closer. The artist had reached through the untamed space, and pressed faith right into our souls. In a place that pulsed with shame and fear, he wasn't running anger management classes or offering quick fixes in shiny binders. The word

announced we were not at the end, we were only in the middle of the story!

For thousands of years, artists, craftsmen, musicians, and poets have lifted their tools to translate what they see. With cloth or with quills or with sable brushes, they painted glorious last suppers, fear-filled apostles; they told dark tales of shipwreck and dying messiahs. Craftsmen fused colored glass to let the sun shine the Bible in puddles of light on cathedral floors.

We stand before all these depictions, astounded. They have taken us far beyond what we can see and helped us to grasp what is holy. They've read the accounts and sat with the stories, interpreting tone, painting anxiety and faith.

The images in this book were born out of pondering the words and phrases of fourteen psalms. During the enforced rest on my "Covid-couch," I mulled over the biblical text. For hours each day, the more I saw, the more the lines took on shape. I've been astonished at the riches in David's words, the treasures he found in the darkness.

Art gifts us time. It is unhurried.

### **Poetry**

Poems allow big ideas to land in deep places in us. They let us tremble at exposed emotion, tug at threads of sorrow

and let things unravel. For poems, especially the Psalms, speak not only to us, but for us.<sup>13</sup>

Poems let us ponder; they are slow. They can feel indulgent!

Here is the tension: we're busy people, wired to achieve and get a great deal of things done. Poems ask a lot of us. We have to ponder questions, step into our fears—honestly, who has the time? The words feel disordered and a little unruly. They don't spell out a message of what we should do. Their plots are untidy and often unresolved. *Come to us with answers and a chart, and then we can plan. Spare us from the middle of the story!*

On Sundays, when we come to church, we assume we'll learn more about God; that the pastor will quarry each biblical text to bring us clear information. We assume logical patterns and clever directives will arrive at our pew, packaged and neat, and that by the end of the service he'll have fracked the passage for fuel that will power our days.

But in our eagerness to put things in order, we sometimes forget to hear what God says. Words are not given to master; ideas are not there to consume. The poetry of the Psalms is for wonder, for mystery, for engagement with the Eternal on cardinal things.

When policies need to be outlined, when important things need to be said, we in the twenty-first century use

arguments and prose. Our legal documents are not in verse or accompanied by a lute! There are no biblical tears in bottles, no trees clapping their hands, and no soaring on eagles' wings!<sup>14</sup>

But in ancient times, the vital things in life were recorded in verse. One-third of the Bible is poetry recorded in the Hebrew form, where lines repeat and intensify, where thoughts develop in pairs. The last words of poems don't sound the same—the cat doesn't sit on the mat by the rat—that's not how these poems work. It's the *ideas* that rhyme, not the sounds. It makes for a deeper contemplation.

Poems invite pondering. They take the calendar of life, where meetings are scheduled and reminders ping, and move us to the heart level, where all the action is. The Psalms add tone and movement to factual accounts:

- We can read about David's throne being seized; 2 Samuel records it. But the tension in that story between a king and his son, we enter into in Psalm 3.
- The story of the giant warrior Goliath and the terrified armies across the plain is written in the book of Samuel, but the marvel of the win is in Psalm 9.
- David's taking of Bathsheba and murder of her husband is chronicled in cold detail in the book of Kings. But we hear the ache and the prayer in Psalm 51.

- And the crucifixion of Christ—the trials, the timings—are charted meticulously in the New Testament. But to discover the depth of the darkness He entered and to hear the prayer He prayed, we need Psalm 22.

Poems fill in the gaps; they give us more.

The psalmist is giving us his journal without gluing any pages together—things that lie unanswered are rough and fought through. He's written it all without gilding over the losses or ignoring the joys. This isn't some record of prim religiosity—these are songs between friends in the middle of the story. That is where they were written, and that is where we live.

In these pages, David is known; it is safe; he belongs.

### **A Helpful Approach**

*Landscape of Hope* takes the writings of the psalmist and gives a visual description of what is taking place. It takes time over the meaning. Art describes; it rarely dictates. These images are an invitation to slow down.

Paired with each picture are comments of application, of how the psalmist's ideas work out in life. These are not intended as an analysis of the Hebrew language or a commentary on theological debate. These remarks are written for slow reading. There is room to reflect and to

ponder with a cadence in the words that is not for speed, but rather for contemplation. There may be details in the Bible commentary that seem unfamiliar—there are one of two reasons for this. It could be the use of a little creative license based on what we are told in the text. Or, more likely, it comes from details that are given elsewhere in the canon. I’ve spent the best part of three decades teaching young people what is found in the Bible. I find joy in searching through obscure Old Testament passages in Judges or Chronicles, Amos or Kings, to see who was alive when, which characters interacted, and what was going on in their kingdoms. Color, surprise, and nuance are brought

to stories that are often hastily told. Each illustration depicts a portion from a psalm with words written out (perhaps multiple times) to show the movement of David’s thinking.

To “read” the image, find the beginning of the verse with your eyes, or even better, with your fingers. The phrases may be tiny or swirling around, but travel with the sentence, sense the action and meaning, the shrinking and growing through the words of the song.

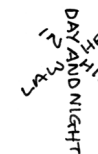
And ponder.



DAY AND NIGHT  
HEMEDITATES



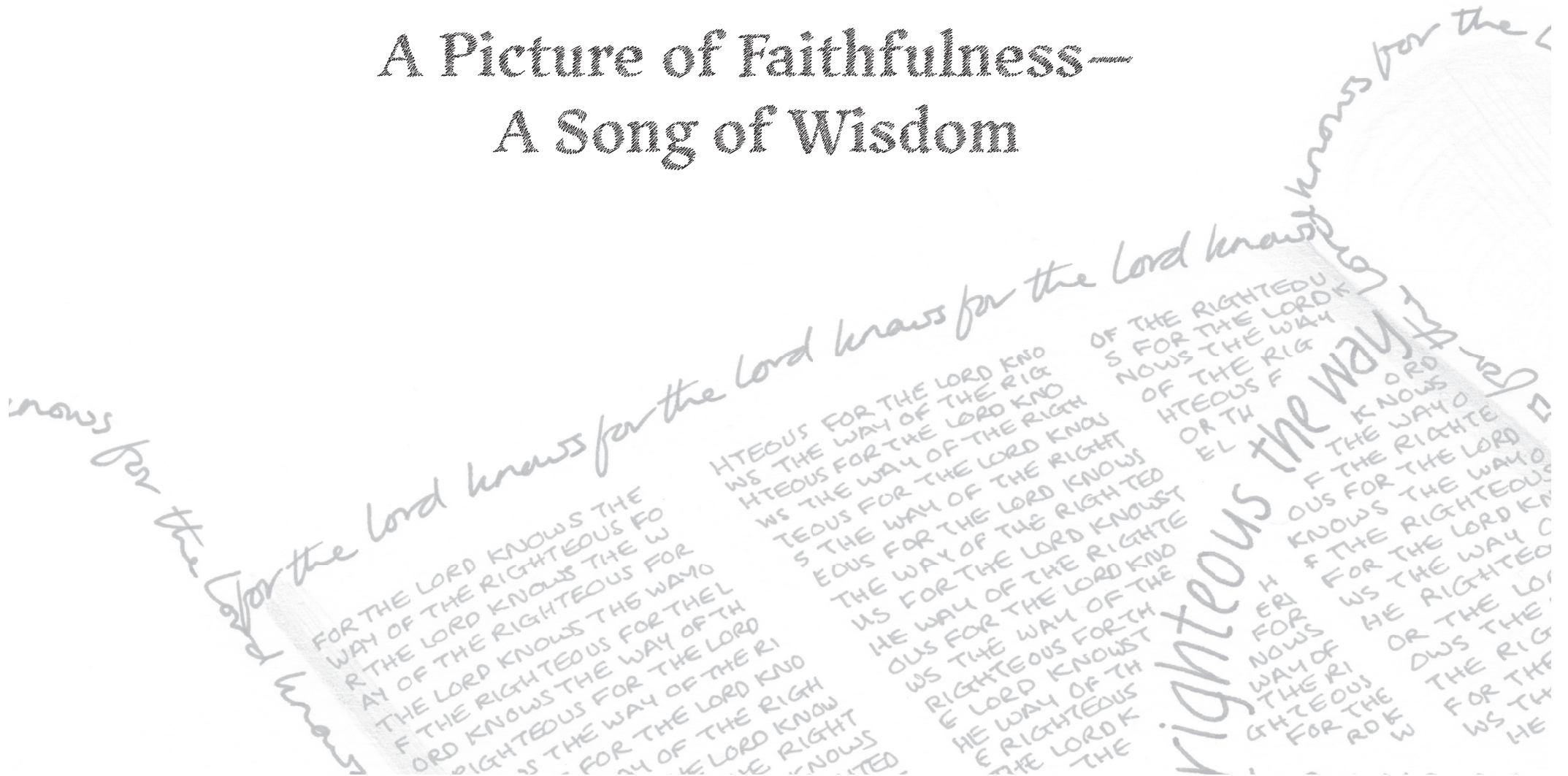
DAY AND NIGHT  
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# PSALM 1

## A Picture of Faithfulness— A Song of Wisdom



The waiting congregation rises to sing as the keyboard begins an earnest tune. A hymn of trust, joy, and surrender beams at us from the screen to carry us into the program.

I'm not ready. My heart is still thumping from the fist-shaking man outside, upset when I stupidly pulled into a no parking zone. The morning news was appalling . . . the brutality of that gang, and little Emma Green is still missing. And on the way into church, I bumped into someone I was meant to meet up with last week. Trust, joy, surrender? I come feeling flustered, guilty, and unwashed, with last week's grime still glued to my soul.

*Come stand by my side . . . let my heart settle . . . take me slowly to God. Walk with me softly; let me find beauty and mystery. Allow me time to understand there is something more . . . there is someone far greater than us. For if you feed me a script and speed me to an altar, the ritual will float over my life and leave me untouched, removed.*

Psalms 1 and 2 are the doorway to the Psalter, the welcome that ushers us into these poems. At this threshold, there is time. Time to remember who we are and what things are about. It's a meditation in the presence of our divine Friend.

Later, we'll walk through this door and settle into its rooms, and speak of struggles and failures, oppression and strife. And we'll meet the characters, themes, and questions of the Psalms that are introduced in these first eighteen verses.

But first, we stand in this liminal space.

We're told the Psalms are "a teaching manual for worship and prayer"<sup>1</sup> and "for spirituality, for relationship with God."<sup>2</sup> If this collection is all about prayer, you'd expect that to be where it starts. But Psalm 1 is not about speaking with God—it's the wisdom song to show us where praying begins.

We have a tendency to run for the answers, to tune in to sound-bites, find the key 1, 2, 3s. We're busy people with networks to maintain, media to update, and information to pass on in ten seconds or less.

But God is in no hurry. In Psalm 1, He shows us how we can meet; and it's the same way He met people in the early Bible stories.

When the Israelites walked from the clay ovens of Egypt, there were weeks of hiking along arid tracks. Their whip wounds and memories mixed with freedom and hope as they followed Moses, the old shepherd, once prince. They rounded a bend, and their horizon filled with Sinai, the Mountain of God.<sup>3</sup> And then came lightning and sulfur and terror and trumpets and explosions and trembling and smoke! These days would hold God's epic revelation of a new society where virtue would trump power; where a higher law would stand over governments and kings: the Ten Commandments would change the world.

As we're gripped by the story in Exodus 19, the action pulls us in; we brace for the meeting between Moses and the Almighty and the writing on tablets of stone. But something takes place before the encounter, before Moses sets off on his climb up the hill. We read that a gift is given to the people who gathered, and that gift is the gift of time.

The slaves were not dragged to the mountain to make hasty commitments; this was no power ambush. The meeting with God would be three days away, and each person was to be dressed in clothes that were clean.

Three million tunics in the desert of Sinai sank into basins of water. Bloodstains and dirt from building sites in Rameses released their hold on the linen and poured away. And all around the encampment, floating on guy ropes between family canvases and hanging from poles, the washing blew, like a sea of white surrender in the wilderness heat.

At dawn on the third day, little ones and teenagers, mums and dads, all came washed to the mountain. They waited there. The astonishing sea-splitting, locust-growing, frog-forming, death-defying, darkness-making God gave them space to think, to wait, to take off the grime and make themselves ready.

Psalm 1 doesn't race up the hill to get the key information, doesn't give hasty solutions we can quickly apply. Yes, it holds structural beauty, symmetry, artistry, and a great deal of poetic punch; yes, it's put together with intention and its themes weave through the Psalter to end in bursts of praise. But it is far more than this. Its claims reach into us to show us the path to flourish in our humanity. Psalm 1 shows the route to deep satisfaction, and the ways that joy can be lost.

It maps the things that diminish a life, that break it down to chaff. It speaks of the places we take our bodies, the people we choose as friends. It studies the disintegration of kindness and how we use our minds. We may expect Psalm 1's advice to a life that is shrinking would be to simply reverse the choices we make: get advice from good people, hang out with the virtuous, make sure we do things that are kind.

We can be brilliant at evaluating our goodness—a few behavior modifications and we're right on track! But that is not the opposite of the life that falls apart. This poem is far more constructive than that. The counsel that's given is not to hide among others; it's to marinate in the wisdom of the Word of God. To savor it, relish it, be nourished by its beauty, and be taken into the bliss of God.

Psalm 1 is overflowing with grace; there is beauty, the righteous are blessed. The God we imagine to be irritated with our patchy prayer life or excuse for devotion sees us, not through frustration, but with generous love. We can stop studying our feet and look into His face. His welcome invites us to joy.

Undeserved kindness changes things.



There were two Liams in Miss Craven's class. One wrote extra sentences, helped those who were weaker, tidied his station, and was a delight. The other Liam was a nightmare. He was. If he made it to class on time, he ducked about in the line, pulling girls' hair or throwing rocks at their bags. Come lunchtime, there was fighting over shoes, over lies, over football, over anything. It never stopped.

With the first parent-teacher meetings scheduled for that night, Miss Craven collected the pile of misdemeanors. She had much to say to the second Liam's folks. The other Liam's workbooks were bursting with stars, and smiled up at her from a neat pile in the tray.

A weary mum, with a toddler on her hip, slumped into the chair in front of the teacher. With a deep sigh she mumbled the name of her son. Miss Craven was ready, pulling over the books, her face lighting up as she spoke of the boy. The mum's head shook in wonder. She brushed a tear from her cheek; things were at last looking up. She hugged her Liam at the gym hall door, relaying his teacher's gushing praise. Miss Craven looked up, to see her scamp of a pupil studying his mum's flushed, happy face.

The teacher reeled at her mistake, but the next parents were waiting, and she didn't have time to fix the slip. The following morning she wasn't sure what to do, when a young boy, shirt pressed, hair combed, face shining,

stood waiting at the front of the line. He'd smoothed his workbook flatter and had painstakingly finished each of his homework sentences. Stunned at the change, she smiled toward his desk. He made his way over, and looking up, whispered, "I never knowed, Miss. I never knowed you thought I was all right." Liam thrived that year. And the next, and the one after. His teacher's accidental approval changed the path of his life!



In the stunning poetry of Psalm 1, we see a human being flourishing, taken up into the life of his Creator. The joy causes him to meditate more, the meditation causes more pleasure. There is purpose and strength, growth and a future. The image pulsates with acceptance.

Psalm 1 finds us looking up, whispering for joy, "We never knowed, Master. We never knowed You thought we were all right!"



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# Pull up a chair

## PSALM 1

*Blessed is the man  
Who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly,  
Nor stands in the path of sinners,  
Nor sits in the seat of the scornful;  
But his delight is in the law of the LORD,  
And in His law he meditates day and night.*

### PSALM 1, VERSES 1 AND 2

The opening psalm in this three-thousand-year-old collection is the preface to the whole book of Psalms. It's the trailer that offers a sneak peek at the adventure without giving too much away! The psalmist has chosen the setting, the characters, and the tensions that lie between them. He introduces four concepts that will develop throughout the next 149 poems: God, the wicked, the righteous, and himself. We watch as he unrolls the blueprint for the entire Psalter, and he does it with a story of contrasts ...

We are introduced to a pathway, shadowed by scorn, darkened by conceit. To travel it is to keep in step with those

whose lives are vain. Companions on this road are slow moving; they are comfortable standing aloof. They easily pull up chairs to jeer at those who look weak.

And we wonder: What is the result of a life that sits down with these advisers as friends?

We're invited to consider an alternative route that is startling in its contrast. The atmosphere along this way shimmers with delight. The Guide on this path speaks to us through a text that values peace over popularity, humility over pride. Its wisdom pours stability into his frame. It gives purpose to his days and, rather than scrutinizing others, lets him see their needs. His mind comes alive. He discovers deep rooted contentment—"blessing."

The conclusion to this song reverberates through the Psalter—sitting around belittling those who aren't us, that's absurd. Today, let's turn to the psalmist's source of joy, and live the life we've been gifted.

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