

Lenten Devotional

Spring 2025



ECCLESIA
CHURCH

Lent 2025

Welcome to our Ecclesia Lenten devotional. This year’s devotional is a journey through the Psalms as we seek to immerse our lives in the poetry of God’s promises. The psalms fit the setting of lent so well because lent involves God bringing us face to face with the reality of our humanity and the psalms are teaching us how to be human before God. The psalms were the prayerbook of Jesus as a part of the covenant people of God and they are gift to us as we seek live lives that are fully alive to his presence. The psalms often confront us with their unrestrained sincerity, with their audacious demands of God, and with their unflinching trust in God even in the bleakest of circumstances. We join our hearts with the choir of voices who have gone before us in order that we might discern the voice of the savior.

Each lenten season is not a matter of disciplined purgation or purging discipline. We don’t fast so that God will look on us with more love, more favor. That is impossible. At every single moment, he looks upon us and moves towards us with infinite, inexhaustible love.

We fast to hear the invitation of the good shepherd to walk in his ways, to receive his healing, and to look at the world the way he sees it: with mercy, forgiveness, wonder, and joy.

Join us as we walk the narrow road of the psalms towards Calvary, as we wade in these words of blessing, and as long for resurrection.

Editor’s Note:

Several Ecclesians were invited to participate in this devotional by contributing their own reflection on a psalm of their choosing. You’ll see those particular reflections marked with their names. If there’s no author listed, the writer is pastor Ian Graham. All scripture references are the NIV (New International Version) unless otherwise noted. There are 47 days between the beginnning of Lent—Ash Wednesday—and Easter Sunday. However, Sunday’s, traditionally are excluded from fasting and other obligations taken on for the season of Lent. There are seven Sunday’s in Lent. 47 days minus 7 Sunday’s gives us 40. Thus, there are 40 days of reflections included.

Day One

Psalms 1

1 Blessed is the one
 who does not walk in step with the
wicked
or stand in the way that sinners take
 or sit in the company of mockers,
2 but whose delight is in the law of the
Lord,
 and who meditates on his law day and
night.
3 That person is like a tree planted by
streams of water,
 which yields its fruit in season
and whose leaf does not wither—
 whatever they do prospers.
4 Not so the wicked!
 They are like chaff
 that the wind blows away.
5 Therefore the wicked will not stand in
the judgment,
 nor sinners in the assembly of the
righteous.
6 For the Lord watches over the way of
the righteous,
 but the way of the wicked leads to de-
struction.

The Psalms literally stop us in our tracks. We have been walking our own way, the way of the world, the way of the wicked (v. 1). We have treated the world like a spectator sport where our sofa becomes the seat of judgment (v. 2). The psalms are an invitation to know God and to know ourselves, and thus an invitation to pray. Here in Psalm 1, we receive this invitation not as a list of things to do but as a cease and desist order. Stop walking, stop standing, stop sitting. Stop talking, and listen. The law of the Lord is heeded only as it is received as a sabbath of hearing.

Hear the words of the Lord, hear how his ways are so different than the acquisitive, reductive ways of the world. Hear and find joy.

Our cultural scripts tell us that to stop is to die, to get passed by and run over. Our flesh tells us to deny ourselves means death and diminishment. But Psalm 1 invites us to a different way.

The verbs for the righteous are deceptively passive: delight, meditate, be planted. I mean how do you delight in something? Do you think about it really hard? But this is the paradox of prayer. Prayer is not first a speaking, but a hearing. God's initial speech in Genesis 1, "Let there be light," bathes the whole of creation in the illuminating grace of God. It's in response to the world-creating words of the Lord that we speak, that we pray. Like babies copying the sounds and syllables of their parents, we learn to speak in listening. In hearing ourselves addressed by God, we can turn from the ways of sinners. We can repent. In hearing the Law of the Lord we are initiated into the customs and cultures of a new world. In hearing the Law of the Lord we are planted in the well-watered sunlight of the love of God.

Psalm 1 invites us to listen, to hear and to pray. Prayer is the grounds of grace, the fertile soil of new life where our lives stand tall in the love of God in every season. Psalm 1 initiates us into the rhythms of the psalter, into living, real living. Our lives are only truly alive when we are alive to God and thus the psalm 1 invites us to rest in the grace of God.

Day Two

Psalm 42

As the deer pants for streams of water,
so my soul pants for you, my God.

2 My soul thirsts for God, for the living
God.

When can I go and meet with God?

3 My tears have been my food
day and night,
while people say to me all day long,
“Where is your God?”

4 These things I remember
as I pour out my soul:
how I used to go to the house of God
under the protection of the Mighty
One

with shouts of joy and praise
among the festive throng.

5 Why, my soul, are you downcast?
Why so disturbed within me?

Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him,
my Savior and my God.

6 My soul is downcast within me;
therefore I will remember you
from the land of the Jordan,
the heights of Hermon—from Mount
Mizar.

7 Deep calls to deep
in the roar of your waterfalls;
all your waves and breakers
have swept over me.

8 By day the Lord directs his love,
at night his song is with me—
a prayer to the God of my life.

9 I say to God my Rock,
“Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I go about mourning,
oppressed by the enemy?”

10 My bones suffer mortal agony
as my foestaunt me,
saying to me all day long,
“Where is your God?”

11 Why, my soul, are you downcast?
Why so disturbed within me?

Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him,
my Savior and my God.

1 As the deer pants for streams of water,
so my soul pants for you, my God.
2 My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When can I go and meet with God?

There are days when I feel a deep yearning. I can be surrounded by people who love and support me, living in the best of circumstances, yet still feel an emptiness—an inexplicable hunger for something deeper. I long to understand and to be understood, to see pain and confusion fade away. I long for heaven.

Sometimes, this longing makes me feel guilty. Shouldn't God be enough for me? Isn't this sense of emptiness something only non-Christians should feel?

I love Psalm 42 because it reminds me that longing for God is part of being human. The journey of faith isn't linear—there are moments when we feel His presence tangibly, and there are moments when we thirst for Him. Yet through it all, Jesus is with us. I've come to believe that until we are home in heaven, this longing is natural. We are in this world, but not of it.

5 Why, my soul, are you downcast?
Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him,
my Savior and my God.

This psalm captures both anguish and hope in a way that feels deeply validating. Rather than a rebuke, I believe these rhetorical questions are meant to comfort us. The fact that such an internal struggle between sorrow and hope is recorded in Scripture reassures me that it is okay to be weak, even when we know God.

I keep coming back to the word yet in “for I will yet praise Him.” There are times when I am too exhausted, when joyful praise feels impossible. And yet, somewhere in the back of my mind, there is a quiet voice that still believes, still whispers praise. It may not be loud, but God tells me that it is enough. Because even in my weakness, God is full of grace. He meets me in my weariness and carries me through my doubts.

I believe that our struggles don't mean we lack faith, but rather reveal our deep need for God. I pray that in the moments when we are too exhausted and sorrowful to find the words, we can turn to these verses and let them be our prayer.

Day Three

Psalm 24

The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it,

the world, and all who live in it;

2 for he founded it on the seas

and established it on the waters.

3 Who may ascend the mountain of the Lord?

Who may stand in his holy place?

4 The one who has clean hands and a pure heart,

who does not trust in an idol

or swear by a false god.

5 They will receive blessing from the Lord

and vindication from God their Savior.

6 Such is the generation of those who seek him,

who seek your face, God of Jacob.

7 Lift up your heads, you gates;

be lifted up, you ancient doors,

that the King of glory may come in.

8 Who is this King of glory?

The Lord strong and mighty,

the Lord mighty in battle.

9 Lift up your heads, you gates;

lift them up, you ancient doors,

that the King of glory may come in.

10 Who is he, this King of glory?

The Lord Almighty—

he is the King of glory.

Envision the route that you travel to church each week. Maybe you drive past suburban strip malls and dozens of other churches. Perhaps you navigate the subways, hoping not to see a rat playing on the tracks and hurrying past homeless people who somehow managed to survive another night. Now think about the space you meet in to worship. Perhaps you meet in a sleek, refurbished warehouse, maybe you meet in a school cafeteria or someone's home. Maybe you even meet in a building that was designed for the sole purpose of being a church. Whether you travel by foot, car, or train and whether you meet in a comedy club or a traditional church building there is a striking dissonance that confronts us all as we enter the doors to worship.

The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.

This is the claim of Psalm 24. The worshipper, upon entering the temple of Solomon, hears this big opening chord resounding, inviting her to worship. But then she thinks about her journey, even to arrive at the temple. How could all of it, all of the things she has seen, all of the places she traversed, all of the people she crossed paths with—how could it all of it be the Lord's? It doesn't add up. Some of it seemed so mundane, some of it so painfully commercial, some of it just plain evil. And then the people. So many people going about their days, so many of them with no thought of God or existence. They belong to the Lord?

The world that we live in and the world of worship seem like two completely different worlds altogether. But there it is right there, the earth is the Lord's, not some other place, not heaven, this place, this town, this neighborhood, these people.

So how do we begin to reconcile these two worlds? Psalm 24 presents us with a radical reorienting of our imagination and a subsequent way of walking in the world. First, we have to allow our imaginations to be recalibrated. The questions, presented in call-and-response fashion at the end of the psalm are not questions seeking an answer but rhetorical questions inviting remembrance. "Who is the King of glory?" Who is the king that can hold under his reign the world that we just walked through and the world of worship? Who is the king that doesn't further separate them into secular and sacred but harmonizes them? The answer given is the same answer given to Moses when he asks the blazing bush, who should I say has sent me? The divine name—the Lord. To declare that the Lord is Lord of all of existence is not to exercise blind faith but to shape our imaginations to the mold of the kingdom. Worship is a discipline of seeing that changes the way we view everything.

Second, how do we live in a world such as this? When we walk out of the doors, squinting in the bright sunlight with our minds freshly challenged to see in a new way, does it change anything about how we actually live? The psalmist tell us that the ones who will stand in his holy place are those who "have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully." Many have thought clean hands and pure hearts required avoidance, like Pilate constantly washing his hands of the world. But Jesus shows us that the path towards purity of heart and hand is not avoidance, rather it is incarnation. Clean hands and pure hearts are not the product of avoiding stain from the world. They are hands that bear the scars of Jesus, the one who ascended the hill of the Lord, on behalf of the world. When we as Christians walk the world as he did, in love and in service, we live out of the overflow of the new imaginations shaped in corporate worship. We live out the declaration that the earth is the Lord's and all that is in it when we see every corner of our lives "charged with the grandeur of the glory of God.". We live out that every person is beckoned by the freedom and love of God when we lift Jesus up and he draws all people to himself.

The psalm invites us, lift up your head, that the King of Glory may come in. In worship we hear the call afresh, lift up your head, see the world as it really is. Stand in the holy place of God's presence so that you might see all the world is infused with the glory of his Spirit.

Day Four

Psalm 130

1 Out of the depths I cry to you, Lord;

2 Lord, hear my voice.

Let your ears be attentive
to my cry for mercy.

3 If you, Lord, kept a record of sins,
Lord, who could stand?

4 But with you there is forgiveness,
so that we can, with reverence, serve
you.

5 I wait for the Lord, my whole being
waits,
and in his word I put my hope.

6 I wait for the Lord
more than watchmen wait for the
morning,
more than watchmen wait for the
morning.

7 Israel, put your hope in the Lord,
for with the Lord is unfailing love
and with him is full redemption.

8 He himself will redeem Israel
from all their sins.

By Beza Desta

One of the many great mercies the Lord shows us is to reveal our deep need and longing for Him. He has knit us together thread by thread, with a heart that longs for Him—a soul that finds true rest and comfort only in His presence. However the world provides many replacements that for a while quiet the cry of our soul. But in His mercy, the Lord allows us to taste the emptiness of the world and its promises. For a moment, He lets us experience a dark night of the soul and see that on this side of heaven there's much pain and grief that we can never seem to correct on our own. Christian, do not shrink back from crying out for mercy. He is mightier than the depths of your agony. Demand to be heard; He is the God who listens. And wait, as watchmen for the morning... wait as watchmen for the morning.

It is true that we are unworthy and that if our sins were counted, we would not stand a chance. But fret not Christian, He does not merely tolerate you; He longs to redeem you and his love for you is steadfast. Boldly ask to believe that... to know that.

"I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in His word I hope." (Psalm 130:5)

Day Five

Psalms 5

Listen to my words, Lord,
consider my lament.
2 Hear my cry for help,
my King and my God,
for to you I pray.
3 In the morning, Lord, you hear my voice;
in the morning I lay my requests before
you
and wait expectantly.
4 For you are not a God who is pleased
with wickedness;
with you, evil people are not welcome.
5 The arrogant cannot stand
in your presence.
You hate all who do wrong;
6 you destroy those who tell lies.
The bloodthirsty and deceitful
you, Lord, detest.
7 But I, by your great love,
can come into your house;
in reverence I bow down
toward your holy temple.
8 Lead me, Lord, in your righteousness
because of my enemies—
make your way straight before me.
9 Not a word from their mouth can be
trusted;
their heart is filled with malice.
Their throat is an open grave;
with their tongues they tell lies.
10 Declare them guilty, O God!
Let their intrigues be their downfall.
Banish them for their many sins,
for they have rebelled against you.
11 But let all who take refuge in you be
glad;
let them ever sing for joy.
Spread your protection over them,
that those who love your name may re-
joice in you.
12 Surely, Lord, you bless the righteous;
you surround them with your favor as
with a shield.

Flowing underneath the surface of the psalms are the preeminence of God, his rule and reign, rest as worship and rebellion, the temptation to subvert God's authority by assuming his throne, and then there is the difficult matter of enemies. For Christians, Jesus instructed us to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us. But the psalter is laden with vitriol and curses (known as imprecations) all heaped upon the heads of our enemies. Here in Psalm 5, David prays: Make them bear their guilt, O God; let them fall by their own counsels; because of their many transgressions cast them out, for they have rebelled against you.

In 1 Timothy 2:4, Paul writes that the Lord wants all to be saved and to come to a knowledge of him. David, on the other hand, seems ready to condemn all of his enemies to the grave. The psalms then raise the question: how are we to pray these sorts of prayers and be faithful to Jesus? The answers, as seems fittings, are as complicated as the question. I want to focus on two angles to this difficult discussion. First, this is a psalm of David, famous in the Old Testament for being "the one after God's own heart." A quick survey of David's life will yield many disturbing results that you would not encourage anyone to emulate. David is a violent man who builds his reputation around his ability to kill. David commits adultery which leads him into a tangled conspiracy resulting in David doing what he does best, killing. So how can this at best morally ambiguous and at worst morally reprehensible man be seen as "the one after God's own heart?" Perhaps it's his feelings towards enemies that gives us a hint. David holds nothing back from God. He does not hold in reserve his most exuberant praise as he dances like a fool before the ark of God in front of all Israel. Conversely, David does not try to keep the dark corners of his heart from the light of God. He brings it all out into the open of God's all-seeing light. He bears his soul completely before God in complete trust and vulnerability. Is it not at least possible that this is the characteristic that the Spirit is beckoning us to pattern our own prayers after? Perhaps this is what it means to be a woman or a man after God's own heart?

Second, the psalmist writes in v. 9: For there is no truth in their mouths; their hearts are destruction; their throats are open graves; they flatter with their tongues.

The second angle that I want to address pertaining to enemies is around the person of Jesus. Jesus is the one who Christians are to see as our pattern in the world: his words, his love, his beauty. So who are the enemies of Jesus? Perhaps this will give us insight into our own prayers regarding our enemies. Well certainly, during his incarnate life recorded in the gospels there are many schemers: scribes, Pharisees, Herod, Pilate all trying to be rid of Jesus. But when the temple guard comes to apprehend Jesus and Peter draws his sword to engage the apparent enemies of Jesus, Jesus stills his hand saying, "Peter, those who live by the sword, die by the sword." He even heals the ear of Malchus, one of the soldiers who assists in arresting Jesus. Paul will say it this way in Ephesians 6v12: For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection reveals our enemies. Our enemies are not people, not even those who inflict violence upon us. Our enemies are the sin and death to which those people are enslaved. Thus, we pray. We pray that our true enemies, sin and death, would meet their final end as Jesus triumphs over them and we pray that the people in our lives who may be acting as enemies would be liberated from the grip of their captors.

Day Six

Psalms 104

Praise the Lord, my soul.
Lord my God, you are very great;
you are clothed with splendor and majesty.
2 The Lord wraps himself in light as with a garment;
he stretches out the heavens like a tent
3 and lays the beams of his upper chambers on their waters.
He makes the clouds his chariot
and rides on the wings of the wind.
4 He makes winds his messengers,
flames of fire his servants.
5 He set the earth on its foundations;
it can never be moved.
6 You covered it with the watery depths as with a garment;
the waters stood above the mountains.
7 But at your rebuke the waters fled,
at the sound of your thunder they took to flight;
8 they flowed over the mountains,
they went down into the valleys,
to the place you assigned for them.
9 You set a boundary they cannot cross;
never again will they cover the earth.
10 He makes springs pour water into the ravines;
it flows between the mountains.
11 They give water to all the beasts of the field;
the wild donkeys quench their thirst.
12 The birds of the sky nest by the waters;
they sing among the branches.
13 He waters the mountains from his upper chambers;
the land is satisfied by the fruit of his work.
14 He makes grass grow for the cattle,
and plants for people to cultivate—
bringing forth food from the earth:
15 wine that gladdens human hearts,
oil to make their faces shine,
and bread that sustains their hearts.
16 The trees of the Lord are well watered,
the cedars of Lebanon that he planted.
17 There the birds make their nests;
the stork has its home in the junipers.
18 The high mountains belong to the wild goats;
the crags are a refuge for the hyrax.
19 He made the moon to mark the seasons,
and the sun knows when to go down.
20 You bring darkness, it becomes night,
and all the beasts of the forest prowl.
21 The lions roar for their prey
and seek their food from God.
22 The sun rises, and they steal away;
they return and lie down in their dens.
23 Then people go out to their work,
to their labor until evening.
24 How many are your works, Lord!
In wisdom you made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures.
25 There is the sea, vast and spacious,
teeming with creatures beyond number—
living things both large and small.
26 There the ships go to and fro,
and Leviathan, which you formed to frolic there.
27 All creatures look to you
to give them their food at the proper time.
28 When you give it to them,
they gather it up;
when you open your hand,
they are satisfied with good things.
29 When you hide your face,
they are terrified;
when you take away their breath,
they die and return to the dust.
30 When you send your Spirit,
they are created,
and you renew the face of the ground.
31 May the glory of the Lord endure forever;
may the Lord rejoice in his works—
32 he who looks at the earth, and it trembles,
who touches the mountains, and they smoke.
33 I will sing to the Lord all my life;
I will sing praise to my God as long as I live.
34 May my meditation be pleasing to him,
as I rejoice in the Lord.
35 But may sinners vanish from the earth
and the wicked be no more.
Praise the Lord, my soul.
Praise the Lord.

By John Georgiades

As a biological chemist, I marvel at how God choreographed the chemical dance of life. The dynamic network of reactions that store and break down nutrients. The interconnected cycles of hydrogen, carbon, nitrogen, and oxygen established by collaborations between plants, microbes, and animals to maintain the air we breathe. At the core of all this chemistry is water—the solvent of life.

Today, at least according to the United Nations, is World Water Day. While most of us probably don't explicitly celebrate World Water Day, we probably understand why we have it. Water decorates the land, quenches our thirst, and keeps us clean. Water also acts as a key image and driving force throughout the Biblical story. In the opening story of Genesis, the creator God conquers the chaos waters to establish order: separating the waters above from the waters below and establishing dry land out of the oceans. Later, in the wake of creation's rebellion, God removes this boundary, bringing catastrophic flood on the lands before recreating the world and establishing a covenant with all living creatures to never again destroy his creation with flood.

Psalm 104 recalls this history in its celebration of God's creation and calls us to wonder at the world we inhabit. We are reminded of God's control over this world. Control enough to separate the waters, to give water to the animals, to bring forth lush forests. Dominion even over the creatures of the deep, the sea monsters the psalmist says God made to frolic in the oceans. God's role as creator and sustainer is on display throughout this poem. In response, all creation looks to God.

When I consider God's creation, I can't help but think of a song that I think beautifully captures the majesty of our maker. "Where Were You?" by The Porter's Gate in their album *Climate Vigil Songs* adapts to music the speech God makes to Job at the end of Job's story (Job 38–41). I think of Job 38–41, in part, as God's perspective on today's reading in Psalm 104. Take a moment to read this passage and/or listen to this song and picture God's glory.

Day Seven

Psalms 35

Contend, Lord, with those who contend with me;
fight against those who fight against me.
2 Take up shield and armor;
arise and come to my aid.
3 Brandish spear and javelin
against those who pursue me.
Say to me,
“I am your salvation.”
4 May those who seek my life
be disgraced and put to shame;
may those who plot my ruin
be turned back in dismay.
5 May they be like chaff before the wind,
with the angel of the Lord driving them away;
6 may their path be dark and slippery,
with the angel of the Lord pursuing them.
7 Since they hid their net for me without cause
and without cause dug a pit for me,
8 may ruin overtake them by surprise—
may the net they hid entangle them,
may they fall into the pit, to their ruin.
9 Then my soul will rejoice in the Lord
and delight in his salvation.
10 My whole being will exclaim,
“Who is like you, Lord?
You rescue the poor from those too strong
for them,
the poor and needy from those who rob them.”
11 Ruthless witnesses come forward;
they question me on things I know nothing about.
12 They repay me evil for good
and leave me like one bereaved.
13 Yet when they were ill, I put on sackcloth
and humbled myself with fasting.
When my prayers returned to me unanswered,
14 I went about mourning
as though for my friend or brother.
I bowed my head in grief
as though weeping for my mother.
15 But when I stumbled, they gathered in glee;
assailants gathered against me without my knowledge.
They slandered me without ceasing.
16 Like the ungodly they maliciously mocked;
they gnashed their teeth at me.

17 How long, Lord, will you look on?
Rescue me from their ravages,
my precious life from these lions.
18 I will give you thanks in the great assembly;
among the throngs I will praise you.
19 Do not let those gloat over me
who are my enemies without cause;
do not let those who hate me without reason
maliciously wink the eye.
20 They do not speak peaceably,
but devise false accusations
against those who live quietly in the land.
21 They sneer at me and say, “Aha! Aha!
With our own eyes we have seen it.”
22 Lord, you have seen this; do not be silent.
Do not be far from me, Lord.
23 Awake, and rise to my defense!
Contend for me, my God and Lord.
24 Vindicate me in your righteousness, Lord my God;
do not let them gloat over me.
25 Do not let them think, “Aha, just what we wanted!”
or say, “We have swallowed him up.”
26 May all who gloat over my distress
be put to shame and confusion;
may all who exalt themselves over me
be clothed with shame and disgrace.
27 May those who delight in my vindication
shout for joy and gladness;
may they always say, “The Lord be exalted,
who delights in the well-being of his servant.”
28 My tongue will proclaim your righteousness,
your praises all day long.

If you've ever felt like the world is aligned in a conspiracy against you, Psalm 35 is for you. David doesn't so much write as he shouts protests:

7 They hid their net for me without cause
and without cause dug a pit for me,
8 may ruin overtake them by surprise—
may the net they hid entangle them,
may they fall into the pit, to their ruin.

For many of us, we read Psalm 35 and feel like telling David, "Look, man, you're just having a bad day, the lady who told you you need two forms of verified ID at the DMV is not a cosmic enemy plotting alongside Satan to ruin your life." Our modern way of naming enemies is by establishing who's in our camp and who's not. The people on the other side of the spectrum are the bad, nefarious people while those within our state borders are given the benefit of good faith and good intentions.

Psalm 35 affirms our suspicions that enemies are a part of life. David doesn't call role, naming these individuals but he identifies them by their injustice and their glee when troubles befall him (vv.11-12).

David promises that he will delight in the Lord and rejoice in his salvation (v. 9), but these unnamed enemies glean their joy from sorrow in David's life (v. 15). They are mockers, slanderers, engaging in the verbal pornography of gossip and secretly fist-pumping when they get a report that something ill or painful has befallen David (vv.15-16).

You may or may not be able to name people in your life who fit this description. Psalm 35 is acknowledging that this is the way of the world, a way of conflict and alienation. This leads us to the second way that Psalm 35 bears witness to us in how we are to live and move in a world fraught with enemies.

Notice how David responds to the presence of his enemies. He does not lash out in anger and righteous retribution. He goes to great length to describe his own innocence, even noting how when he got updates on those who now mock him, when he heard that they were in anguish, he mourned alongside them, as if he were grieving the loss of his own mother (vv. 13-14). We love nothing more in our society and in our stories than when a person, a people, or an entity get what's coming to them. We say yes and amen to vindicating vengeance either by the law or other means. But David doesn't become a vigilante for his own victimhood.

Rather, David prays to God. He acknowledges that God is his judge and deliverer. David opens with the plea:

Contend, Lord, with those who contend with me;
fight against those who fight against me.
Take up shield and armor;
arise and come to my aid.
Brandish spear and javelin
against those who pursue me.
Say to me,
"I am your salvation."

David knows that he is imperiled because of his enemies but he also knows that only the Lord can release him from their snares. He foreshadows what the apostle Paul will instruct the Roman church to do in Romans 12v17-19:

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. 18 If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. 19 Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.

Jesus will tell those listening that they are not simply to refrain from vengeance, they are to love their enemies. Psalm 35 is a long way from the way Jesus will unmask our true enemies (sin and death) but it gives us a way to live in the world that is often contentious, where people wittingly and unwittingly often live as our enemies.

But in light of Jesus' teachings, Psalm 35 leaves us with a much more haunting question. Jesus says, don't look at the speck of sawdust in your neighbor's eye while ignoring that there is a 2 X 4 sticking out of your own eye (Matthew 7). Jesus compels us to reread Psalm 35 asking ourselves not simply how have we been wronged by others, but how have we, ourselves, been an enemy to others? You see, we live our lives as both offended and offender, and the witness of Jesus declares to all, there is grace for both—forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who have trespassed against us (also, providentially, Matthew 7).

Day Eight

Psalms 91

Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High
will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.
2 I will say of the Lord, "He is my refuge and my
fortress,
my God, in whom I trust."
3 Surely he will save you
from the fowler's snare
and from the deadly pestilence.
4 He will cover you with his feathers,
and under his wings you will find refuge;
his faithfulness will be your shield and ram-
part.
5 You will not fear the terror of night,
nor the arrow that flies by day,
6 nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness,
nor the plague that destroys at midday.
7 A thousand may fall at your side,
ten thousand at your right hand,
but it will not come near you.
8 You will only observe with your eyes
and see the punishment of the wicked.
9 If you say, "The Lord is my refuge,"
and you make the Most High your dwelling,
10 no harm will overtake you,
no disaster will come near your tent.
11 For he will command his angels concerning
you
to guard you in all your ways;
12 they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a
stone.
13 You will tread on the lion and the cobra;
you will trample the great lion and the ser-
pent.
14 "Because he loves me," says the Lord, "I will
rescue him;
I will protect him, for he acknowledges my
name.
15 He will call on me, and I will answer him;
I will be with him in trouble,
I will deliver him and honor him.
16 With long life I will satisfy him
and show him my salvation."

By Lydia Andres

Psalm 91 speaks to the assurance of the love and protection that we have from God. Verse 14 says, “Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name.”¹ This Psalm of promise that is given to those who love God. The things of protection mentioned at the beginning of the Psalm are things God will do for those who call out to Him. Now, that doesn’t mean that it is intended to be read as if there will be nothing that can harm us as if having God on our side was a magical way to never experience pain or hardship again simply because we love God. Instead, this Psalm should serve as a reminder that there is no separation from the love of God. Paul says this in Romans 8:31-39:

“31 What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? 32 He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? 33 Who will bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. 34 Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. 35 Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? 36 As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.” 37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Both Paul and the Psalmist know that there will be pain in this life; that is simply a part of being human, but we have this great hope that there is no separation from God because of the love of God. This love declares from the cross amid unimaginable pain that He loves so much He would be willing to bear our sins and wash us clean from them. It’s not a love that only appears when things are easy, but one that comes to deliver us from that which we cannot save ourselves from: sin. In this, He becomes, as the Psalmist writes, the one in whom we find refuge, our dwelling place, our shelter.

Day Nine

Psalm 44

We have heard it with our ears, O God;
our ancestors have told us
what you did in their days,
in days long ago.
2 With your hand you drove out the nations
and planted our ancestors;
you crushed the peoples
and made our ancestors flourish.
3 It was not by their sword that they won
the land,
nor did their arm bring them victory;
it was your right hand, your arm,
and the light of your face, for you loved them.
4 You are my King and my God,
who decrees victories for Jacob.
5 Through you we push back our enemies;
through your name we trample our foes.
6 I put no trust in my bow,
my sword does not bring me victory;
7 but you give us victory over our enemies,
you put our adversaries to shame.
8 In God we make our boast all day long,
and we will praise your name forever.
9 But now you have rejected and humbled us;
you no longer go out with our armies.
10 You made us retreat before the enemy,
and our adversaries have plundered us.
11 You gave us up to be devoured like sheep
and have scattered us among the nations.
12 You sold your people for a pittance,
gaining nothing from their sale.
13 You have made us a reproach to our neighbors,
the scorn and derision of those around us.
14 You have made us a byword among the nations;
the peoples shake their heads at us.
15 I live in disgrace all day long,
and my face is covered with shame
16 at the taunts of those who reproach
and revile me,
because of the enemy, who is bent on revenge.

All this came upon us,
though we had not forgotten you;
we had not been false to your covenant.
18 Our hearts had not turned back;
our feet had not strayed from your path.
19 But you crushed us and made us a haunt for jackals;
you covered us over with deep darkness.
20 If we had forgotten the name of our God
or spread out our hands to a foreign god,
21 would not God have discovered it,
since he knows the secrets of the heart?
22 Yet for your sake we face death all day long;
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.
23 Awake, Lord! Why do you sleep?
Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever.
24 Why do you hide your face
and forget our misery and oppression?
25 We are brought down to the dust;
our bodies cling to the ground.
26 Rise up and help us;
rescue us because of your unfailing love.

Psalm 44 is a prayer that doesn't easily mold into our typical categories. There is no resolution, no confession, just a confused plea in the face of both relentless enemies and the seeming absence of God. The psalm is an exercise in contrasts that only serves to further indict God. The psalmist remembers God's mighty acts in the past (v. 1, 20) but it's the Lord who has forgotten. The people have not turned away from God (vv. 17-18) but it's the Lord who has abandoned the people (v. 19). The peoples bless God and boast in his name (v8), the enemies meanwhile mock and deride them (vv.13-16) and all the while, God is sleeping (v. 23). God's people are reduced to dust (v. 25)—unless—unless, God will arise (v. 26).

But that's the thing. At least from the vantage point of Psalm 44, he doesn't. There is no alternative heavenly perspective showing us how God is not really absent or sleeping, there is no response from heaven to suddenly change the situation, there's not even a final resolve on the part of the psalmist to remain steadfast in trust and praise. Only one final desperate, perhaps resigned, plea- "rise up, come to our help. Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love."

Many of us have probably etched our names into the cell wall of this sort of dark night of despair, searching our innermost thoughts and motivations and concluding, like Job, "I haven't turned away, I haven't done anything wrong!" And then in the same breath, given voice to the accusatory question, "Where are you?" But whether we know this kind of despair well or simply bear the memory in our bones, Psalm 44 is a witness.

It is a witness that in the sacred record of the salvation of God, there is a place for this sort of protest. It sounds almost hubristic to dare that we have done it right, we have stayed the course, and God has forgotten, God has dozed off. Theologically, we know this is not the case. Paul picks up the phrasing from this very psalm echoing the charge against God—"you have made us like sheep for slaughter"—in Romans 8 where he famously finishes with his final flourish: there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Christ. Nothing. Not what's happening in Psalm 44, not life, not death. And yet, without systematic theologizing, explanation, or easy resolution, Psalm 44 is right there in the middle of the Bible as an invitation to bear witness. Psalm 44 may be one of the most human-centered prayers in the scriptures. God and his perceived absence serves as a foil for the asserted faithfulness of the one offering the prayer. It's truly stunning the depths of honesty that God encourages in us.

But as much as Psalm 44 is a witness to our own individual experiences, in the hands of the church, Psalm 44 is a witness to the plight of our sisters and brothers whose daily life often reflects the tension of Psalm 44. I think about the church in places like Nigeria, Ukraine, Cambodia, and so many others. Gatherings of faithful people, dedicated to the Lord surrounded by violence and oppression, crying out to God. And yet their situation is not resolved, it does not change. Psalm 44 is a witness to their cries and it demands that we not forget them in our prayers.

Psalm 44 is a gift of grace, a witness to the love of God even when that love seems distant.

Day Ten

Psalms 8

Lord, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory
in the heavens.

2 Through the praise of children and infants
you have established a stronghold against
your enemies,
to silence the foe and the avenger.

3 When I consider your heavens,
the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars,

which you have set in place,
4 what is mankind that you are mindful of
them,

human beings that you care for them?
5 You have made them a little lower than the
angels

and crowned them with glory and honor.

6 You made them rulers over the works of your
hands;

you put everything under their feet:

7 all flocks and herds,
and the animals of the wild,

8 the birds in the sky,
and the fish in the sea,
all that swim the paths of the seas.

9 Lord, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

One of the first dates my wife and I went on as teenagers was to go to the park in the evening, lay down on the grass, and simply stare into the night sky and talk. Staring into the depth of that sky, full of wonder and awe I—a deeply committed atheist at the time—was moved to ask questions, questions that would constitute the beginning of the Spirit’s movement on my heart to lead me back to my God.

I can imagine that the Psalmist is experiencing a similar wonder here as he gazes at the works of God’s fingers, the immense beauty of a creative mind that set it all in motion with a breath. Psalm 8 is a beautiful retelling of and reflection on the creation story of Genesis 1, when God with a Word formed creation. And just like in Genesis 1, there is a certain element of God’s creation that the Psalmist pauses to reflect on at length. The crown of God’s creation, the apple of God’s eye, the overflow of God’s Trinitarian love and character: humanity. In the face of the deep seas, the towering mountains, the blazing sun and the starry expanse, the Psalmist asks the question that inevitably comes to our minds when faced with the intimidating breadth of creation... “What are humans that you care for them, mortals, that you are mindful of them?” But by the inspiration of the Spirit, we’re then given a peak behind the curtain, not at the Psalmist’s perspective, but at God’s

“Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honor

You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;

you have put all things under their feet”

These are startling words, but they reveal to us the eyes and heart with which God sees and loves us. When we are busy standing paralyzed by our perceived ‘smallness’ in the world, God says no. “This is about you. I made this for you, and you are able and powerful enough to care for and steward all of it.” Psalm 8 is finally a reminder of a truth we often forget. We aren’t impotent in the face of a chaotic and random world, though media may want to make us feel that way. No, God created us, set us apart, crowned us to enjoy, to steward, and to guide creation toward its end: reconciliation with the God who loves it as himself, that by the Spirit we might all proclaim,

“O LORD, our Lord how majestic is your name in all the earth!”

Day Eleven

Psalm 137

By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept
when we remembered Zion.
2 There on the poplars
we hung our harps,
3 for there our captors asked us for songs,
our tormentors demanded songs of joy;
they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
4 How can we sing the songs of the Lord
while in a foreign land?
5 If I forget you, Jerusalem,
may my right hand forget its skill.
6 May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth
if I do not remember you,
if I do not consider Jerusalem
my highest joy.
7 Remember, Lord, what the Edomites did
on the day Jerusalem fell.
"Tear it down," they cried,
"tear it down to its foundations!"
8 Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction,
happy is the one who repays you
according to what you have done to us.
9 Happy is the one who seizes your infants
and dashes them against the rocks.

Psalms 137 is a jarring glimpse into the human heart. The Psalm starts off with the aching melancholy of diaspora: how can we sing the songs of our homeland in the clutches of foreign exile? It captures the unique power of those made in God's image to create beauty even in the midst of oppression and cultural hegemony. This psalm has given both voice and hope to refugee peoples throughout history—acknowledging the ache for home, the uncanniness of exile, the lament of the loss of home, and the longing for return.

But then it turns its attentions towards the perpetrators in a way that is so vile, and yet so human. Scholars have labeled these psalms imprecatory Psalms. Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, calls these psalms of disorientation.

Psalms 137vv7-9

Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites
the day of Jerusalem's fall,
how they said, "Tear it down! Tear it down!
Down to its foundations!"
O daughter Babylon, you devastator!
Happy shall they be who pay you back
what you have done to us!
Happy shall they be who take your little ones
and dash them against the rock!

Obviously this is a heinous, evil image. The people of Judah had suffered greatly at the hands of the Babylonians. The Babylonians had devastated Jerusalem—they had murdered, they had pillaged, and they had conquered not just physically but through their system of relocating peoples that they had subdued, their goal was complete ideological colonization and domination. The people of Judah were filled with animosity towards their captors and they voiced their gruesome hatred to God. We tend to edit ourselves in God's presence to try to present a manicured version of ourselves but the Psalms frequently tell us this is impossible. What's more, the Psalms seem to suggest that this is not what God desires.

Jesus was frequently misunderstood because he had all the makings of the perceived Messiah—a kingly figure in the line of David who would lead the people of God in glorious victory over their pagan oppressors and restore Israel to heights beyond the reigns of David and Solomon—without fomenting any of the hatred directed towards the Romans or compromised national leaders. Because Jesus had come to confront the forces that truly enslave humanity.

Jesus on the cross, in dying for the world, reveals the true enemies of God and God's people. When Jesus says "the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin" (John 19v11), he's not talking about Judas, or the religious leaders, or Pilate. He is talking about the great unholy trinity of evil: Satan, sin, and death. Paul will say it this way: "for our struggle is not against blood and flesh but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6v12).

So what do we do with the Psalms like Psalm 137? How do we pray these psalms in a land where they themselves are foreign, the land of the Kingdom of God, the land of the mercy and enemy love? Should we just skip these altogether? I think not. Brueggemann speaks of the reality that we both know as Christians that we should not feel these levels of vengeance but that we often, in fact, do, feel that way. He then says we have three options when it comes to these unwanted, but present nonetheless feelings:

We can act on them, take matters into our own hands.

We can shove them down deep inside, what Freud called repression. The problem with this, as Freud grasped so well, is that we leak. We put these kinds of emotions and trauma somewhere, they will find their way out with a fury.

We can give them away.

We can pray these psalms and in doing we enter into the visceral grief and rage that so many in the world in places like Israel, Palestine, Ukraine, Sudan, and the Armenian people (among so, so many more) are feeling right now. But we direct these prayers towards the true enemies of God just as Jesus did. God's hatred is arrayed against them and we can join our voices and emotions in full confidence that Jesus has not only disarmed them on the cross (Colossians 2v14) but that there will come a day where they will be completely and utterly destroyed (1 Corinthians 15v26; Revelation 21v4). In praying these prayers we truly acknowledge that God alone is able to carry the grief, the injustice, the longing for restoration. We give it away. And when we pray these prayers on behalf of our neighbors, we in some mysterious way, carry the grief of the world just like Jesus our messiah.

These Psalms are a unique invitation allowing us to be fully human before God and to enter into the suffering of the world around us. They are a gift wrapped in the rawness of life and the fallenness of the world. And God will redeem everything that is fallen.

Day Twelve

Psalm 23

1 The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.
2 He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,
3 he refreshes my soul.
He guides me along the right paths
for his name's sake.
4 Even though I walk
through the darkest valley,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.
5 You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
6 Surely your goodness and love will follow me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord
forever.

By Katie Horan

The first time I remember hearing the words of Psalm 23, my hands were coated in mayonnaise and my shirt smelled unrecoverably like fried fish. I was 16 and working at a seafood restaurant just three short hours from the nearest ocean, spending my afternoons after school as a prep cook. Three days a week when my classes let out, I flew down the road from my high school to a small side street restaurant where I chopped tomatoes, made coleslaw by the ton, and learned to gut a fish like a pro. I didn't like the work that I was doing, and I hated the way the restaurant smelled, but I was glad to be working because it felt like I was doing the sort of growing up I had always looked forward to.

A week and a half prior to this particular day, I had decided to give my life to Jesus. I showed up to work knowing that my favorite coworker, Miss Audrey, would be excited to hear all about it. Miss Audrey was in her 60s and had started working at the restaurant a few weeks after I had, hoping that the job would help her recover from the grief of losing her husband. She was the type of sweet soul who would let out a soft and long "mmm-hmm, God is good!" when the line cooks would sneak us a snack and a huffed "Jesus Help Me!" when our manager would rush her making twice-baked seafood potatoes. She called me "Katie Bug," which she joyfully exclaimed when I came into work and set up at the prep station alongside her.

As we discussed our weeks and I told her about my new-found Christian status, she shared how she too had become a part of an ekklesia when she was 16. At a religious revival hosted by her then-boyfriend-become-husband's father's church in the 60s, she heard the words of Psalm 23 read to her and something clicked. "The Lord is MY Shepherd, I shall not want!" Feeling the weight of being a little lamb, Miss Audrey sprinted to the place of calm Jesus in his role of shepherd had set aside for her. Psalm 23 remained special to her, always reminding her of the day she began to understand who God was.

The psalm became special to me that day, too. For the short remainder of time I stayed at the restaurant, Miss Audrey and I would talk about how our cups were running over, the sweetness of our friendship spilling onto each other. When I got a better job, she gave me a teacup that still sits on my dresser at home. "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever." Each time I read this verse, I hear it in Miss Audrey's voice just like I did that first time. I'm thinking of her this year leading up to Lent—I invite you to do so too.

Day Thirteen

Psalm 47

Clap your hands, all you nations;
shout to God with cries of joy.

2 For the Lord Most High is awesome,
the great King over all the earth.

3 He subdued nations under us,
peoples under our feet.

4 He chose our inheritance for us,
the pride of Jacob, whom he loved.

5 God has ascended amid shouts of joy,
the Lord amid the sounding of trumpets.

6 Sing praises to God, sing praises;
sing praises to our King, sing praises.

7 For God is the King of all the earth;
sing to him a psalm of praise.

8 God reigns over the nations;
God is seated on his holy throne.

9 The nobles of the nations assemble
as the people of the God of Abraham,
for the kings of the earth belong to God;
he is greatly exalted.

The story of particularity that forms an undercurrent of the Old Testament is difficult for us to reconcile. The concept—what biblical scholars call election—strikes us as arbitrary, partial. How can the “great king over all the earth” (v. 2) love Jacob and hate Esau (Malachi 1v3)? But God is God of all in that he is not a generalist. This is scandalous to our modern ears because it’s not efficient, it’s not obvious, and it dethrones our sovereign self. But as the story progresses, we see what this slow specificity was always about. It was never about God picking teams, it was about God inhabiting a particular story in a particular time and place. Jesus of Nazareth, born in the line of the tribe of Judah, born under Roman occupation, at a time in the life of his people when there was a burgeoning sentiment for revolution. Jesus, God incarnate, takes on a limited frame of flesh and bone as a part of a subdued people to declare that “God reigns over the nations” (Psalm 47v8)

In Psalm 47 we hear a short hymn of praise extolling both this particular story and this cosmic rule. For most of the story of Israel, they are operating from memory not reality that God “subdued peoples under us and nations under our feet” (v. 3). The echo of the Exodus and the brief glimpse of sociopolitical prominence under the reign of David and Solomon must have felt a tantalizing mirage in the desert of exile and pagan oppression. Yet still, in all of its audacity and delusion here is the claim of Israel that their God is the one true God. Verse 9 is a stunning proclamation and likely felt as a claim bordering on the absurd for most of Israel’s history:

The nobles of the nations assemble as the people of God Abraham, for the kings of the earth belong to God.

Here we see the merging of this theology of sovereignty with the promise that set this story of particularity in motion. The Lord God called to Abraham and said to him:

“Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.””

Genesis 12v1-3

The people of Israel through their story with this God begin to see not only that they have a deity among deities who cares for them and provides for them but that this God that they have come to know as YHWH is the one, true God. It is only through a life with God that we begin to see that in the midst of the chaos and strife of this world that there is a God who could somehow be drawing all of these discordant notes into harmony.

The lens for the people in Psalm 47 is praise:

Sing praises to God, sing praises;
Sing praises to our King, sing praises.
For God is the king of all the earth;
Sing praises with a psalm. (Vv.5-7)

Praise is not simply an exercise in conjuring hope or an escapist fantasy, it is a way of seeing reality rightly. Worship forms our minds to know, our hearts to endure, and our bodies to see that there is a sovereignty truer than our suffering, an eternal king more powerful than the despots that come and go. Because praise causes us to enter into the specificity of the story: this God, this church, my limits. It causes us to make claims that are beyond our ability to manage and our capacity to imagine. In a world of chaos, strife, and confusion we glimpse the promise land of shalom by giving ourselves over to the God who gave himself for us. “Clap your hands, all you peoples; shout to God with loud songs of joy. For the Lord, the Most High, is awesome, a great king over all the earth” (Psalm 47v1-2).

William Stafford, in his poem “Bi-Focal” captures the way that praise bends and redeems time. “The world happens twice—” he writes, “once what we see it as; second it legends itself, deep the way it is.” Praise is the transfiguration of our experience with the glory of God. The way we see, through tears of joy, that he truly does make everything work together for the good of those who love him. Let the legend move, give him your heart, seek to glorify him even in the valley.

Day Fourteen

Psalm 46

God is our refuge and strength,
an ever-present help in trouble.
2 Therefore we will not fear, though the earth
give way
and the mountains fall into the heart of the
sea,
3 though its waters roar and foam
and the mountains quake with their surging.
4 There is a river whose streams make glad the
city of God,
the holy place where the Most High dwells.
5 God is within her, she will not fall;
God will help her at break of day.
6 Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall;
he lifts his voice, the earth melts.
7 The Lord Almighty is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress.
8 Come and see what the Lord has done,
the desolations he has brought on the earth.
9 He makes wars cease
to the ends of the earth.
He breaks the bow and shatters the spear;
he burns the shields with fire.
10 He says, "Be still, and know that I am God;
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth."
11 The Lord Almighty is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress.

Be still. Be still.

I'm not sure how others feel but I have trouble with taking directions. Particularly directions which require inaction. Lists, to-dos, homework, volunteering, all fall within the realm of my overconfident feelings of capability and work ethic. Because then I could feel I earned something. Contributed in some way. But Psalm 46 puts the very strenuous, physical protection of God up against our

very existence. Breaking spears, fortifying walls, ending wars, disarming violence. The LORD sees our broken and breaking world, with rising waters and eroding mountains, warring nations and fracturing families, and our only instruction is to BE STILL. Something which is truly unnerving. I want to do something. I want to feel useful.

Even while being still I fail. Sure I could be still physically while listening to music or reading a book. I could be still mentally, while working out or doing yoga. I could even be still right before falling asleep. But being still in the presence and full body knowledge of God is unbearably hard. Made more so by the absolute simplicity of it.

Every passing minute of silent contemplation makes me feel more like a fidgety five-year-old. My drifting thoughts and twitching fingers drain any feelings of self-righteousness that my accomplished lists and checked off to-dos may bring.

But It is for all these reasons, that this psalm has ministered to me over and over and over again. It confesses, under no certain terms, that to receive the love and comfort and protection of God we must only be. A truly unfathomable concept. Our instruction as children, beloved of God, is simply to live. To breathe. To exist. To be. And that cuts through my ego and self-conception everyday of the week.

Day Fifteen

Psalm 27 [The Message]

27 Light, space, zest—
that's God!
So, with him on my side I'm fearless,
afraid of no one and nothing.
2 When vandal hordes ride down
ready to eat me alive,
Those bullies and toughs
fall flat on their faces.
3 When besieged,
I'm calm as a baby.
When all hell breaks loose,
I'm collected and cool.
4 I'm asking God for one thing,
only one thing:
To live with him in his house
my whole life long.
I'll contemplate his beauty;
I'll study at his feet.
5 That's the only quiet, secure place
in a noisy world,
The perfect getaway,
far from the buzz of traffic.
6 God holds me head and shoulders
above all who try to pull me down.
I'm headed for his place to offer anthems
that will raise the roof!
Already I'm singing God-songs;
I'm making music to God.
7-9 Listen, God, I'm calling at the top of
my lungs:
"Be good to me! Answer me!"
When my heart whispered, "Seek God,"
my whole being replied,
"I'm seeking him!"
Don't hide from me now!
9-10 You've always been right there for
me;
don't turn your back on me now.
Don't throw me out, don't abandon me;
you've always kept the door open.
My father and mother walked out and left
me,
but God took me in.

Point me down your highway, God;
direct me along a well-lighted
street;
show my enemies whose side
you're on.
Don't throw me to the dogs,
those liars who are out to get me,
filling the air with their threats.
13-14 I'm sure now I'll see God's
goodness
in the exuberant earth.
Stay with God!
Take heart. Don't quit.
I'll say it again:
Stay with God

Psalm 27 invites us to a glimpse of a well-worn, mature faith. These words are not those of one freshly afoot on the road of life with God. These words are the embodiment of the image of the tree in Psalm 1, a life firmly rooted in God, watered by past experiences of God’s salvation, by the promises and hope of what the Lord has said. David writes as one well-schooled in the art of trusting God.

Perhaps most striking about David’s assurance is that chaos seems to be the vantage point from which he prays. He describes his circumstances with images of vandal hordes descending and all hell breaking loose (vv.2-3). David’s increased depth of trust and hope in God has not resulted in a diminishing of the very real threats that plague him. But David’s trust has reframed everything. In the midst of this anarchy, David is “calm as a baby, collected and cool” (vv.2-3).

There is something so radically this-worldly about the shape the hope Psalm 27 invites us into. The pain and the danger are real but so is the reality that God is inviting us into counter-rhythms that syncopate the cadences of chaos with order and beauty. Two important practices stand out within the context of the psalm. He writes in vv.4-5:

I’m asking God for one thing,
only one thing:
To live with him in his house
my whole life long.
I’ll contemplate his beauty;
I’ll study at his feet.

First, David invites us to the disciplines of contemplative prayer, silence and solitude. David’s world much, much like our own, moves at a frenzied pace. We are constantly being discipled by the antichrist rhythms of noise, notifications, news, and the normalization of violence. David knows that the only response is to retreat. A retreat not away from this world but a retreat into the refuge of God’s presence. Thomas Merton writes that when Christians forsake contemplation they substitute the “truth of life” for “fiction and mythology” bringing about the “alienation of the believer, so that his [sic] religious zeal becomes political fanaticism.” David instead of leaning into the madness, embraces silence and solitude. He writes of the presence of God:

That’s the only quiet, secure place
in a noisy world,
The perfect getaway,
far from the buzz of traffic.

Second, David immerses himself in worship both private and communal. Even on the way to church, he’s already singing his own songs:

I’m headed for his place to offer anthems
that will raise the roof!
Already I’m singing God-songs;
I’m making music to God.

Worship is the eruption of joy and gratitude, not a response fueled by emotivism, but a quiet resolve to contemplate what God has done and to voice heartfelt thanksgiving for it. Worship is the antidote to our own poisonous obsession with self, our propensity to live at the mercy of our circumstances and our ever-changing whims. Worship in the face of great trial is not a denial of our situation. Rather it is God’s invitation to to view the world from his own vantage point, to be with God and find that in all things he is drawing near to us.

David expresses one final plea, “You’ve always been right there for me; don’t turn your back on me now. Don’t throw me out, don’t abandon me; you’ve always kept the door open” (vv. 9-10). He asks for guidance, he needs God to show him the way. He writes:

Point me down your highway, God;
direct me along a well-lighted street;

And he ends his prayer in one final, resolved, steadfast, radically hopeful expression of trust. Again, what’s remarkable about this ending stanza is that this resolution is not reserved for another life. He finds hope right here in the midst of the confines of this world, this place, amongst these people and these circumstances. He knows that God won’t quit on him and so, grizzled veteran of faith and trust in God that he is, he won’t quit on God. He holds fast to the hope that God’s goodness will reveal itself again, right here in this “exuberant earth.” Don’t quit. God is faithful. In the beautiful translation of Eugene Peterson:

I’m sure now I’ll see God’s goodness
in the exuberant earth.
Stay with God!
Take heart. Don’t quit.
I’ll say it again:
Stay with God.

Day Sixteen

Psalms 21

The king rejoices in your strength, Lord.

How great is his joy in the victories you give!

2 You have granted him his heart's desire
and have not withheld the request of his
lips.

3 You came to greet him with rich blessings
and placed a crown of pure gold on his head.

4 He asked you for life, and you gave it to him—
length of days, for ever and ever.

5 Through the victories you gave, his glory is
great;

you have bestowed on him splendor and maj-
esty.

6 Surely you have granted him unending bless-
ings

and made him glad with the joy of your pres-
ence.

7 For the king trusts in the Lord;
through the unfailing love of the Most High
he will not be shaken.

8 Your hand will lay hold on all your enemies;
your right hand will seize your foes.

9 When you appear for battle,
you will burn them up as in a blazing fur-
nace.

The Lord will swallow them up in his wrath,
and his fire will consume them.

10 You will destroy their descendants from the
earth,
their posterity from mankind.

11 Though they plot evil against you
and devise wicked schemes, they cannot suc-
ceed.

12 You will make them turn their backs
when you aim at them with drawn bow.

13 Be exalted in your strength, Lord;
we will sing and praise your might.

Strength, power, might. These are words that focus on assertion, establishing one’s dominion through rigorous training, subduing enemies, superior strategy, or just having bigger guns. The king in Israel was the tangible manifestation of the nation’s vitality. The king not only set the defense budget but led the troops into battle. It would be completely understandable and appropriate for the king to pray for specific things that the nation needed to be successful: Dear Lord, please bring us faster horses, stronger armor, sharper arrows, favorable weather, and smarter soldiers. But his prayer here is not an itemized list of things you need to win at war. In fact there is no anxiety here about scarcity or uncertainty. In v. 8, the king shifts into the future tense, declaring—prophesying, really—what the Lord will do to the enemies of Israel.

Where does this confidence come from?

Simple. The king knows where his strength comes from and he knows the promises that the Lord has made to Israel. He proclaims to the congregation, “In your strength, the king rejoices, O Lord, and in your help how greatly he exults!”[1] If anyone in the nation of Israel could convince himself that the success or failure of the kingdom was all on his shoulders, it was certainly the king. When the nation first demanded for a king to lead them, Samuel warned them that the biggest danger is that the king would not put his trust in the Lord first. Here, we see the king, as proxy for the nation as a whole, placing his trust in the strength of the Lord. But it’s not just that the king trusts in the Lord, he knows the Lord and thus knows his mission in the world.

For the king trusts in the Lord, and through the steadfast love of the Most High he shall not be moved.[2]

The monarch attributes everything that he has, his life, his strength, his glory to the Lord. And in that trust, he is secure knowing that the task that is before him is not his alone. God, in his hesed, his steadfast love to the people of Israel, will go before them. For us, this raises the obvious question, where does our trust reside? This is an important question and is foundational to a life with God. But beyond that, this psalm asks the question, what task are you undertaking that requires the kind of holy confidence on display in the words of the king. For the king, trust was a matter of life or death not just for him but for his entire kingdom. Accordingly, perhaps our faithfulness is not simply about us, but is a question of life or death for our families, our neighbors, and our cities.

Day Seventeen

Psalm 51

1 Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion
blot out my transgressions.
2 Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin.
3 For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is always before me.
4 Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight;
so you are right in your verdict
and justified when you judge.
5 Surely I was sinful at birth,
sinful from the time my mother con-
ceived me.
6 Yet you desired faithfulness even in the
womb;
you taught me wisdom in that secret
place.
7 Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be
clean;
wash me, and I will be whiter than
snow.
8 Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones you have crushed rejoice.
9 Hide your face from my sins
and blot out all my iniquity.
10 Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.
11 Do not cast me from your presence
or take your Holy Spirit from me.
12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain
me.
13 Then I will teach transgressors your
ways,
so that sinners will turn back to you.
14 Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed,
O God,
you who are God my Savior,
and my tongue will sing of your righ-
teousness.

15 Open my lips, Lord,
and my mouth will declare your
praise.
16 You do not delight in sacrifice, or
I would bring it;
you do not take pleasure in burnt
offerings.
17 My sacrifice, O God, is a broken
spirit;
a broken and contrite heart
you, God, will not despise.
18 May it please you to prosper Zion,
to build up the walls of Jerusalem.
19 Then you will delight in the sacri-
fices of the righteous,
in burnt offerings offered whole;
then bulls will be offered on your
altar.

In Luke 16, Jesus tells a very strange story. A manager has been swindling from his boss and he’s found out. The rich boss tells the man that he needs to get all the accounts in order because he will be fired. The manager, is lazy but keenly self-aware. He says to himself, “Now what, I am going to be fired and I’m not strong enough to dig ditches and I’m too proud to beg.” But the man has an idea. He invites all of the people who owe payment to his boss to come, he pulls out the scrolls with their debts and he slashes their debt. In his thinking, these people that he is helping out will in turn help him out after he loses his job. But he also knows something else, something about his boss. You would suppose, that this man who has been stealing and has now eroded his sources of revenue is really going to be punished—and that’s the way Jesus sets up the story. But Luke tells us the boss had to praise the manager for being shrewd. You see, not only did he use his relational capital to ensure a future for himself. He also knew that his boss was a merciful man who would not renege on the kindness that the manager spread, albeit it in an underhanded way, throughout the region. In short, he presumed upon the mercy of his boss.

In Psalm 51, we have David, at the depths of one of his worst failures. Some of the Psalms are labeled with reference points, to give us context for what was happening when they were written. This particular psalm was written when David used his power to force himself upon Bathsheba. We have David expressing genuine contrition, remorse, and an apprehension of the weight of his crimes against God.

3 For I recognize my rebellion;
it haunts me day and night.
4
Against you, and you alone, have I sinned;
I have done what is evil in your sight.
You will be proved right in what you say,
and your judgment against me is just.
5
For I was born a sinner—
yes, from the moment my mother conceived me.

We can all relate to this place of desolation. Haunted by our choices, by regret, by the distance between our hearts and a holy God. We have to stare down the reality of our shadows. God convicts not to condemn but to liberate. Confession, then, is not putting our lives to the whims of an arbitrary and unpredictable judge, it is acknowledging the character of our judge and king that he is “rich in mercy and abounding in steadfast love.” The only way we exempt ourselves from dwelling in this mercy is refusal to cross over the threshold through the door of confession. Mercy is our home, it’s doors are unlocked, the fire is crackling, there are delights simmering on the stove. We can stay outside in the cold of self-assured denial or we can come in, take our shoes off and find rest.

And if you read closely, the psalm is not merely confessional self-loathing, it is filled with confidence. David presumes upon the mercy of God.

David is in the docket for murder, abuse, and breaking God’s commandments and he has a list of commandments for how God should respond. It is the height of presumption for someone who is completely at the mercy of the court to make demands of the judge. Pay attention to the imperatives:

“Have mercy...” “Blot out...” (v. 1) “Wash me...” “Purify me...” (v. 2)
“Purify me...” “Wash me...” (v. 7)
“Give me my joy” “Let me rejoice” (v. 8)
“Don’t keep looking at my sins” “Remove the stain” (v. 9)
“Create in me...” “Renew...” (v. 10)

“Do not banish me...”
“Don’t take your Holy Spirit” (v.11)

“Restore to me...”
“Make me obedient...” (v. 12)

This may sound like classic narcissism. David has all the appearances of contrition without giving up control of the situation. Unless, that is, David knows something deeply true of the mercy and grace of God. That we never use grace as an excuse for sin but when we find that we have sinned, even sinned in way that has thoroughly broken lives, we can presume upon the mercy of God. That God is a God who heeds these imperatives doesn’t make him weak or passive. You can presume upon mercy because that’s who God is.

When we find ourselves in desolation, in realization of our sins and sinfulness, God is there. He has taken it upon himself to repair the void left by sin, offering the sacrifice of a broken spirit in his very Son. You can presume upon God’s mercy because as David glimpses and we see fully in Jesus, God’s very heart is self-giving love that redeems, restores, and heals.

Day Eighteen

Psalms 11

In the Lord I take refuge.

How then can you say to me:

“Flee like a bird to your mountain.

2 For look, the wicked bend their bows;

they set their arrows against the strings
to shoot from the shadows
at the upright in heart.

3 When the foundations are being destroyed,
what can the righteous do?”

4 The Lord is in his holy temple;

the Lord is on his heavenly throne.

He observes everyone on earth;

his eyes examine them.

5 The Lord examines the righteous,

but the wicked, those who love violence,
he hates with a passion.

6 On the wicked he will rain

fiery coals and burning sulfur;
a scorching wind will be their lot.

7 For the Lord is righteous,

he loves justice;
the upright will see his face.

David's world is tearing at the seams. The fabric of polite society, the ethos that upholds a peaceful and civil society has eroded. People are cruel and bombastic, without regard for human decency. Everywhere he looks there is more violence. Snipers load their weapons and shoot indiscriminately into crowds of the innocent (v. 2). David's world sounds like hell. What's worse, David's world sounds a lot like our own world a lot of the time. And the temptation for David is no different than so many of us undoubtedly feel: with all the darkness in the world should we just run and hide (v. 1)

Its unclear to me whether our own world is more saturated with fear, violence, and evil than ages prior but what I do know is that those of us in the western world who have smart phones in our pockets or computers in our house are more inundated with these images than ever before. So how are we to respond when our eyes are constantly confronted with suffering and wickedness? Surely we would rather just ignore it altogether. Often we try to numb ourselves to the pain of our world by inundating ourselves with entertainment or mindless scrolling. This is a form of flight. But look again at what David says in v. 1:

1 In the LORD I take refuge; how can you say to me, "Flee like a bird to the mountains;
David is asking, "How can I run and hide when the Lord is my refuge?" David is saying that his only recourse in this world of wickedness is to take refuge in the Lord. He goes on to describe the certainty that the Lord will make it right, he will enact justice. He chooses to stand and fight but not with his hands, but to entrust himself to God. He implores God to act with urgency. He prays. Prayer is the battleground, the theater of the battle between good and evil and the Lord is inviting us into the fight.

Day Nineteen

Psalm 28

To you, Lord, I call;
you are my Rock,
do not turn a deaf ear to me.
For if you remain silent,
I will be like those who go down to the pit.

2 Hear my cry for mercy
as I call to you for help,
as I lift up my hands
toward your Most Holy Place.

3 Do not drag me away with the wicked,
with those who do evil,
who speak cordially with their neighbors
but harbor malice in their hearts.

4 Repay them for their deeds
and for their evil work;
repay them for what their hands have done
and bring back on them what they deserve.

5 Because they have no regard for the deeds of
the Lord
and what his hands have done,
he will tear them down
and never build them up again.

6 Praise be to the Lord,
for he has heard my cry for mercy.

7 The Lord is my strength and my shield;
my heart trusts in him, and he helps me.
My heart leaps for joy,
and with my song I praise him.

8 The Lord is the strength of his people,
a fortress of salvation for his anointed one.

9 Save your people and bless your inheritance;
be their shepherd and carry them forever.

Psalm 28 is not a psalm that was written in one sitting. It is a psalm that slowly took its form like the way the sunrise defeats the darkness—there is a spark of hope that pierces the dark, irrevocably breaking its hold, but it takes time for the light to diffuse, permeating the starry dome, finger painting with the clouds. David begins, bearing witness to his own pleas. He is essentially saying, “I am doing it all right, I am trusting in you, I am bringing my needs before you, don’t ignore me.”

David then turns his attention to those who ignore God’s ways. He describes those with long careers in rebellion against God. Eugene Peterson calls them “full-time employees of evil.” It seems kind of out of place at this point in the psalm. But sometimes, if we’re honest even with our less flattering emotions before God, we compare ourselves to others. We go on detours to the rough side of town, driving through with the windows up and the doors locked, harboring a sense of superiority. Is David’s judgmental attitude right, is it just? He would think so but the answer is “probably not.” But that’s not really the question is it? The question that the psalms are asking is will you live your whole life before God? Will you bring every ounce of action, emotion, circumstance, fear, and triumph before the Lord? Will we open the inner sanctum of our lives to the holy of holies where God resides?

The psalm finishes with a joyful flourish. Time has elapsed, the ordeal has turned a corner. David rejoices in Eugene Peterson’s interpretation of Psalm 28::

Blessed be God—
He proved he’s on my side;
he heard me praying.
I’ve thrown my lot in with him.
Now I’m jumping for joy,
and shouting and singing my thanks to him.

David now speaks from the other side of the chasm, God hears, he is faithful. David responds in exuberant praise. He’s been proven to have chosen the winning team. He now holds both ends of the ordeal in his hands and can tie them into a bow, mark them down as another chapter in the story of God’s faithfulness.

Perhaps the message of this psalm is the brief glimpse we get into the in-between, the point between the petition and the praise. In that time, David doesn’t lose his head, he doesn’t become somebody he’s not. David doesn’t become one of those who “moonlights for the Devil.” For the time being, he maintains his identity and thus holds onto the promises of God. This is reinforced by David’s ending praise.

Pain has a way of teaching us who God is and who we are. The hard-won fruit of this suffering is that David sees his identity clearly and he sees even more clearly who God is— David is the leader of God’s people and God is the salvation and refuge for all, leader and layperson alike. David’s task as a leader, in leading them to godliness, blessing, and safety then becomes clear: follow God, the shepherd and stay true to his own God-given identity.

Day Twenty

Psalm 50

1-3 The God of gods—it's God!—speaks out, shouts, "Earth!"
welcomes the sun in the east,
farewells the disappearing sun in the west.
From the dazzle of Zion,
God blazes into view.
Our God makes his entrance,
he's not shy in his coming.
Starbursts of fireworks precede him.
4-5 He summons heaven and earth as a jury,
he's taking his people to court:
"Round up my saints who swore
on the Bible their loyalty to me."
6 The whole cosmos attests to the fairness of this court,
that here God is judge.
7-15 "Are you listening, dear people? I'm getting ready to speak;
Israel, I'm about ready to bring you to trial.
This is God, your God,
speaking to you.
I don't find fault with your acts of worship,
the frequent burnt sacrifices you offer.
But why should I want your blue-ribbon bull,
or more and more goats from your herds?
Every creature in the forest is mine,
the wild animals on all the mountains.
I know every mountain bird by name;
the scampering field mice are my friends.
If I get hungry, do you think I'd tell you?
All creation and its bounty are mine.
Do you think I feast on venison?
or drink drafts of goats' blood?
Spread for me a banquet of praise,
serve High God a feast of kept promises,
And call for help when you're in trouble—
I'll help you, and you'll honor me."

Next, God calls up the wicked:
"What are you up to, quoting my laws,
talking like we are good friends?
You never answer the door when I call;
you treat my words like garbage.
If you find a thief, you make him your buddy;
adulterers are your friends of choice.
Your mouth drools filth;
lying is a serious art form with you.
You stab your own brother in the back,
rip off your little sister.
I kept a quiet patience while you did these things;
you thought I went along with your game.
I'm calling you on the carpet, now,
laying your wickedness out in plain sight.
22-23 "Time's up for playing fast and loose with me.
I'm ready to pass sentence,
and there's no help in sight!
It's the praising life that honors me.
As soon as you set your foot on the Way,
I'll show you my salvation."

Psalm 50 is a high courtroom drama. The judge needs no one to declare “all rise” as he enters the courtroom for his majesty and presence causes all to bow in the light of his glory.

“The God of gods—it’s God!—speaks out, shouts, “Earth!” welcomes the sun in the east, farewells the disappearing sun in the west. From the dazzle of Zion, God blazes into view. Our God makes his entrance, he’s not shy in his coming. Starbursts of fireworks precede him.”

Psalm 50:1-3 MSG

As the judge takes his seat, he acknowledges the jury—heaven and earth—and he summons the defendants in the docket: the covenant people of God. It’s important that we see that often when God judges people in the scriptures its those who have assented to covenant loyalty to God not those who haven’t. This court has zero questions of credibility or fairness, the judge is impartial, completely righteous, all-seeing, and all-knowing.

The judge’s glory and holiness make the charges against the people even more searing. The judge acknowledges the people’s proper form of worship, the externals of devotion that are all kept scrupulously. But this judge who the opening of the psalm tells us is the author and owner of creation asks the logical question: why, if I am the one who calls creation to be, would I need your offerings of bulls and goats? (Vv. 7-15). The judge goes on:

Every creature in the forest is mine, the wild animals on all the mountains. I know every mountain bird by name; the scampering field mice are my friends. If I get hungry, do you think I’d tell you? All creation and its bounty are mine. Do you think I feast on venison? or drink drafts of goats’ blood? Spread for me a banquet of praise, serve High God a feast of kept promises, And call for help when you’re in trouble— I’ll help you, and you’ll honor me.”

Psalm 50:7-15 MSG

There’s nothing transactional for this God, no placating him with platitudes. He is relentlessly, unswervingly pursuing justice. Justice is sometimes confused with order, with the absence of dissent. Many politicians promise a severe hand of law and order to curb the forces, often manufactured caricatures of shady actors, that threaten the well-being of the polis. But the Hebrew word for justice, from the root word tsedeqah, can also be translated righteousness. Often in modern Christian circles we treat these concepts as distinct; justice having to do with action and righteousness with the state of one’s character or soul before God. But this is not so in the biblical imagination. Truly from the vantage point of the scriptures, “Justice is,” to quote Cornell West, “what love looks like in public.”

Now the charges zero in on the defendants:

“Next, God calls up the wicked: “What are you up to, quoting my laws, talking like we are good friends? You never answer the door when I call; you treat my words like garbage. If you find a thief, you make him your buddy; adulterers are your friends of choice. Your mouth drools filth; lying is a serious art form with you. You stab your own brother in the back, rip off your little sister. I kept a quiet patience while you did these things; you thought I went along with your game. I’m calling you on the carpet, now, laying your wickedness out in plain sight.”

Psalm 50:16-21 MSG

Another important facet of judgment in the Bible is it rarely allows us to stand alongside the judge pointing our figures saying, “See we’re right and you’re wrong!” The covenant people of God often were mistreated, maligned, and abused. In spite of their experience, God in one and the same breath promises that he will judge the nations in all of his fairness and holiness and he calls the people to a high standard of holiness, justice, and mercy.

We cannot be the people of God, merely in form or function. Quoting scriptures or showing up to worship gatherings don’t make us loving, righteous, holy, or just. There is nothing external that we can offer that will sway the judge because the judge is not merely interested in order but rather, he is passionate that would all would find his flourishing life in relatedness to him. As Jesus reminds us when tempted by the adversary, we do not live “by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Deuteronomy 8v3; Matthew 4v4). We must heed the words of God, including submitting ourselves to his judgment. There is nothing we can offer God that meets his standard short of our whole hearts. He desires mercy not sacrifice (Hosea 6v6; Matthew 9v13) and he enacts his mercy through sacrifice (1 John 3v16) . He is knocking at the door and longs to invite us into the fullness of his life with us (Revelation 3v20).

Day Twenty-One

Psalm 2

Why do the nations conspire
and the peoples plot in vain?
2 The kings of the earth rise up
and the rulers band together
against the Lord and against his anointed,
saying,
3 “Let us break their chains
and throw off their shackles.”
4 The One enthroned in heaven laughs;
the Lord scoffs at them.
5 He rebukes them in his anger
and terrifies them in his wrath, saying,
6 “I have installed my king
on Zion, my holy mountain.”
7 I will proclaim the Lord’s decree:

He said to me, “You are my son;
today I have become your father.
8 Ask me,
and I will make the nations your inheritance,
the ends of the earth your possession.
9 You will break them with a rod of iron;
you will dash them to pieces like pottery.”
10 Therefore, you kings, be wise;
be warned, you rulers of the earth.
11 Serve the Lord with fear
and celebrate his rule with trembling.
12 Kiss his son, or he will be angry
and your way will lead to your destruction,
for his wrath can flare up in a moment.
Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

With bleary eyes, I looked at my phone...3:34 AM. For most of us, we understand that coded collection of numbers and letters as a disruption in our normal routines. Perhaps it's an expected interruption like the first few months of a baby's life. Maybe it's anticipation or anxiety that is making sleep elusive. For me, it was all of the above. My family and I recently started down the path towards some major changes (more on that soon) and also recently welcomed our beautiful son to the world. But I knew in that particular moment that it was not our boy that was keeping me awake.

Worry (I use this term intentionally because I am not describing clinical anxiety here) about the future is like being held captive. Your captor is a master of human psychology and breaking human resolve. He makes sure that you are constantly on the edge of exhaustion rushing into your room turning all the lights on and blaring unbearably loud noises and then leaving you in your panicked state. Fear about tomorrow invades the deep watches of the night leaving us trying to play God from our beds.

"The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and his anointed, saying, Let us burst their bonds asunder, and cast their cords from us"(Psalm 2vv.3-4). The psalmist here describes kings who are attempting to establish their own sovereignty apart from the rule of God. For them, the peaceful, just reign of God begins to feel like bonds and cords of slavery. Psalm 2 is about nations conspiring against the rule of God. But its also about the things that we plan and the things that we fear in God's absence.

Often our response to the waking nightmares of worry is to plot our own course. We use our imaginations to construct doomsday scenarios. We believe the worst about tomorrow and thus the worst about God and begin to scheme every way we can to stockpile our own needs so we will no longer need to rely on the provision of God.

And yet in the midst of all our attempts to take the reins, to be yet captains of our own fate, heaven laughs. Heaven laughs because there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God. Heaven laughs at the absurdity of our attempts to manage the affairs of the world from our beds. Heaven laughs like a parent laughs when a child tells them there are monsters under the bed. Heaven laughs because the Lord of all the universe loves us, is concerned with us and rejoices with us.

Day Twenty-Two

Psalm 3

Lord, how many are my foes!

How many rise up against me!

2 Many are saying of me,

“God will not deliver him.”

3 But you, Lord, are a shield around me,

my glory, the One who lifts my head high.

4 I call out to the Lord,

and he answers me from his holy mountain.

5 I lie down and sleep;

I wake again, because the Lord sustains me.

6 I will not fear though tens of thousands

assail me on every side.

7 Arise, Lord!

Deliver me, my God!

Strike all my enemies on the jaw;

break the teeth of the wicked.

8 From the Lord comes deliverance.

May your blessing be on your people.

The psalmist, after taking note of all the enemies assembled against him, surrounding him, places himself in the most vulnerable human state. He goes to sleep. If any situation would call for a stop-at-nothing workaholic approach, it would seem that being the target of the hatred and vitriol of thousands would be such a scenario. And yet the psalmist doesn't try to fight his way out, he doesn't even lose sleep over the furor arrayed outside his door. He lays down. From Genesis 1, we can gather a few things that are true of all humanity.

1. We are not God. Seems like a no-brainer but I am always amazed how often I forget that simple fact. A seemingly subtle fact that the Jewish people still recognize in the way they observe major holidays: the days do not start or end with us. There is evening and morning, each day begins when we cease from our work to spend time with family, to eat, to sleep. Every day is a gift.
2. Every woman and man is made in the image of God, an icon, singularly shaped by God to reflect the beauty of our Creator.
3. We are creatures designed with the task of ruling and stewarding the creation of God. The image of God is not simply a characteristic of being human it is a vocation to live into.
4. In all of this we are blessed by God. As the old cliché goes, we are "blessed to be a blessing." God has lavished his love and attention upon us in order that we might live rightly in relationship with him in worship. I think it no small detail that in Genesis 1, the work is the worship.
5. It all culminates in sabbath. The Creator rests and all of creation joins him. This is the Shalom, the world at peace joyfully ceding all that we would do to sustain us over to Creator, entrusting ourselves to God.

Returning to Psalm 3, the question for us today is where are our battles raging? Notice the psalmist never downplays the very real threat that his enemies present. If anything, he emphasizes just how strong they are to demonstrate that the stakes are nothing short of life and death. What sorts of stress are you enduring at this moment? Perhaps your enemies are surrounding you: pressures at work, bosses or coworkers who want to see you fail, financial troubles, marital strife. This psalm tells us that the strongest thing we can possibly do, in response to these overwhelming forces, is simply to entrust ourselves to God. Sabbath is not passive. Sabbath is a form of radical resistance.

Day Twenty-Three

Psalms 39

I said, "I will watch my ways
and keep my tongue from sin;
I will put a muzzle on my mouth
while in the presence of the wicked."
2 So I remained utterly silent,
not even saying anything good.
But my anguish increased;
3 my heart grew hot within me.
While I meditated, the fire burned;
then I spoke with my tongue:
4 "Show me, Lord, my life's end
and the number of my days;
let me know how fleeting my life is.
5 You have made my days a mere handbreadth;
the span of my years is as nothing before
you.
Everyone is but a breath,
even those who seem secure.
6 "Surely everyone goes around like a mere
phantom;
in vain they rush about, heaping up wealth
without knowing whose it will finally be.
7 "But now, Lord, what do I look for?
My hope is in you.
8 Save me from all my transgressions;
do not make me the scorn of fools.
9 I was silent; I would not open my mouth,
for you are the one who has done this.
10 Remove your scourge from me;
I am overcome by the blow of your hand.
11 When you rebuke and discipline anyone for
their sin,
you consume their wealth like a moth—
surely everyone is but a breath.
12 "Hear my prayer, Lord,
listen to my cry for help;
do not be deaf to my weeping.
I dwell with you as a foreigner,
a stranger, as all my ancestors were.
13 Look away from me, that I may enjoy life
again
before I depart and am no more."

Psalm 39 is a psalm for a digital age, the context that Alan Hirsch calls an “un-civil war.” For many of us, we’ve been knee-deep in the comments section or in a discussion on a social media thread and felt our face getting hot, our blood beginning to boil, and our fingers set the cursor into motion with words that (hopefully) would soon be deleted or filed in a drafts folder never to see the light of day. The Psalmist writes:

“I will guard my ways that I may not sin with my tongue;
I will keep a muzzle on mouth as long as the wicked are in my presence.” I was silent and still; I held my peace to no avail; my distress grew worse, my heart became hot within me. When I mused, the fire burned; then I spoke with my tongue: (vv.1-3)

David is clearly in no emotional state to be responding to his neighbors. Any words that he offers are going to be from the dizzying frenzy of fight or flight and if his words are any indicator, flight is not on the menu. But notice, David doesn’t internalize all this strife and absurdity and then finally boil over, spewing hot lava on anyone who happens to be in the vicinity. Rather, David’s words are directed towards God:

Lord, let me know my end, and what is the measure of my days;
Let me know how fleeting my life is.
You have made my days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is nothing in your sight.
Surely everyone stands as a mere breath. Selah
Surely everyone goes about like a shadow. Surely for nothing they are in turmoil; they heap up, and do not know who will gather. (vv. 4-6)

David’s frustrations, his agony, his anger are all due to the people he faces every day. Yet his words turn a different direction, looking past the veil of flesh and blood to the unseen world of the divine. David channels his angst into a plea not for vengeance or vindication, but an awareness of just how fleeting his life is. Ultimately, David knows that it is God with whom he must deal.

In the presence of real wickedness (v. 2) and real indignation, David is undone not by his own righteousness but by the weight of the hand of God pressing at the places of vitriol within his own heart.

“You chastise morals in punishment for sin, consuming like a moth what is dear to them; surely everyone is a mere breath” (v. 11)

Somehow in the throes of this moment, David finds himself in the court but he is not simply the plaintiff, the victim, he is in the docket himself. The judge has reserved his questioning not for his opponents but for him. And David begs God to turn away his piercing gaze:

Hear my prayer, O Lord, and give ear to my cry; do not hold peace at my tears. For I am your passing guest, an alien, like all my forebears. Turn your gaze away from me, that I may smile again, before I depart and am no more.” (vv. 12-13)

It may seem strange. A psalm which begins with David confidently strolling into the courtroom ends with him pleading for just a moment’s reprieve of mercy. But this is often where God meets us in our anger, at the cutting edge of justified rage and the desire to belittle, to treat others with contempt, and—as Jesus will later make explicit—to kill. God is not blind to the the injustice that David endures but he is also not blinded to the reactions of David’s heart.

It’s often the moments where we are most right that we are most vulnerable. God will not leave us to wallow in our vitriol, even towards the wicked, because our hearts are too valuable for him to ever look away from. Psalm 39 beckons us back to ultimate reality, it is God that we must face. Even in judgment, the Lord turning his face to us is a blessing of unrelenting commitment. He will not leave us as a passing guest but comes and makes his home with us. Selah

Day Twenty-Four

Psalms 4

Answer me when I call to you,
my righteous God.

Give me relief from my distress;
have mercy on me and hear my prayer.

2 How long will you people turn my glory into
shame?

How long will you love delusions and seek
false gods?

3 Know that the Lord has set apart his faithful
servant for himself;

the Lord hears when I call to him.

4 Tremble and do not sin;

when you are on your beds,
search your hearts and be silent.

5 Offer the sacrifices of the righteous
and trust in the Lord.

6 Many, Lord, are asking, "Who will bring us
prosperity?"

Let the light of your face shine on us.

7 Fill my heart with joy

when their grain and new wine abound.

8 In peace I will lie down and sleep,

for you alone, Lord,
make me dwell in safety.

What’s the thing in your life that you are just certain, if it were to be different, would change everything? What’s the circumstance, relationship, life event far off in the future that you are waiting on to make you happier, more fulfilled, or put you in the place where you are finally able to experience joy? If your job were different, would you be different? If your spouse, your friends, or your kids were different, would you be different? David in Psalm 4, takes on two challenges with this sort of counterfactual investment in the future. First, there is the temptation towards bitterness. Look at vv. 4-5, “When you are disturbed (possibly or are angry), do not sin; ponder it on your beds, and be silent.” Here we find David in distress, he is at the mercy of his circumstances. He is the object of scorn and lies, and from every appearance he is completely in the right, the victim with a righteous complaint. Yet there is nothing he can do about it and even in that place, the temptation to become embittered and to lash out, however justified it may seem, runs the risk of plunging him into sin. David determines that his only response to his circumstances is to “offer right sacrifices, and put your trust in the Lord.” This is far from trying to carve one’s own path in the world. David here models the trust in the Lord that both heals the sin in our own hearts and judges justly and fights on our behalf.

The second temptation that we see in this psalm is the allure of using your circumstances as an excuse. David says in v. 6 of those that are constantly waiting on something to change, “Oh that we might see some good! Let the light of your face shine on us, O Lord!” If only God would do this, if only he would change this, life would be so much better. When we find our life becoming so future-oriented that we fail to seize the present moment, we betray that we misunderstand God’s promises. God’s promise of ultimate joy is not that the weather would always be fair, that people would always treat us well, and that things would go our way. God’s promise is that in spite of our circumstances, he is always near. The promise is presence. David, a master mystic and thus a seasoned diver in the deep places of the Lord, knows this well. He concludes: You have put gladness in my heart more that 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)—notice again, rest is a defiant act of faith and trust.

Verse for meditation from Eugene Peterson’s version of Psalm 4vv7-8:

Why is everyone hungry for more? “More, more,” they say.
“More, more.”
I have God’s more-than-enough,
More joy in one ordinary day

Than they get in all their shopping sprees.
At day’s end I’m ready for sound sleep,
For you, God, have put my life back together.

Day Twenty-Five

Psalms 40

I waited patiently for the Lord;
he turned to me and heard my cry.
2 He lifted me out of the slimy pit,
out of the mud and mire;
he set my feet on a rock
and gave me a firm place to stand.
3 He put a new song in my mouth,
a hymn of praise to our God.
Many will see and fear the Lord
and put their trust in him.
4 Blessed is the one
who trusts in the Lord,
who does not look to the proud,
to those who turn aside to false gods.
5 Many, Lord my God,
are the wonders you have done,
the things you planned for us.
None can compare with you;
were I to speak and tell of your deeds,
they would be too many to declare.
6 Sacrifice and offering you did not desire—
but my ears you have opened—
burnt offerings and sin offerings you
did not require.
7 Then I said, “Here I am, I have come—
it is written about me in the scroll.
8 I desire to do your will, my God;
your law is within my heart.”
9 I proclaim your saving acts in the great
assembly;
I do not seal my lips, Lord,
as you know.
10 I do not hide your righteousness in my
heart;
I speak of your faithfulness and your
saving help.
I do not conceal your love and your faith-
fulness
from the great assembly.
11 Do not withhold your mercy from me,
Lord;
may your love and faithfulness always
protect me.
12 For troubles without number surround
me;
my sins have overtaken me, and I can-
not see.
They are more than the hairs of my head,
and my heart fails within me.
13 Be pleased to save me, Lord;
come quickly, Lord, to help me.

May all who want to take my life
be put to shame and confusion;
may all who desire my ruin
be turned back in disgrace.
15 May those who say to me, “Aha!
Aha!”
be appalled at their own shame.
16 But may all who seek you
rejoice and be glad in you;
may those who long for your saving
help always say,
“The Lord is great!”
17 But as for me, I am poor and
needy;
may the Lord think of me.
You are my help and my deliverer;
you are my God, do not delay.

Psalm 40 is a dissenting voice against the prevailing cultural mythology. To a world vacillating between the poles of bootstrap theology and abandoned helplessness, Psalm 40 offers testimony and exhortation: wait on the Lord. David was in quicksand, sinking, slowly swallowed by the soil (v. 2). The hard thing about quicksand is that every impulse urges us to struggle, to scrape our way out but that only results in falling deeper into the mire. When our circumstances start to spiral out of control we clamor and grasp for any sort of foothold. We hear the assured self-help wisdom of those who captained their own fate, we look for quick fixes, handmade gods, remedies that swear that they will take away the pain (just don't look too closely at the side effects).

If that doesn't work we start negotiating with the divine, we regard the cosmos as a marketplace... "help me and I'll do this for you..." "get me out of this and I'll never do that again." We offer our promises, hoping that heaven will hear and help. We say anything we can. Jesus warned us, "when you pray don't heap up empty phrases" as some desperate attempt to secure the ear of God. Jesus didn't say that because there's something inherently wrong with clamoring for help, with crying out with our words; but rather because Jesus was inviting us into a much less anxious approach, to pray simply trusting that God loves us, he hears us, and he will never leave us.

Psalm 40 declares "sacrifice and offering you did not desire" (v. 6a), life is not defined by how much we can do or give for God, life is a gift, expressed in what God has done for us. David writes, "Many, Lord my God, are the wonders you have done, the things you planned for us. None can compare with you"(v. 5a). Rather than climbing our way out of our quicksand by our many declarations of fidelity and empty promises, God wants to carve out listening ears, a waiting heart. He wants to fill our lives to overflowing in awe of wonders "too many to declare"" with grateful hearts pouring forth "a new song" "a hymn of praise."

David knows well the game of trying to play personal messiah and he's offering us not simply wisdom of a better path, but salvation, a salvation not achieved, but received.

Blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, who does not look to the proud, to those who turn aside to false Gods (v. 4).

In the quicksand of life there is a God who lifts us out, not just saving us from our peril but blessing us in the midst of it. Wait on the Lord.

Day Twenty-Six

Psalm 16

Keep me safe, my God,
for in you I take refuge.

2 I say to the Lord, "You are my Lord;
apart from you I have no good thing."

3 I say of the holy people who are in the land,
"They are the noble ones in whom is all my
delight."

4 Those who run after other gods will suffer
more and more.
I will not pour out libations of blood to such
gods
or take up their names on my lips.

5 Lord, you alone are my portion and my cup;
you make my lot secure.

6 The boundary lines have fallen for me in
pleasant places;
surely I have a delightful inheritance.

7 I will praise the Lord, who counsels me;
even at night my heart instructs me.

8 I keep my eyes always on the Lord.
With him at my right hand, I will not be shak-
en.

9 Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue re-
joices;
my body also will rest secure,

10 because you will not abandon me to the
realm of the dead,
nor will you let your faithful one see decay.

11 You make known to me the path of life;
you will fill me with joy in your presence,
with eternal pleasures at your right hand.

Hopefully you have had one of those days. One of those days where the sun shines perfectly bright and warm, where the coffee is exquisite, or the company is the kind that you wish you could stay at that meal or that vacation forever. The psalms, are not all complaints for help or outraged pleas for justice. The psalms are a prism displaying the full radiance of what it means to be human before God. Throughout the early part of the psalter, many of the Psalms have been focused upon the life of the ungodly and the wicked. The psalmist has looked outward at the state of the world and determined that those who live their lives taking advantage of others seem to have a pretty good life, they are economically secure and thus free from the accompanying, all-consuming anxiety of not knowing where their next meal is coming from. They live fat and happy in the face of God’s law and the Psalmist implores God to do something to balance the scales. Here in Ps. 16 we see the opposite. David says of those that live according to God’s law— “As for the holy ones in the land, they are the noble”[1]—whereas those who follow other gods are those who “multiply their sorrows, they drink offerings of blood.”[2]

The psalmist here is not worried about everyone else, he is simply expressing his trust in the Lord and gratitude for his provision. David proclaims both his faith in God and the extent of his Lord’s reign in v. 2:

You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you.

David, in worshiping the Lord, has seen that he is the gracious giver of every good thing and the benefits are real-life security—“the boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; I have a goodly heritage[3]. David is having one of those days, a day of sabbath, a day of peace where he sees his life as it truly is in the hands of the Lord, who is God over all. He says, “My heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure. For you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit.”[4] Ps. 16 is an expression of the beauty of a life lived trusting in the Lord. David’s life is ordered by rhythms of prayer and praise- I bless the Lord who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me. I kept the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.[5]

Life lived in the presence of the Lord, as the psalms so openly attest, is not always easy. But in embracing the Lord in every season, in developing rhythms to soak in the presence of Jesus and to be addressed and shaped by him really does produce a harvest of joy. “The psalm teaches that trust is not merely a warm feeling of a passing impulse in a time of trouble; it is a structure of acts and experiences that open one’s consciousness to the Lord as the supreme reality of life” (J.L. Mays).

Day Twenty-Seven

Psalm 12

Help, Lord, for no one is faithful anymore;
those who are loyal have vanished from the
human race.

2 Everyone lies to their neighbor;
they flatter with their lips
but harbor deception in their hearts.

3 May the Lord silence all flattering lips
and every boastful tongue—

4 those who say,
“By our tongues we will prevail;
our own lips will defend us—who is lord over
us?”

5 “Because the poor are plundered and the
needy groan,
I will now arise,” says the Lord.
“I will protect them from those who malign
them.”

6 And the words of the Lord are flawless,
like silver purified in a crucible,
like gold refined seven times.

7 You, Lord, will keep the needy safe
and will protect us forever from the wicked,

8 who freely strut about
when what is vile is honored by the human
race.

Psalm 12 draws a sharp contrast between the words of the wicked and the words of the Lord. The psalmist enters his plea into the courtroom in vv.1-3:

Help, O Lord, for there is no longer anyone who is godly: the faithful have disappeared from humankind. They utter lies to each other with flattering lips and a double they heart they speak.

It's interesting how the words of the ungodly are entered as articles of evidence against them. Were we not always taught that "sticks and stones would break our bones but word would never hurt us?" Notice also, these words are not spoken from within the circle of the ungodly to the oppressed masses, rather these are the words shared in conversation between the ungodly. So why would a bunch of lies and empty flattery shared between people claiming to be friends be of any concern to the world at large? I think the key is in v. 8b:

Vileness is exalted among humankind.

The words shared between the wicked are not the cause of the state of the world, rather they are the clearest evidence of the collective bent of the human heart. Instead of focusing on the things that really matter, things like truth, beauty, justice, and love, people everywhere are focused on themselves, spending their time and their words on inanity and gossip. The psalmist, like us, lives in a reality TV world where the conversations shared in polite society are the most damning evidence that the world has lost its mind. Think about our own world. Think about how much time we all spend on promoting a facade, think about how much mindless scrolling occupies the minutes, and seconds of our lives, think about a world where binge-watching is seen as almost a good. We spend our days looking at screens which claim to be windows to the world at large, but what we find is that are merely mirrors reflecting back our hollow souls.[1] In such a state, how could we have anything good to say? It's easier just to talk about ourselves.

In v. 5 it is the Lord who speaks:

Because the poor are despoiled, because the needy groan, I will now rise up, says the Lord. I will place them in the safety for which they long.

The Lord speaks and he does not even address the words of the wicked. Their words don't even warrant consideration. Rather he turns his words immediately to the poor. The one's who suffer physically in a world without any sense of meaning are always the marginalized. But their suffering will not be ignored, it is their plight which rouses the Lord to action. While the ungodly long for entertainment and to be lifted up, it is the longings of the poor, longings for safety and security which will be met by the Lord. Jesus says it this way:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Day Twenty-Eight

Psalm 13

How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

2 How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
and day after day have sorrow in my heart?

How long will my enemy triumph over me?

3 Look on me and answer, Lord my God.

Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death,

4 and my enemy will say, "I have overcome
him,"

and my foes will rejoice when I fall.

5 But I trust in your unfailing love;
my heart rejoices in your salvation.

6 I will sing the Lord's praise,
for he has been good to me.

If you were trying to reach a certain place in the world, you would chart a course (or more likely you would do what the voice on your phone tells you to do). Much in the same way, the destinations of our lives determine the course of our lives. Just as our journeys are shaped by our destination, our lives are shaped by our hopes. David asks the Lord, “How long?”

For many of us when we consider our hopes and dreams, we think of the positive ends we want for our own lives, our careers, and our family. But David’s hopes in Ps. 13 rise up from the pit of despair. He doesn’t have time for goals and vision, he just needs God to show up, right now. He needs God, not something that resembles him.

This psalm invites us in two directions. First, we are to be people who pray this prayer on behalf of those who are in a situation similar to David’s. David’s life is under the threat of imminent death. He cries out in fear and in frustration, “How long until you fix this? Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death.” Paul describes the very fabric of creation echoing the anguish of David’s prayers.[3] All around us, there are those praying, “How long until I see you?” “How long until I am healed?” “How long until there is joy?” When we pray this psalm on behalf of our neighbors, we bear one another’s burdens and partner with God in their redemption and healing.

The second direction is more introspective. What are you hoping for right now? What’s the thing that seems to elude you, standing off in the distance just out of reach? What direction is your life pointed towards? Do you long with the aches of how long? Do you long to see the Lord face to face?

Are your hopes heaven-shaped?

In the psalms, we are invited towards a reorientation of our whole lives. Ps. 13 is shaping our hopes around the things of God, putting our own self-centered dreams through the fire of God’s desires and heart for the world. What emerges from the furnace is a life of purified gold that seeks the Lord first and receives every gift from his hand with gratitude and worship.

Day Twenty-Nine

Psalms 25

In you, Lord my God,
I put my trust.
2 I trust in you;
do not let me be put to shame,
nor let my enemies triumph over me.
3 No one who hopes in you
will ever be put to shame,
but shame will come on those
who are treacherous without cause.
4 Show me your ways, Lord,
teach me your paths.
5 Guide me in your truth and teach me,
for you are God my Savior,
and my hope is in you all day long.
6 Remember, Lord, your great mercy and
love,
for they are from of old.
7 Do not remember the sins of my youth
and my rebellious ways;
according to your love remember me,
for you, Lord, are good.
8 Good and upright is the Lord;
therefore he instructs sinners in his
ways.
9 He guides the humble in what is right
and teaches them his way.
10 All the ways of the Lord are loving and
faithful
toward those who keep the demands of
his covenant.
11 For the sake of your name, Lord,
forgive my iniquity, though it is great.
12 Who, then, are those who fear the
Lord?
He will instruct them in the ways they
should choose.
13 They will spend their days in prosperi-
ty,
and their descendants will inherit the
land.
14 The Lord confides in those who fear
him;
he makes his covenant known to them.
15 My eyes are ever on the Lord,
for only he will release my feet from
the snare.

Turn to me and be gracious to me,
for I am lonely and afflicted.
17 Relieve the troubles of my heart
and free me from my anguish.
18 Look on my affliction and my dis-
tress
and take away all my sins.
19 See how numerous are my ene-
mies
and how fiercely they hate me!
20 Guard my life and rescue me;
do not let me be put to shame,
for I take refuge in you.
21 May integrity and uprightness pro-
tect me,
because my hope, Lord, is in you.
22 Deliver Israel, O God,
from all their troubles!

Psalm 25 is an exercise in contrast. David is struggling, burdened by the consequences of his sin. The gravity of his guilt is like a millstone around his neck. He cries out :

Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted. Relieve the troubles of my heart, and bring me out of my distress. Consider my affliction and my trouble, and forgive all my sins.(vv.16-18)

The consequences of his decisions have laid a heavy burden upon him. Crushed under the weight of his guilt, unable to move, David remembers another way. He considers the ways of the Lord:

Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old. Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness' sake, O LORD! Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in the way. He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way. All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.(vv.6-10)

Maybe you have been here. Stuck, heavy-laden by the accumulation of your own sin. It's an impossible place to be in. Walking through the world feels like you are walking on the ocean floor with intense pressure compressing your very soul. And its here at the moment when our soul feels the heaviest that its actually the lightest. David says:

To you, O Lord, I lift my soul.

Lifting our souls to God from the depths is not like Atlas lifting the world. In lifting our souls to God we find that the Lord is not a pallbearer struggling to hoist our unwieldy, oaken casket. Rather, his mercy makes our struggles as light as a feather. He does not downplay our rebellions or make them out to be somehow less than they are. Rather, he exhausts them by taking the weight upon his shoulders, thus emptying sin of all its weight. We can lift our souls to the Lord when we can't even lift one foot in front of the other because he has made known to us his ways, and his way is easy and his burden is light.

Day Thirty

Psalms 29

Ascribe to the Lord, you heavenly beings,
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.

2 Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name;
worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness.

3 The voice of the Lord is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders,
the Lord thunders over the mighty waters.

4 The voice of the Lord is powerful;
the voice of the Lord is majestic.

5 The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars;
the Lord breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon.

6 He makes Lebanon leap like a calf,
Sirion like a young wild ox.

7 The voice of the Lord strikes
with flashes of lightning.

8 The voice of the Lord shakes the desert;
the Lord shakes the Desert of Kadesh.

9 The voice of the Lord twists the oaks
and strips the forests bare.

And in his temple all cry, "Glory!"

10 The Lord sits enthroned over the flood;
the Lord is enthroned as King forever.

11 The Lord gives strength to his people;
the Lord blesses his people with peace.

In the beginning the spirit of God is hovering over the waters (Genesis 1v1-2). Out of that primordial darkness, the voice of the Lord breaks forth, “Let there be light” and a mighty symphony of creation begins to resound. On the seventh day, like a God taking residence in his temple, the Lord rests, makes his dwelling within the sanctuary of the world, not confined but graciously drawing near in every corner.

This same voice that spoke creation into its form, as the psalmist notes, is still present and is still powerful, still reigning over the waters of chaos, still breaking the cedars of Lebanon and Syria— the trees that the woodworkers of Canaan craft their “god” Baal out of. The same voice that was so powerful that it formed a world with the shape of its words sits enthroned still.

This tells us two things. 1) God is still so big and reigns in so much majesty that he doesn’t even have to get up from his throne to keep order in the universe. His very word manifests his will, he speaks and it happens. This is a vast departure from other theological myths of the Ancient Near East, who envisioned their gods as warriors subduing rival forces through bloody combat. The God of Israel wars with his words, and his word is enough. 2). God is still creating. The voice of God which brings light out of nothingness, is endowed with such generative power that it is always dynamic, always creating new possibility. Words create worlds, and God’s ongoing word to his creation, even in the face of forces that would seek to unravel the shalom that God intends for the world, still carves out a path of hope when all seems lost.

Psalm 29 brings us back to this creative sovereignty of God. Likely this psalm was a prayer offered in the temple-worship of Israel with a corporate refrain in v. 9. Like a Southern Baptist preacher leading his congregation in the rote, “and all God’s people said...Amen;” the psalmist as he walks through the mighty acts of God cannot help but turn to the congregation and invite participation. He beckons the gathered faithful to respond and they sing their “amen” as they shout with one voice “glory!”

The final stanza summarizes this poetic prayer. It serves as a powerful reminder that no matter where we find ourselves, God is still king, still present, still creating. The Lord is enthroned over the chaos, he is king now and forever. He is still speaking relationally to his creation, and the word that he speaks is strength and peace. And all God’s people say, “glory.”

Day Thirty-One

Psalms 26

Vindicate me, Lord,
for I have led a blameless life;
I have trusted in the Lord
and have not faltered.

2 Test me, Lord, and try me,
examine my heart and my mind;

3 for I have always been mindful of your unfailing love
and have lived in reliance on your faithfulness.

4 I do not sit with the deceitful,
nor do I associate with hypocrites.

5 I abhor the assembly of evildoers
and refuse to sit with the wicked.

6 I wash my hands in innocence,
and go about your altar, Lord,

7 proclaiming aloud your praise
and telling of all your wonderful deeds.

8 Lord, I love the house where you live,
the place where your glory dwells.

9 Do not take away my soul along with sinners,
my life with those who are bloodthirsty,

10 in whose hands are wicked schemes,
whose right hands are full of bribes.

11 I lead a blameless life;
deliver me and be merciful to me.

12 My feet stand on level ground;
in the great congregation I will praise the Lord.

Psalm 26 sounds, on its face, like the self-righteous protestations of a deluded legalist. Is David really placing wagers on his own integrity (v. 1) in the presence of a holy, all-seeing God? He even invites God to perform open-heart surgery on him, examining the hidden caverns of his life (v. 2). So what are we to do with a psalm that most of us would never claim is true of our own experience? How do we pray this along with David with a straight face?

What David expresses here is a visceral, unflinching trust. It may sound as though he is unwilling to confess his own sinfulness but that misses the point. This psalm is not about who David is, this psalm is about who God is. The steadfast love of God is the branch that David clings to, holding fast in the rushing currents of falsehood and idolatry. Left to his own devices, David would be swept along with the sinners, the devious, the frauds. But David's life is not defined merely by his own actions, his life flows from a deep river of confession, worship, and prayer.

I scrub my hands with purest soap,
then join hands with the others in the great circle,
dancing around your altar, God,
Singing God-songs at the top of my lungs,
telling God-stories.
God, I love living with you;
your house glows with your glory.

The Message, vv.6-8

He expresses his trust in the means that God has provided for purification. He recalls rapturous times of worship in the presence of God and the community. His life is shaped by story and song both of what God has done and his own experience with God. Everything for him starts from a deep and personal encounter with God.

David invites us to a faith that is embraced in momentary acts of faithfulness, where the words of our mouths and the state of our hearts are constantly presented to God for examination. God's presence is a fire, engulfing and purifying every corner of his life. We can trust that God's presence will not simply rubber stamp our agendas, or provide us with good feelings to get us through the day, but it will provide a way forward, a way of openness, of integrity, of transformation.

David beautifully conveys the meaning of life: God, I love living with you. David's life before God expresses the poles of this life: exuberant displays of abandon in the congregation where everything is in its right place and a life of contemplative nearness in the midst of ambiguity and brokenness, a life lived up close to God. Openness, vulnerability, this is the life that is oriented to God's presence. Trust is the foundation of this life, a trust that says God is exactly who he has shown himself to be, abundant steadfast love and thus, I can trust that I am exactly who he says I am: beloved.

Christian faith is not neurotic dependency but childlike trust. We do not have a God who forever indulges our whims but a God whom we trust with our destinies." -Eugene Peterson

Day Thirty-Two

Psalm 43

Vindicate me, my God,
and plead my cause
against an unfaithful nation.

Rescue me from those who are
deceitful and wicked.

2 You are God my stronghold.
Why have you rejected me?

Why must I go about mourning,
oppressed by the enemy?

3 Send me your light and your faithful care,
let them lead me;

let them bring me to your holy mountain,
to the place where you dwell.

4 Then I will go to the altar of God,
to God, my joy and my delight.

I will praise you with the lyre,
O God, my God.

5 Why, my soul, are you downcast?
Why so disturbed within me?

Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him,
my Savior and my God.

It sounds pious enough, “I’ll praise you no matter what comes.” I’ve no reason to doubt the sincerity of the sentiment or the intention to do just that. But, how often, when the trouble comes is our first impulse to put, shall we say, other modifiers around the name of God. Psalm 43 gives us a view from the inside of those troubled times and shows us that our only way out is not by grinning, bearing, and singing hallelujah through it. But rather our instinctive response to pain and suffering, “help me” or “make it stop” may not be so far off base after all.

The psalmist writes:
Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause
 against an ungodly people;
from those who are deceitful and unjust
 deliver me!
2 For you are the God in whom I take refuge;

Many Christians tend to have a cause/effect view of suffering. Our own inner monologue plays the hits from Job’s friends, a voice that sounds like that of the accuser telling us, “We must have done something to deserve what we’re going through.” But the psalms are a corrective to our illusions of either karmic retribution or that “everything happens for a reason.” Sometimes, even though we have remained firmly planted within the refuge of God’s care, the world is turned upside-down.

The psalm is bracketed by two sets of questions. The first directed towards God:

why have you cast me off?
Why must I walk about mournfully
 because of the oppression of the enemy?

The second set of questions, the psalmist poses to himself:

Why are you cast down, O my soul,
 and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
 my help and my God.

Within those brackets, the psalmist pleas for God to send his “light and truth” to lead him. Of course, this light and truth may be the realization that he’s gotten off-track that he needs to repent and change course. But that’s not the general sentiment of the psalm. God’s light and truth are associated with all that is pure with the absence of darkness. Throughout the scriptures, when motivations, people, empires are subjected to the light and truth of God they find it to be a searing furnace that melts away all that is false. The answer that the psalmist expects is that God’s light and truth will be that of liberating vindication, release from oppressive enemies.

To be sure, many of us have real enemies that we encounter daily. Yes, Jesus tells us to love our enemies but he also tells us to pray to be delivered from evil. Paul in Ephesians 6 gives us both the armory to withstand enemies and the insight to grasp that our enemies, though they may take human form, are really unseen forces of injustice behind those human interactions. While some of our enemies may be external, physical many of our enemies are the voices of shame, accusation (the Hebrew word for Satan means “accuser), or the neuropsychological chemicals that can grab the reins of all of the above and more. Regardless of their source, Psalm 43 tells us it’s ok to name them for what they are, ok to cry out to God for vindication and salvation, and that it’s vital to have a vision of what freedom would look like. Psalm 43 gives us this vision:

O send out your light and your truth;
 let them lead me;
let them bring me to your holy hill
 and to your dwelling.
4
Then I will go to the altar of God,
 to God my exceeding joy;
and I will praise you with the harp,
 O God, my God.

The holy hill was the place where the temple resided. The altar was the intersection of heaven and earth. Together, these embody the shalom of God, that cosmic peace where all is as it should be under the gracious reign of God. Dwelling in this shalom brings “exceeding joy” and “praise.” Psalm 43 is giving us language to cry out to God from the pit of despair. It doesn’t say everything there is to say about God but it does bear witness to the only way we can move from this trouble to joy: God saving, God moving, God lifting, God sending his light and truth.

Are you burdened today? That’s ok, cry out to God for salvation, be honest with yourself and your circumstances, and know that there is salvation and an exceeding joy that God will not withhold from you.

Day Thirty-Three

Psalms 19

The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
2 Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they reveal knowledge.
3 They have no speech, they use no words;
no sound is heard from them.
4 Yet their voice goes out into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world.
In the heavens God has pitched a tent for the sun.
5 It is like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber,
like a champion rejoicing to run his course.
6 It rises at one end of the heavens
and makes its circuit to the other;
nothing is deprived of its warmth.
7 The law of the Lord is perfect,
refreshing the soul.
The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy,
making wise the simple.
8 The precepts of the Lord are right,
giving joy to the heart.
The commands of the Lord are radiant,
giving light to the eyes.
9 The fear of the Lord is pure,
enduring forever.
The decrees of the Lord are firm,
and all of them are righteous.
10 They are more precious than gold,
than much pure gold;
they are sweeter than honey,
than honey from the honeycomb.
11 By them your servant is warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.
12 But who can discern their own errors?
Forgive my hidden faults.
13 Keep your servant also from willful sins;
may they not rule over me.
Then I will be blameless,
innocent of great transgression.
14 May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart

C. S. Lewis said of Psalm 19, "I take this to be the greatest poem in the Psalter and one of the greatest lyrics in the world." Psalm 19 begins as a meditation on the beauty of the world crafted by the hands of God. David images the sun as a bridegroom emerging from the bridal chamber after a night of amorous activity, glowing and parading across the heavens. The light of the sun nourishes the whole earth with warmth and testifies to the tender care of the God who made it. Nature is often so stunning in its splendor, so awesome in its sheer magnitude, so radiantly beautiful that many throughout the ages have concluded that in and of itself is divine. They have bowed down to worship the sun, the moon, and the stars. And who can blame them?

But David in this psalm, like Paul on Mars Hill, is inviting them to look behind the curtain. He proclaims to anyone who would listen that the author of all of this glory, is not anonymous, he has a name. We may be surprised to observe how exactly he does this. Look at vv. 7-11:

The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the LORD are sure, making wise the simple; 8 the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is clear, enlightening the eyes; 9 the fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the LORD are true and righteous altogether. 10 More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.

David moves from exalting in the glories of the heavens and the earth to basking in the glory of the...Law? This is an interesting juxtaposition to say the least. The natural world is breathtaking and commanding, an untamed spirit ever invoking its divine right to freedom. The law, it would seem, is the opposite of that. Obeying the law is routine, repressive. Or is it? David certainly would disagree with that sentiment. David moves from describing the wonders of the created world to valuing the law as worth more than the most precious metals because he thinks that in the law of the Lord, we find the freedom and holiness that the sun expresses with each step across the cloud-dotted sky. Nature is almost frivolous in its spontaneity, and nearly arbitrary in its cruelty. The law brings congruence, revealing the ways of God to humanity and inviting daughters and sons to know their maker and to live like him.

Henry David Thoreau, the apostle of Walden Pond, preached the gospel of romantic rapture in the natural world. He thought by embracing the created world as an end unto itself, he was freeing himself from the shackles of order and relationships. He said, "Disobedience is the true foundation of liberty. The obedient must be slaves." But King David, in Psalm 19, is telling us that the cosmos without the care of a creator is mere chaos. The law of the Lord compels us to the congruence that is thread through all things. We think that freedom is being able to do whatever we want. But freedom is not infinite choice, freedom is choosing the ways of the infinite. The law of the Lord, because it reveals the character of the divine, the beauty that is behind all the beauty beckons us to holiness. Holiness is the heart of beauty, the heart of freedom.

Day Thirty-Four

Psalm 6

Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger
or discipline me in your wrath.

2 Have mercy on me, Lord, for I am faint;
heal me, Lord, for my bones are in agony.

3 My soul is in deep anguish.
How long, Lord, how long?

4 Turn, Lord, and deliver me;
save me because of your unfailing love.

5 Among the dead no one proclaims your name.
Who praises you from the grave?

6 I am worn out from my groaning.
All night long I flood my bed with weeping
and drench my couch with tears.

7 My eyes grow weak with sorrow;
they fail because of all my foes.

8 Away from me, all you who do evil,
for the Lord has heard my weeping.

9 The Lord has heard my cry for mercy;
the Lord accepts my prayer.

10 All my enemies will be overwhelmed with
shame and anguish;
they will turn back and suddenly be put to
shame.

I am languishing; O LORD, heal me, for my bones are shaking with terror. My soul also is struck with terror, while you, O LORD—how long? (Ps. 6vv2-3).

The psalmist, presumably David, in Psalm 6 is not just having a bad day. He is in the throes of death. He goes on: For in death there is no remembrance of you; in Sheol who can give you praise? I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with my weeping. My eyes waste away because of grief; they grow weak because of all my foes. (vv. 5-7). David is in a downward spiral, drowning in his tears every night, losing his vision either because his eyes are red, dry and all cried-out or they are calling it quits because they have just seen too much. I have certainly felt this way recently. On every side, we are constantly bombarded with unspeakable suffering in our world. Whether we are enduring it ourselves or simply empathizing from afar, it's a wonder our eyes don't all just up and retire saying, "I've seen enough."

But this psalm and thus the circumstances of the psalmist take an unexpected turn. The psalmist has been crying out to the Lord, "How long?" (v. 3) and now he speaks with a confidence that seems to come from nowhere: Depart from me, all you workers of evil, for the LORD has heard the sound of my weeping. The LORD has heard my supplication; the LORD accepts my prayer. All my enemies shall be ashamed and struck with terror; they shall turn back, and in a moment be put to shame. (vv. 8-10). Why the sudden bravado when as recently as v. 7 he was drowning in tears? Simply, the psalmist knows that heaven hears him. He is assuaged, strengthened, emboldened by this one simple expression of faith that God hears when he cries and is able to work mightily in his circumstances. We are not told if the psalmist receives this word from the Lord. Presumably he does not and rather is operating from the confidence of his past dealings with God. He knows that in previous trials, the Lord has heard him when he has cried out and has responded. But most of all he knows that he does not serve a God who is far off but rather a loving, attentive Father—a God who hears. Here this is the psalmist's sole hope, that heaven hears him. And it changes everything.

Day Thirty-Five

Psalm 48

Great is the Lord, and most worthy of praise,
in the city of our God, his holy mountain.
2 Beautiful in its loftiness,
the joy of the whole earth,
like the heights of Zaphon is Mount Zion,
the city of the Great King.
3 God is in her citadels;
he has shown himself to be her fortress.
4 When the kings joined forces,
when they advanced together,
5 they saw her and were astounded;
they fled in terror.
6 Trembling seized them there,
pain like that of a woman in labor.
7 You destroyed them like ships of Tarshish
shattered by an east wind.
8 As we have heard,
so we have seen
in the city of the Lord Almighty,
in the city of our God:
God makes her secure
forever.
9 Within your temple, O God,
we meditate on your unfailing love.
10 Like your name, O God,
your praise reaches to the ends of the earth;
your right hand is filled with righteousness.
11 Mount Zion rejoices,
the villages of Judah are glad
because of your judgments.
12 Walk about Zion, go around her,
count her towers,
13 consider well her ramparts,
view her citadels,
that you may tell of them
to the next generation.
14 For this God is our God for ever and ever;
he will be our guide even to the end.

Psalm 48 is like a military parade, surveying the defenses of Zion, the city of God, extolling in the awesome power of God. This show of force brings comfort and rootedness to the people who dwell within its walls. But to the kings of other nations, when they see the defensive capabilities of Zion as an extension of God's care for his people, they are struck with "panic" and "trembling" (vv.5-6). It's important to note here that the armory of Israel in this Psalm is merely for protection. It is a fierce and real harbor but it is not for campaigns of conquest or crusades of vengeance, the city is fortified with the presence of God who is "a sure defense" (v.3).

When the scriptures talk about the "holy mountain" or the "elevation" they are referencing, broadly, the holy city of Jerusalem and, specifically, the mount where the temple resides. Psalm 48 tells us the center of this unshakable stronghold is the temple of God. At times in Israel's history the walls of the temple and the business of religion it housed took on greater import than the God whose presence was supposed to dwell there. But for all of the distortions, the temple was ultimately about the presence of God. The fiery center of the temple was encountering the presence of God in praise and hearing the true story of the world.

Because the temple was a place of presence, encounter, and praise, it was a condensed symbol of shalom—the way the world is ordered under the gracious reign of God. Thus it wasn't just about the people who were standing physically in the temple. It was a sign to the world of the way things were supposed to be—face to face relationship with God bringing about justice, worship, and an abiding in the true story of the world.

From this place of settled security in the temple, the psalmist invites us to:

...ponder your steadfast love, O God, in the midst of your temple. Your name, O God, like your praise, reaches to the ends of the earth. Your right hand is filled with victory. Let Mount Zion be glad; let the towns of Judah rejoice because of your judgments.

Psalm 48:9-11

There is no reason to suspect that the world outside the temple walls has miraculously become less violent, less confusing, less threatening at this one, singular moment in history. Rather, this prayer was prayed in a world just like ours with wars and rumors of wars bearing down on our attention and emotions at every moment. But what the psalmist is declaring to us is that even in the midst of a world of chaos, peace is possible in the presence of God because it is a gift of God. His name is not confined to the temple, his name "reaches to the ends of the earth" (v.10). He is able to secure the future with his promises because "his right hand is filled with victory" (v. 11).

He then instructs his listeners, to "walk about Zion; go all around it; count its towers..." This is an act of the worshipping imagination. Throughout Israel's history, the walls of Zion turned out to be quite permeable, subjected to the imperial whims of stronger nations that surrounded them. But the protection and peace of Zion was never about its military sophistication, it was always about the presence of God there who "has shown himself a sure defense" (v. 3). For us as we read this psalm, we are invited to join the psalmist on the walk, looking at the stronghold that God has erected around us. How has God protected us? How has he saved us from danger? What happened when the shadow of death fell upon us?

This psalm is a psalm of perspective trying to quell the tumultuous anxiety inside of us. If we walk around the story of Jesus, what his life, death, and resurrection have secured. If we remember the stories of deliverance in the scripture and the way that God has protected and made a way for us, our heart rates begin to slow, our thought processes become less impeded, our eyes clearer. The Spirit makes us aware that though it appears we are surrounded by danger on every side, we are held safely in the center of the defenses of the army of heaven. At the end of the psalm, the psalmist gives us a purpose for all of this. Not just an assurance that we are held in the fierce care of our God but that we might share the story:

"consider well its ramparts; go through its citadels, that you may tell the next generation that this is God, our God forever and ever. He will be our guide forever."

Psalm 48:13-14

Day Thirty-Six

Psalm 7

Lord my God, I take refuge in you;
save and deliver me from all who pursue me,
2 or they will tear me apart like a lion
and rip me to pieces with no one to rescue me.
3 Lord my God, if I have done this
and there is guilt on my hands—
4 if I have repaid my ally with evil
or without cause have robbed my foe—
5 then let my enemy pursue and overtake me;
let him trample my life to the ground
and make me sleep in the dust.
6 Arise, Lord, in your anger;
rise up against the rage of my enemies.
Awake, my God; decree justice.
7 Let the assembled peoples gather
around you,
while you sit enthroned over them on high.
8 Let the Lord judge the peoples.
Vindicate me, Lord, according to my righteousness,
according to my integrity, O Most High.
9 Bring to an end the violence of the wicked
and make the righteous secure—
you, the righteous God
who probes minds and hearts.
10 My shield is God Most High,
who saves the upright in heart.
11 God is a righteous judge,
a God who displays his wrath every day.
12 If he does not relent,
he will sharpen his sword;
he will bend and string his bow.
13 He has prepared his deadly weapons;
he makes ready his flaming arrows.

Whoever is pregnant with evil
conceives trouble and gives birth
to disillusionment.
15 Whoever digs a hole and scoops it out
falls into the pit they have made.
16 The trouble they cause recoils on them;
their violence comes down on their own heads.
17 I will give thanks to the Lord because of his righteousness;
I will sing the praises of the name of the Lord Most High.

Psalm 7 is a psalm of judgment. David extols the righteous judgment of the Lord, even inviting the Lord's judgment upon his own life. David doesn't fear the judgment of the Lord because he knows that the Lord's justice is not retributive but restorative. For many today, we fear any talk of God as a judge because of the images of an angry, arbitrary God that it conjures up. But what would it look like for us to recover a proper understanding of the judgment of God? I want to focus on a couple of this psalm's important perspectives.

First, the Lord is a judge who is able to actually bring about justice through his wisdom, power, and holiness (v. 11). The people of Israel actually wanted God to judge the world because they were often oppressed, at the mercy of violent imperial forces. They were certain, because of God's promises to their ancestors, that when God enacted his judgment, their righteousness would be vindicated and their oppressors would be condemned.

Second, David gives us an important paradigm as he begins his request for judgment with himself. He invites the Lord:

3 O LORD my God, if I have done this, if there is wrong in my hands, 4 if I have repaid my ally with harm or plundered my foe without cause, 5 then let the enemy pursue and overtake me, trample my life to the ground, and lay my soul in the dust.

Judgment should always begin with us. This is the heart of Jesus' teaching in Matthew 7. He tells his disciples:

Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. 2 For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. 3 Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? 4 Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' while the log is in your own eye? 5 You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye.

The Scriptures do not try to deter us from the notion of judgment altogether. They simply declare over and over again that judgment belongs to God alone and thus when we judge others, especially their motivations, we are in a sense playing God. The psalms invite a deep and searching self-examination. They place us face to face with God and in his presence our souls are laid bare. The psalms constantly invoke the Lord to judge and they invite us to do the same. Jesus' warnings against judgment do not remove the promise that the Lord will judge the earth from the equation, rather they beckon us to recognize our proper place is not in the judgment seat but rather in the place of the one being judged and finding God just and merciful.

Day Thirty-Seven

Psalms 22

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from saving me,
so far from my cries of anguish?

2 My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,

by night, but I find no rest.

3 Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One;
you are the one Israel praises.

4 In you our ancestors put their trust;
they trusted and you delivered them.

5 To you they cried out and were saved;
in you they trusted and were not put to shame.

6 But I am a worm and not a man,
scorned by everyone, despised by the people.

7 All who see me mock me;
they hurl insults, shaking their heads.

8 "He trusts in the Lord," they say,
"let the Lord rescue him."

Let him deliver him,
since he delights in him."

9 Yet you brought me out of the womb;
you made me trust in you, even at my mother's breast.

10 From birth I was cast on you;
from my mother's womb you have been my God.

11 Do not be far from me,
for trouble is near
and there is no one to help.

12 Many bulls surround me;
strong bulls of Bashan encircle me.

13 Roaring lions that tear their prey
open their mouths wide against me.

14 I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint.

My heart has turned to wax;
it has melted within me.

15 My mouth is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth;
you lay me in the dust of death.

16 Dogs surround me,
a pack of villains encircles me;
they pierce my hands and my feet.

17 All my bones are on display;
people stare and gloat over me.

18 They divide my clothes among them
and cast lots for my garment.

But you, Lord, do not be far from me.
You are my strength; come quickly
to help me.

20 Deliver me from the sword,
my precious life from the power of
the dogs.

21 Rescue me from the mouth of the
lions;
save me from the horns of the wild
oxen.

22 I will declare your name to my
people;

in the assembly I will praise you.

23 You who fear the Lord, praise him!
All you descendants of Jacob, hon-
or him!

Revere him, all you descendants of
Israel!

24 For he has not despised or
scorned

the suffering of the afflicted one;
he has not hidden his face from him
but has listened to his cry for
help.

25 From you comes the theme of my
praise in the great assembly;
before those who fear you I will
fulfill my vows.

26 The poor will eat and be satisfied;
those who seek the Lord will
praise him—

may your hearts live forever!

27 All the ends of the earth
will remember and turn to the
Lord,

and all the families of the nations
will bow down before him,

28 for dominion belongs to the Lord
and he rules over the nations.

29 All the rich of the earth will feast
and worship;

all who go down to the dust will
kneel before him—

those who cannot keep themselves
alive.

30 Posterity will serve him;
future generations will be told
about the Lord.

31 They will proclaim his righteous-
ness,

declaring to a people yet unborn:
He has done it!

Lament is a foreign concept to many modern Christians. Whether by explicit teaching or through learned behavior, we come to believe that we can never doubt God's goodness. We think that talking to God is solely about praising his goodness and that we need to keep our sadness to ourselves. But this is not an idea found in the Bible. Our scriptures are full of laments: Jesus grieves the loss of his friend, Lazarus; the young girls of Judges 11 mourn the death of Jephthah's daughter; tears are shed on behalf of the murder of Bethlehem's young boys in Matthew 2. Somewhere around two-thirds of the Psalms can be classified as lament. Even Jesus himself quoted today's psalm of lament, Psalm 22, as he was hanging on the cross. He knew the prayerbook of the Israelites and allowed the words to become his own.

Psalm 22 can become our prayer as well. It is a painful psalm laden with emotional vulnerability. It opens with "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" These are profoundly lonely words. What could be worse than being abandoned by all—even by God himself? Yet this question drips with irony. The psalmist is asking why God has abandoned them but is directing the question to God! There is a beautiful and comforting paradox in this: no matter how overwhelming the loneliness and despair, the Lord is within earshot. Despite saying they are forsaken, the psalmist speaks to God, remembering their birth (v. 9), asking God to stay near (v. 11), and begging God for help (v. 19). There are days I feel apart from God, days that I question his goodness in my life. But if I pray the psalms, the Bible's prayerbook, I speak directly to God with a boldness and strength that is unlike my own. Even when I cannot feel his presence, God is never far.

The world is overwhelming. The news of ongoing wars and acts of violence comes to us at unnerving speeds through modern technology. Our own relationships hit rocky patches, filling our lives with conflicts and tension. Doctors come with bad news. This past year, I received the call that a close friend, someone like a sister, had been killed in a bike accident. In that moment of crisis, words came to a stop. How could I approach my God after this? The only thing I knew was to pray the psalms of lament, the prayerbook of the Israelites and of the historical Church. In the footsteps of Jesus, I continue to allow the words to become my own. "You, Lord, do not be far from me. You are my strength; come quickly to help me!" (v. 19).

Day Thirty-Eight

Psalms 38

Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger
or discipline me in your wrath.
2 Your arrows have pierced me,
and your hand has come down on me.
3 Because of your wrath there is no health
in my body;
there is no soundness in my bones be-
cause of my sin.
4 My guilt has overwhelmed me
like a burden too heavy to bear.
5 My wounds fester and are loathsome
because of my sinful folly.
6 I am bowed down and brought very low;
all day long I go about mourning.
7 My back is filled with searing pain;
there is no health in my body.
8 I am feeble and utterly crushed;
I groan in anguish of heart.
9 All my longings lie open before you,
Lord;
my sighing is not hidden from you.
10 My heart pounds, my strength fails me;
even the light has gone from my eyes.
11 My friends and companions avoid me
because of my wounds;
my neighbors stay far away.
12 Those who want to kill me set their
traps,
those who would harm me talk of my
ruin;
all day long they scheme and lie.

I am like the deaf, who cannot hear,
like the mute, who cannot speak;
14 I have become like one who does
not hear,
whose mouth can offer no reply.
15 Lord, I wait for you;
you will answer, Lord my God.
16 For I said, "Do not let them gloat
or exalt themselves over me when
my feet slip."
17 For I am about to fall,
and my pain is ever with me.
18 I confess my iniquity;
I am troubled by my sin.
19 Many have become my enemies
without cause;
those who hate me without reason
are numerous.
20 Those who repay my good with
evil
lodge accusations against me,
though I seek only to do what is
good.
21 Lord, do not forsake me;
do not be far from me, my God.
22 Come quickly to help me,
my Lord and my Savior.

“Enough.” David cries out in Psalm 38. As he puts pen to paper he finds himself completely and overwhelmingly destitute. David feels the weight of shame in the light of the God who knows him thoroughly:

There is no soundness in my flesh
because of your indignation;
there is no health in my bones
because of my sin.
For my iniquities have gone over my head;
they weigh like a burden too heavy for me. (vv. 3-4)

Moreover, he is ostracized by friend and neighbor alike:

My friends and companions stand aloof from my affliction,
and my neighbors stand far off. (v.11)

And enemies, like predators who always seek out the weakest and most isolated smell blood:

Those who seek my life lay their snares;
those who seek to hurt me speak of ruin,
and meditate treachery all day long.

But I am like the deaf, I do not hear;
like the mute, who cannot speak.
Truly, I am like one who does not hear,
and in whose mouth is no retort. (vv. 12-14).

Nothing is sound, the center isn't just failing to hold, it has been ripped to shreds. Perhaps you know this darkness well. This place where everything in your life seems as if it is conspiring to snuff out your very life. And what's worse, you know some of your wounds are self-inflicted but you feel as if even God is standing at a distance tsk-tsking saying, “See I told you so.”

David, mired in the midnight zone where no light enters, utterly crushed and spent in the tumult of his heart (v. 8). He is terminally sick in his body and yet the more pressing question for David is will this sickness of his soul be denied medical care by the great physician? If this shame will be chronic, he is ready to give in, to let go. In David's cries many of us can see a mirror held up to our own depression and anxiety. The feeling that it will never end. The obsession with relief, David says:

O Lord, all my longing is known to you;
my sighing is not hidden from you.
My heart throbs, my strength fails me;
as for the light of my eyes—it also has gone from me. (vv.9-10).

Yet as the wheel turns on this cruel carousel, David's one concern, his only resolve is to know that he is not forever forgotten by God. With the last ounces of fight in his lungs, he cries out to God.

Do not forsake me, O LORD;
O my God, do not be far from me;
make haste to help me,
O Lord, my salvation. (vv. 21-22)

We only see this psalm from one side, the side of David's pain and internal anxiety. But dear reader, we have a whole Bible to listen in on this conversation from God's side of the line and I want to offer you this word of hope today.

Even if you don't have any fight left, God is fighting for you.

Even if you feel utterly destitute, God is healing you.

Even if you feel that your shame will ever define you, God is drawing near to you.

Even if you feel forsaken, God is with you.

Day Thirty-Nine

Psalms 32

Blessed is the one
whose transgressions are forgiven,
whose sins are covered.

2 Blessed is the one
whose sin the Lord does not count against
them
and in whose spirit is no deceit.

3 When I kept silent,
my bones wasted away
through my groaning all day long.

4 For day and night
your hand was heavy on me;
my strength was sapped
as in the heat of summer.

5 Then I acknowledged my sin to you
and did not cover up my iniquity.
I said, "I will confess
my transgressions to the Lord."
And you forgave
the guilt of my sin.

6 Therefore let all the faithful pray to you
while you may be found;
surely the rising of the mighty waters
will not reach them.

7 You are my hiding place;
you will protect me from trouble
and surround me with songs of deliverance.

8 I will instruct you and teach you in the way
you should go;
I will counsel you with my loving eye on you.

9 Do not be like the horse or the mule,
which have no understanding
but must be controlled by bit and bridle
or they will not come to you.

10 Many are the woes of the wicked,
but the Lord's unfailing love
surrounds the one who trusts in him.

11 Rejoice in the Lord and be glad, you righteous;
sing, all you who are upright in heart!

Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* depicts the descent into madness of a murderer who thinks he has committed the perfect crime. Eventually, he's found out by his own conscience, overwhelmed with hysterical agony and the paranoia of guilt. Sentenced to life in the work camps in Siberia, the main character, Raskolnikov has become a hollow man, broken by the weight of his own decisions and the ensuing spiral of darkness. But, Sonya, a prostitute, who is Raskolnikov's only meaningful human interaction, keeps showing up in his life. Even after he is convicted, she brings him a New Testament, she visits him in prison, she hears his confession. Through his relationship with Sonya, through the power of confession, Raskolnikov is healed, he is brought back from the dead. The consequences of his actions remain, but his soul is redeemed.

Psalm 32 describes the torture of unconfessed sin and the joy of bringing our brokenness into the light. David writes,

When I kept silence, my body wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Selah

We are not disembodied souls. The guilt from our hearts is circulated into our bones. We feel the weight of our sin not just psychologically but physiologically. David vividly portrays this wasting sickness, like a cancer slowly spreading. Our natural reaction when we know that we have done wrong, is to try to hide in our shame. This truly is the most insidious thing about sin, it doesn't just break us once, it fractures our hearts and then shackles us to that moment, convincing us that we are forever defined by this one act. Paul will later describe sin as a slave master (Romans 6), a power that uses fear and propaganda to keep us in bondage.

But the witness of Psalm 32 voices its testimony from the other side. There is a cure for sin, there is a healer, a great physician that will take away our ills. He runs to us, he is near, all we have to do is turn to him. Although, understanding this is like scaling the highest mountain of shame. Sin tries to convince us that the last thing we can ever do is confess. But the Scriptures tell a different story. Look how quickly things turn upon the hinge of confession:

Then I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not hide my iniquity;
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,"
and you forgave the guilt of my sin. Selah

David melting heart, heavy bones and all simply acknowledges his sin and he finds not a harsh "how dare you," not abandonment, or disowning, but wholeness, restoration.

God is not a hoarder of grace, he doesn't offer it like a trap to get us to come out into the light so he can snap it shut. He has made a way. Even in our rebellion against him he is our refuge (v. 6). Instead of hiding in our shame, we can make his light our hiding place (v. 7).

What is it that's keeping you in the dark? What's it that's telling you there's no way forward, that no one can know, and that God is done with you? He's not. He's faithful. Do you need mercy? We all do. Let steadfast love surround you. Let it go.

Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered. (v. 1)

His love conquers all sin. Even yours. Even mine.

Day Forty

Psalms 34

1 I will extol the Lord at all times;
his praise will always be on my lips.
2 I will glory in the Lord;
let the afflicted hear and rejoice.
3 Glorify the Lord with me;
let us exalt his name together.
4 I sought the Lord, and he answered me;
he delivered me from all my fears.
5 Those who look to him are radiant;
their faces are never covered with shame.
6 This poor man called, and the Lord heard him;
he saved him out of all his troubles.
7 The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him,
and he delivers them.
8 Taste and see that the Lord is good;
blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.
9 Fear the Lord, you his holy people,
for those who fear him lack nothing.
10 The lions may grow weak and hungry,
but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing.
11 Come, my children, listen to me;
I will teach you the fear of the Lord.
12 Whoever of you loves life
and desires to see many good days,
13 keep your tongue from evil
and your lips from telling lies.
14 Turn from evil and do good;
seek peace and pursue it.
15 The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous,
and his ears are attentive to their cry;
16 but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil,
to blot out their name from the earth.

The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears them;
he delivers them from all their troubles.
18 The Lord is close to the broken-hearted
and saves those who are crushed in spirit.
19 The righteous person may have many troubles,
but the Lord delivers him from them all;
20 he protects all his bones,
not one of them will be broken.
21 Evil will slay the wicked;
the foes of the righteous will be condemned.
22 The Lord will rescue his servants;
no one who takes refuge in him will be condemned.

Psalm 34 is the testimony of a weathered, God-facing life. Its fine-wine wisdom, aged and oaken, each note bearing witness to years, disappointments, but ultimately the triumph of a long and loving obedience in the same direction. David begins with his resolution:

I will bless the Lord at all times (v. 3).

This seems like the naive proclamations of over-eager youth. But as we will see, this promise has gray hair and experience. This is not a decision that has been made in a fleeting moment but the accumulated awareness of what it means to live life looking to God with radiant, expectant, unashamed eyes (v. 5). This proclamation is not a conversation that David began, it's an answering word, a response to steadfast and unfailing love, of a man who knows that God not only can save him but also actually enjoys being in his company.

David then recounts his past:

I sought the Lord and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears (v. 4).

David's not recalling one isolated incident. Think of how fear works. It labors endlessly, it's never far and its work is never done. But David is here to tell us, as often as the fear comes knocking, as often as the pain of this world shows up with its very real terror and its false gospel of doom and despair, the Lord is always near to the brokenhearted (v. 17). When your spirit is crushed under the agony of anxiety, even if all you can muster is a faint groan, a longing too deep for words and too broken for articulation, the Lord will answer your cry (v. 17).

David doesn't discount the reality of the fears that faces us. Many of them are venomous, injecting the most bitter poisons of loss, bitterness, and disillusionment. But what he suggests is that those fears are real in the same way a black hole is real. In black holes, gravity accelerates at such a pace that no particles or light can escape. Fear does this too. It traps us in its vortex of nothingness.

But what David proclaims is Gospel. Salvation. God is present even in the places where nothing escapes, he can hear our cry because he is not beyond the black hole of despair, he is right there with us.

David then teaches us a "holy fear" a fear with actual weight to it: the fear of the Lord. The first invitation David offers is simply a practice of the presence of God. "Taste and see that the Lord is good" (v. 8). Like any good thing we taste, it perpetuates a longing for more. Fear of the Lord is not a fear that alienates us from God, it aligns us with the rhythms of grace. David then shows us more by offering his second invitation, "Depart from evil, do good, seek peace and pursue it" (v. 14). Fear of the Lord is being remade again in his image, excavating the goodness of the architecture of our world, turning from the ways of figs and leaves, of shame and fear, to the abundance of shalom. David says, here, in this way is life. And I know because I've seen it all.

Finally, David offers one stern warning and one resounding promise. As David writes, "Evil brings death to the wicked, and those who hate righteousness will be condemned." It's not that God is up in some far-off heaven with his eternal ledger—as we've already seen he's near to the brokenhearted. God is life. His ways are the only way to sustain life. Any way opposed to his is to choose death. Any other way than God's way folds in on itself. But for those who serve the Lord, who seek his face, and take refuge in his grace, the Lord will redeem your life, there is no condemnation (v.22)

The apostle Paul will later pick up on this echo in his letter to the Romans. In Romans 8, he will write, "Now there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus. (Rom. 8:1) and nothing that can ever separate us from his love (Rom. 8v38-39).

Yes hardship, pain, fear, loss, and ultimately death will come to us all in this life. But David stands as a docent in the museum of grace: in every circumstance, even at our darkest hour, the Lord hears and he rescues (v. 17). Selah.