



The Five Books of the Heart

A Meditative Journey Through the Psalms

VOLUME II

The Journey Home

Book Four and Book Five of the Psalter



*"Let everything that has breath
praise the Lord!"*

— PSALM 150:6



BOOK ONE
THE WAY OF
THE BLESSED



BOOK TWO
THE CRY OF
DELIVERANCE



BOOK THREE
THE CRISIS OF
HOLINESS



BOOK FOUR
THE ETERNAL
KING



BOOK FIVE
THE TORAH OF
PRAISE

◆ A TWO-VOLUME SERIES ◆

The Five Books of the Heart

A Meditative Journey Through the Psalms

Volume II

The Journey Home

Book Four and Book Five of the Psalter

The Five Books of the Heart, Volume II: The Journey Home

A Meditative Journey Through the Psalms

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This volume completes the work begun in Volume One. Where Volume One walked the first three books of the Psalter, from the Blessed Man of Psalm 1 through the unresolved covenant crisis of Psalm 89, Volume Two walks the last two books, from the return of Moses in Psalm 90 to the final hallelujah of Psalm 150. The two volumes are designed to be read together, but Volume Two can be read on its own by a reader who already knows the first three books of the Psalter well.

This series is offered as a companion to *The Geography of Redemption* and *The Torah Blueprint*. Where *Geography of Redemption* traces the pattern of Scripture through the lens of exile and return, and where *The Torah Blueprint* traces the pattern of the four Gospels as built upon the five books of Moses, *The Five Books*

of the Heart traces the same fivefold architecture in the Psalter,
where it becomes the shape of Israel's prayer back to God.

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Series Preface

A Personal Journey

I came to the Psalms the way most people do. I came through crisis.

It was a season when the easy answers of faith had collapsed, when the tidy categories of blessing and obedience no longer held, when God seemed more absent than present. I needed words for what I was feeling, and I could not find them in the sermons I had been listening to, or in the devotional books I had been reading, or in the language of the prayer meetings I had been attending. I needed words older than my own tradition could give me. I went looking for them, and I found them in the ancient prayers of Israel.

Psalm 13: How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?
Psalm 42: Why, my soul, are you cast down? Psalm 88:
Darkness is my closest friend. These were not the sanitized prayers of Sunday morning. These were the raw cries of people who knew suffering, who wrestled with doubt, who dared to bring their anger and confusion directly to God. Praying their words gave me permission to be honest with my own.

But as I lived in the Psalms through that difficult season, I began to notice something. The book was not a random collection of prayers. There was architecture here. There was progression. The psalms of lament did not remain in despair. Most of them turned toward trust. The questions were real, but so were the answers. The darkness was acknowledged, but

the light always broke through. The book knew where it was going.

The book I am referring to is the Psalter as a whole, not any single psalm within it. The Psalter, I discovered, is not a single book but five, and the five books of the Psalter are arranged in a pattern that mirrors the five books of Moses. Book One mirrors Genesis. Book Two mirrors Exodus. Book Three mirrors Leviticus. Book Four mirrors Numbers. Book Five mirrors Deuteronomy. The correspondence is not forced. It runs the whole length of both bodies, and the ancient editors who assembled the Psalter in its current form arranged it deliberately to carry the pattern.

Volume One of this series walked the first three books of the Psalter. Book One, the Genesis of Prayer. Book Two, the Exodus of the Soul. Book Three, the Crisis of Holiness. The arc of Volume One was, in a sense, the arc of descent. The individual learned to pray, the nation learned to cry, and the sanctuary finally fell. Volume One closed where the Psalter closes Book Three, with the unresolved covenant crisis of Psalm 89, the Davidic throne cast down in the dust and the question hanging in the air. Lord, where is your steadfast love of old?

Volume Two walks the return. Book Four begins with the only psalm attributed to Moses, and the first thing it says is that the Lord has been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth. Before the temple that just burned down was ever built. The Lord himself, from everlasting to everlasting, is the dwelling place that no army can overthrow. Book Four declares, again and again, that the Lord reigns, regardless of what the visible kingdoms of the

earth are doing. Book Five completes the journey. The redeemed tell their story. The Songs of Ascents carry the pilgrims home. The Torah Psalm meditates for a hundred and seventy-six verses on the enduring word of God. And the final five psalms gather the whole Psalter into a crescendo of hallelujahs loud enough to include the heavens and the earth and every breathing creature.

Volume Two is also the volume in which the messianic thread that has been running through both books from the beginning is finally gathered into a single portrait. Psalm 2's king announced. Psalm 22's sufferer on the cross. Psalm 23's shepherd who became the lamb. Psalm 89's covenant question. Psalm 110's priest-king after Melchizedek. Psalm 118's rejected stone become cornerstone. These and many other messianic passages have been glimpsed through both volumes, and the final section of Volume Two draws them together into a single synthesis of the Christ the whole Psalter has been pointing to. The journey home, in the deepest sense, is the journey to him.

A Word About the Two Volumes Together

If you are reading Volume Two without having read Volume One, you can still follow. The architectural framework is rebuilt briefly where it matters, and the chapters on individual psalms are self-contained enough to be read on their own. But the two volumes are designed to be read together, and the experience of reading them in order is different from the experience of reading only one. Volume One walks the descent. Volume Two walks the return. The darkness of Book Three matters more when you have felt it. The dawn of Book

Four shines brighter when you have sat in the night that came before it. And the final hallelujahs of Psalm 150 hit differently when you have heard the silence of Psalm 88 preceding them.

If you have the time and the patience to walk both volumes in order, I commend the walk. Volume One takes, at a pace of one chapter a day, about three to four weeks. Volume Two takes about two to three weeks.

And if you are a reader whose season is Book Four or Book Five, who has come through a Volume One kind of crisis and is now in the rebuilding or in the praise, this volume may meet you precisely where you are. The morning psalms of Book Four, the pilgrim songs of Book Five, the Torah meditation of Psalm 119, and the final hallelujahs of Psalm 150 are all here to accompany a soul that is coming back into the light. Welcome. This volume was written for you, among others, and I hope it meets you well.

A Final Word Before You Begin

The Psalter does not hurry. It took the editors of the Hebrew Bible, over many generations, to assemble the book we now have. It has taken the church two thousand years to learn to read it with the depth the Spirit has put into it. It has taken me the better part of my adult life to come to some small measure of understanding of what it is trying to teach. And I do not expect you to understand it all in a first reading of this two-volume companion. Walk slowly. Return often. Let the Psalter do its work on you over years, not weeks.

And above all, remember that this book is a companion, not a replacement. The Psalms themselves are the source. Pray

them. Sing them. Memorize portions of them. Let them colonize your interior vocabulary the way the psalmists have colonized mine. The life of faith is long, and the Psalms are the best prayer book we have for walking it. Whatever else this companion does or fails to do, if it helps you meet the Psalms themselves more deeply, it has succeeded. The Psalter can carry you where this book cannot. Always return to the psalms themselves.

Let us walk the second half of the journey together.

Note to the Reader

This is Volume Two of a two-volume work on the Psalter. It treats Books Four and Five of the Psalms, together with a concluding messianic synthesis drawing the threads of both volumes into a single portrait of Christ. Volume One walked the first three books of the Psalter and closed in the darkness of Psalm 89's unresolved covenant crisis. Volume Two begins exactly where Volume One ended, with the turn that Book Four provides when Moses returns and the first word of the book declares that the Lord himself has been our dwelling place in all generations.

A note on the selection of psalms treated in this volume. Book Four of the Psalter contains seventeen psalms, of which this volume treats five. Book Five contains forty-four psalms, of which this volume also treats five. That is ten psalms in total, plus the messianic synthesis, which revisits a larger set of psalms already touched on in both volumes. The ratio in Volume Two differs from Volume One, where seventeen psalms were treated across three books of the Psalter. Book Five in particular is disproportionately underrepresented, not because Book Five deserves less attention, but because Book Five's length and its dominant mode (praise) do not require the same kind of verse-by-verse unpacking that Books One and Two required. The Psalms of Book Five are often shorter, and many of them are direct enough that a reader who has been prepared by the earlier volumes can pray them without extensive commentary.

A note on the messianic synthesis. The final major section of Volume Two draws together the messianic thread that has

been running through both volumes, from Psalm 2's coronation of the Son to Psalm 132's Davidic hope. I have not saved all the messianic material for this section. Where a psalm carries clear messianic weight, I have said so in the chapter on that psalm in either volume. The synthesis at the end of Volume Two does not duplicate what has already been said. It gathers. It draws the threads together. It attempts to show, in a sustained final movement, how the Psalter as a whole points to the one whom the New Testament names as Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, the Son of David, the Son of God. This is where the two-volume work finds its final shape, and the synthesis is therefore the capstone of the whole.

A note on how to use this volume. As with Volume One, read slowly. One chapter a day, preferably with the psalm itself open alongside the chapter, is a good pace. Do not rush to the messianic synthesis. Let the chapters on Book Four and Book Five prepare you for it. When you reach the synthesis, do not read it in a single sitting. It is substantial, and it rewards slow reading. Treat it as the capstone it is meant to be, not as a summary to be surveyed.

A note on the end of the journey. When you finish Volume Two, you will have walked the whole Psalter in the company of this companion. That is a real accomplishment, and I hope it has been rewarding. But the Psalter itself is not something you finish. You return to it for the rest of your life. The companion has done its work if it has pointed you toward a lifelong friendship with the book it is trying to help you read. Go back to the Psalms. Keep going back. The companion will still be here if you need it, but the Psalms themselves are what will carry you through the years.

The Turn

Where Volume One Ended

“Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.” — Psalm 90:1–2

Volume One ended in the dark.

It ended where the Psalter itself ends Book Three. With Psalm 89’s unresolved question hanging in the air. Lord, where is your steadfast love of old, which by your faithfulness you swore to David? The Davidic covenant, which had seemed unconditional in the first half of Psalm 89, had been described in the second half as cast down in the dust. You have renounced the covenant with your servant. You have defiled his crown in the dust. You have breached all his walls. You have laid his strongholds in ruins. The psalm ended with an almost perfunctory doxology, because the editorial shape of the Psalter required one, but the question that dominated the second half of Psalm 89 was not answered inside the psalm’s own verses. It was left open. The reader of the Psalter, coming to the end of Book Three, closed the book on a question with no apparent resolution.

If the Psalter had stopped at Psalm 89, the whole book would have been one of the strangest prayer books ever compiled. A book that began with the blessed man planted by streams of water and ended with the Davidic king cast down in the dust

would be, whatever else it was, a book that had lost its nerve. It would be a book in which the opening promise could not be reconciled with the closing complaint. It would be a book that had either given up or had not been edited carefully enough to resolve its internal tensions.

But the Psalter did not stop at Psalm 89. The editors who assembled the book did not leave the covenant question unanswered. They did not fail to notice the tension between Book Three and the opening promises of Book One. They simply placed their answer where the Psalter itself places it, in Book Four and in Book Five. And the answer they gave, which we will walk through in the chapters that follow, is one of the most theologically impressive moves in the whole Hebrew Bible.

Where the Answer Comes From

The answer does not come from where a modern reader might expect it to come. It does not come from an argument. It does not come from a theological treatise. It does not come from a prophet standing up and declaring that God's ways are higher than our ways. It comes, in the pages of the Psalter, from an unexpected direction. It comes from Moses.

Psalm 90, the opening psalm of Book Four, bears the superscription, A Prayer of Moses, the man of God. It is the only psalm in the Psalter attributed to Moses, and its placement at the beginning of Book Four is one of the most deliberate editorial decisions in the whole book. The editors who assembled the Psalter chose to answer the Davidic covenant crisis of Book Three by reaching past David, past the

Davidic covenant itself, past the monarchy that the covenant had established, all the way back to Moses. Before there was a David, there was a Moses. Before there was a Jerusalem, there was a wilderness. Before there was a temple, there was a tabernacle. Before any of the structures that had just collapsed in Book Three had been built, there had been a God who had walked with his people without any of those structures, and who had been their dwelling place before the mountains were brought forth.

This is the Psalter's response to the covenant crisis. Not a denial that the crisis is real. Not an explanation of how the crisis will be resolved within the framework of Davidic theology. A deeper return. A going back to a more ancient covenant. A remembering that God's relationship with his people began long before the Davidic line existed, and will continue long after any particular human institution has failed. The foundation is not the monarchy. The foundation is not the temple. The foundation is God himself, who was present with his people in the wilderness before they had a king or a temple, and who will be present with them in every subsequent wilderness, whether of exile or of personal crisis or of the slow attrition of the visible structures of faith.

The Pattern Restated

This move in the Psalter has a pattern that repeats throughout Scripture whenever the people of God face a crisis in the visible institutions of their faith. When Israel sinned with the golden calf at Sinai and the tablets of the covenant were broken, Moses went back to the Lord on the mountain and interceded, and the covenant was renewed on the basis of who

God is rather than on the basis of Israel's fidelity. When the first temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C., the prophets who interpreted the disaster reached back behind the temple to the Abrahamic covenant and the Mosaic covenant, reminding the exiled community that God's relationship with them did not begin with the temple and would not end with the temple's destruction. When the church has faced its own crises across the centuries, whether the Arian controversy or the corruption of the medieval papacy or the challenges of modernity, the faithful response has always been to reach back to the more ancient foundations, to Christ himself and the apostolic testimony, to the God who was before the church was and who will be after the church has passed through whatever shadow currently presses on him.

The Psalter, by placing Psalm 90 at the opening of Book Four, teaches this pattern. When the covenant structure of Book Three has failed, do not panic. Go back further. The foundation is older than the failure. The God who is your dwelling place was your dwelling place before the structures were built, and he will be your dwelling place after the structures have fallen. From everlasting to everlasting, you are God. The covenant crisis does not destroy this. The covenant crisis discloses it. When the superficial layers have been stripped away, the deeper layer is what remains, and the deeper layer is sufficient for every season the people of God will ever walk through.

What Volume Two Does

Volume Two of this series is the walking out of this pattern through the Psalter. It is the return. It is the rebuilding. It is

the rediscovery of the foundation beneath the rubble. And it is, in its closing movement, the revelation of the one in whom the foundation itself has been made flesh, and in whom every covenant God ever made with his people has been fulfilled and brought to completion.

Book Four will walk us through the theological recalibration that the Psalter performs after the Book Three crisis. The Lord reigns, Book Four will declare, again and again, in psalm after psalm. The reign is not dependent on the Davidic monarchy. The reign is older than any monarchy and will outlast any monarchy. The refuge of the people of God is God himself, not any of the structures that mediate his presence. The generations of Israel's national history rise and fall, but the God who sees the generations is the same from everlasting to everlasting. This is the theology that makes possible, on the far side of Book Three's crisis, a renewed and deeper trust.

Book Five will complete the journey. The redeemed will tell their story. The Songs of Ascents will carry the pilgrims up to Jerusalem. The Torah Psalm will meditate on the enduring word of God for a hundred and seventy-six verses of sustained delight. And the final five psalms will explode in a crescendo of hallelujahs. Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. The destination of the whole journey is worship, and the worship of the final psalms is not shallow worship. It is the worship of those who have walked through Book Three's darkness and come out the other side, who have seen the covenant question answered in ways deeper than they could have imagined, and whose praise is therefore the praise of the redeemed rather than the nervous hope of the unsettled.

And at the end of Volume Two, after Book Five has closed, we will gather the messianic threads of both volumes into a single final synthesis. The portrait of Christ that has been visible in fragments throughout the Psalter will be gathered. The king announced in Psalm 2. The sufferer of Psalm 22. The shepherd of Psalm 23. The divine king of Psalm 45. The ascending Lord of Psalm 68. The covenant king of Psalm 72. The rejected one of Psalms 69 and 89. The priest-king of Psalm 110. The rejected stone of Psalm 118. The son of David of Psalm 132. All of these, and more, will be brought together into a single sustained portrait of the one to whom the whole Psalter has been pointing. Jesus Christ. The Messiah. The Son of David. The Son of God. The Lord of the whole covenant.

This is where Volume Two takes us. From the dark of Psalm 89 to the light of Psalm 150, and from the implicit Christ of the Psalter to the explicit Christ of the gospel. The journey home, in every sense of the word. Let us begin.

BOOK FOUR OF THE PSALTER

The Eternal King

Psalms 90–106 | When Kingdoms Fall, the Lord Reigns

The Numbers Book of the Psalter

Book Four of the Psalter corresponds to Numbers, the fourth book of Moses, and the correspondence illuminates both books. Numbers is the wilderness book, the book of the forty years between the exodus from Egypt and the entry into the land, the book in which a generation died without seeing the promise fulfilled. It is the book in which Israel had to learn to trust God without any of the institutions that would later stabilize their national life. No temple yet. No king yet. No settled land yet. Only the tabernacle that moved when the cloud moved, the manna that fell fresh each morning, and the God who was present in the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night.

This is precisely the theology Book Four of the Psalter needs. After the Book Three crisis, in which the Davidic throne has been cast down and the sanctuary has been destroyed and the covenant seems to have been revoked, the Psalter needs a theology that can survive the collapse of the institutions. It needs the wilderness theology of Numbers, where God was present without a temple, where the people belonged to him without a king, where the covenant was kept by his faithfulness rather than by any visible structure. Book Four reaches for this theology and holds it up against the Book

Three crisis. The institutions may have fallen. The Lord has not.

Book Four opens with the only psalm attributed to Moses in the whole Psalter, and the placement is not accidental. It is the editorial signature of the book's theology. Moses is the man of the wilderness. Moses led Israel before there was a king, before there was a temple, before there was a settled land. Moses knew what it was to walk with God when everything except God himself was uncertain. And Moses, brought forward in Psalm 90, is the voice Book Four begins with, because Moses is the voice that can teach the Book Three reader how to walk again when the visible structures of his faith have fallen.

The dominant note of Book Four is declared in psalms 93 and 95 through 99, sometimes called the enthronement psalms or the Yahweh malak psalms after the Hebrew phrase that opens many of them. The Lord reigns. The Lord reigns. The Lord reigns. Again and again, in psalm after psalm, the same declaration. This is the answer to Book Three's covenant crisis. Not an argument that the Davidic covenant has been fulfilled after all in some way the reader could not see. A deeper truth. The Lord himself reigns, and his reign was never conditional on the Davidic monarchy functioning. The Lord reigned before David was born. The Lord reigns now that David's throne has been overturned. The Lord will reign forever, and no political event in any century of human history has any power to unsettle his reign.

This is the theological recalibration Book Four performs. It does not answer the Book Three question at the level the question was asked. It changes the level at which the question

is asked. The Book Three psalmist asked, in effect, where is the Davidic covenant if the Davidic king has been cast down? Book Four answers, the Davidic covenant was always a subset of a more ancient covenant, and the more ancient covenant is still in force, and the Lord who holds it is the Lord who reigns. The reader who follows Book Four into Book Five will discover, eventually, how the Davidic covenant is fulfilled after all in a way the crisis could not have anticipated. But even without that fulfillment, Book Four is sufficient. The Lord himself, from everlasting to everlasting, is the foundation that cannot be overthrown.

PSALM 90

The Dwelling Place of All Generations

“A thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night.” — Psalm 90:4

Moses Returns

The superscription of Psalm 90 is one of the shortest and most consequential in the Psalter. A Prayer of Moses, the man of God. There is no psalm anywhere else attributed to Moses, and no psalm in the entire book begins Book Four more fittingly. The man who led Israel through the wilderness, who climbed Sinai and received the law, who spoke with the Lord face to face as a man speaks with his friend, is the voice that opens the book designed to answer the covenant crisis of Book Three. And what Moses says, as the first thing he says, is the phrase that carries the whole theological weight of the book that follows.

Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations.

The Hebrew word translated dwelling place is *maon*, a word that speaks of a habitation, a home, a settled place where one lives. But Moses is not saying that the Lord has been their temple or their tabernacle or the particular architectural location in which the divine presence has been housed. He is saying something more radical. The Lord himself, as a person, has been their dwelling place. The relationship has been the home. Long before Israel had a temple in Jerusalem, long before the tabernacle was built in the wilderness, long before

any architectural space on earth had been set apart for the worship of Yahweh, the Lord had been the dwelling place of his people. The home was him. The shelter was him. The habitation was him. And this has been true in all generations, which is to say from the moment the relationship with his people began, back through Abraham and through Noah and through Adam, all the way to the first human being who ever drew a conscious breath in the presence of the Creator who had made him.

This is the answer to Psalm 89. The psalm that closed Book Three had mourned the overthrow of the Davidic throne and the defilement of the anointed one's crown in the dust. The question that hung in the air was, where is the covenant now that the structures that carried it have been destroyed? And the first line of Book Four says, the covenant was never in the structures. The covenant was in the Lord himself, who has been our dwelling place in all generations. The structures come and go. The Lord remains. And because the Lord remains, the covenant he made remains, even when every visible form of it has been shaken.

Before the Mountains

Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

Moses reaches further back than any other psalmist in the whole Psalter. Before the mountains. Before the earth itself. Before the world was formed. The scope of this opening is cosmic, and it is deliberately so. Moses is establishing, at the

opening of Book Four, that the God to whom the Psalter is addressed precedes the creation itself. He is not a product of the world. He is not shaped by the world. He is before the world, and he will be after the world, and in the meantime he is the eternal foundation on which the world rests.

From everlasting to everlasting. The Hebrew is *me'olam ad olam*.

Me'olam ad olam reaches both directions. Back without beginning, forward without end. The God of Psalm 90 has no beginning. He has no ending. He exists in a mode of being that is categorically different from the mode in which human beings and nations and dynasties and institutions exist. And this is the ground of the theological recalibration Book Four is about to perform. The covenant crisis of Book Three assumed that God's faithfulness could be measured against the visible fate of a particular human institution. Psalm 90 opens by reminding the reader that God himself is on a different scale entirely. A thousand years in his sight are but as yesterday when it is past. The rise and fall of nations is, to him, the blink of an eye. The Davidic dynasty, however long it lasted, was a brief episode in the life of a God who endures forever. The crisis was real in the lives of those who lived through it. But measured against the scale of the eternal God, the crisis was a moment, and the God who endures through it and beyond it is the one who matters.

This is not a cold comfort. It is a true comfort, and it is the kind of comfort that only the true eternity of God can provide.

If God were bound by the timescale of human institutions, the destruction of the temple and the overthrow of the monarchy would have been catastrophic for him too. The fact that he is not so bound means that the events that devastated his people were not events that unsettled him. He saw them before they happened. He will see beyond them after they have passed. And in the meantime, he remains the dwelling place of his people, as he has been in all generations, and as he will be in all generations yet to come.

You Turn Man Back to Dust

After the grand cosmic opening, Psalm 90 does something unexpected. It turns to the fragility of human life. You return man to dust and say, Return, O children of man! For a thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night.

The contrast is stark. God is from everlasting to everlasting. Humanity is dust, returning to dust. A thousand years of God's life are as yesterday in his sight. The whole human lifespan is, to him, like a watch in the night, a three-hour period of the Roman military rotation, brief and quickly passing. Moses is placing humanity in its proper proportion to the God to whom the psalm is addressed. Not to crush humanity, but to set it accurately. The covenant crisis of Book Three was a crisis, in part, because Israel had come to think of its institutions as more permanent than any human arrangement can be. Moses is adjusting the scale. Nothing human is permanent. Everything human passes. Only God endures. And the faithful life is the life that has made peace

with this, that has placed its hope in the God who endures rather than in the structures that pass.

You sweep them away as with a flood; they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning. In the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers. The imagery is from the dry Mediterranean climate of ancient Israel, where the grass that sprouted fresh after an overnight rain could wither by evening under the hot sun. The image was familiar to every Israelite who had watched the cycles of the agricultural year. And Moses is applying it to human life as a whole. The flourishing is brief. The withering is certain. The nations that rise in the morning of their history fade in the evening of their decline. The institutions that seem permanent in one generation are forgotten in another. This is the human condition, and the faithful response to it is not to pretend it is otherwise. It is to learn to live wisely within it.

Teach Us to Number Our Days

And this leads to the request that is at the theological heart of the psalm. So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.

Teach us to number our days. The request is specific. Moses is not asking for long life. He is not asking for prosperity. He is not asking for deliverance from the covenant crisis that the Book Three psalmist had asked about. He is asking for something deeper and more enduring. Teach us to number our days. Teach us to live in conscious awareness that our days are finite, that our breath is borrowed, that our life is a gift that will one day be returned. Teach us to be the kind of people

who have grasped the shortness of human life and who therefore live wisely within it.

The phrase get a heart of wisdom is significant. The Hebrew word translated get is nabi.

Nabi means to cause to come in, to bring in, to acquire. The wisdom Moses is asking for is not a natural property of the human mind that can be cultivated through effort alone. It is something that must be brought in, acquired from outside. And the way it is acquired is by learning to number the days. The one who has grasped that his days are few, that his life is brief, that the grass he is will wither before the evening, is the one who is in the position to receive the heart of wisdom that Moses is asking God to give.

This is one of the most counter-cultural prayers in the whole Psalter. Modern American culture is built on the denial of death. We hide our dying in hospitals and nursing homes. We cosmetically conceal the aging process. We talk about mortality obliquely, if at all. We live as if we had forever, and the accumulation of hours on our screens suggests that we are trying to fill time as if it were an infinite resource that had to be used up rather than a precious gift that had to be stewarded. Moses prays the opposite. Teach us to number our days. Teach us that our days are few. Teach us to live in the conscious awareness of our mortality, because the awareness of mortality is what produces the heart of wisdom. The denial of mortality produces only foolishness, and the foolishness lasts exactly as long as we last, which is to say not very long at all.

Every believer who has grown old in the faith has eventually come to Psalm 90's prayer. The young believer prays for deliverance, for opportunity, for success. The mature believer prays, increasingly, to be taught to number his days. The shift happens imperceptibly, over decades. The believer finds that the requests he is making to God have changed. He is asking less for what he wants and more for what he needs. And what he needs, above all, is a heart of wisdom that has grasped how brief his life is and how precious each day therefore is and how he is to spend the days he has been given in the service of the one who gave them.

Satisfy Us in the Morning

Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us, and for as many years as we have seen evil. Let your work be shown to your servants, and your glorious power to their children. Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and establish the work of our hands upon us; yes, establish the work of our hands!

The psalm closes with a series of requests that flow out of the theological recalibration it has performed. Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love. Not with health. Not with wealth. Not with institutional security. With your steadfast love. The word *chesed*, steadfast love, is the covenant word, the word that describes God's loyal commitment to his people across every failure and every crisis. The request is for the morning to be satisfied not with circumstances but with the love of God himself, and for the rest of the day, and the rest of

the days, to be lived in the rejoicing and gladness that such satisfaction produces.

Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us, and for as many years as we have seen evil. The prayer is audacious in its specificity. The number of days of affliction the people of God have experienced, the number of years of evil they have seen, these are to be matched by an equal number of days and years of gladness. Moses is asking, in effect, for a restoration proportional to the suffering. Whatever Book Three has taken, Book Four is asking that God give back in equal measure. The grief of the exile is to be met by a joy of equal length. The years of sorrow are to be balanced by years of gladness. This is not a promise that every believer will see the restoration in this life. Some will not. But it is a prayer, and the prayer is authorized by the Psalter's preservation of it, and the God to whom the prayer is offered has, in his own time, an answer that will fulfill the prayer in ways the one who prayed it could not have foreseen.

Let your work be shown to your servants, and your glorious power to their children. The prayer reaches across generations. Even if the current generation does not see the full work of God, the next generation might. Even if the children of exile do not live to see the restoration, their children may. Moses is praying generationally, not just personally. And the prayer is a prayer for the long view. God's work will be shown. His glorious power will be manifest. If not in the days of those who are currently afflicted, then in the days of their children. The patience is real. The hope is real. And the God who is being prayed to is the God who answers across generations, not only within them.

Establish the work of our hands upon us. Twice, with emphasis. Establish the work of our hands. This is the final request of the psalm, and it is a request that has meaning only within the theological recalibration the psalm has performed. The work of human hands is, in itself, fragile. It fades like the grass. It returns to the dust that produced it. But when the work of human hands is established by God, it participates in his own permanence. It becomes part of what he is doing rather than part of what merely passes. The prayer is not for our work to be exempted from mortality. The prayer is for our work to be taken up into the work of the eternal God, so that what we have done with our brief lives contributes to something that will endure. Establish the work of our hands. Take what we have offered, brief and fragile as it is, and weave it into the work that your own eternity will not let perish.

Christ in the Dwelling

Christ in the Dwelling: Psalm 90 declares that the Lord has been the dwelling place of his people in all generations, and the declaration reaches its deepest fulfillment in Christ, in whom the dwelling has become flesh. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, John writes, and his verb for dwelt is skeneō, the verb of the tabernacle, the verb of God dwelling with his people in the wilderness under the cloud. The Lord who was the dwelling place of all generations has now, in Christ, become a dweller among us. And the one who has come to dwell among us has promised, before he returned to the

Father, to send the Spirit who would make every believer a dwelling place of God. Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? Paul will write to the Corinthians. Psalm 90's declaration, which opened Book Four with the reminder that the Lord himself has always been the home of his people, finds its ultimate fulfillment in the incarnation and in Pentecost, where the God who was the dwelling place has now made the believer a dwelling place of himself. From everlasting to everlasting, he is God. And in his everlasting, he has come to live with us, and to live in us, and to carry us home to the eternal dwelling he was always preparing us for.

PSALM 103

Bless the Lord, O My Soul

“Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name!” – Psalm

103:1

The Soul Commanded to Bless

Psalm 103 is one of the most beloved psalms in the Psalter, and it deserves every line of the affection it has received. The psalm is a single sustained act of worship, offered by a soul who has discovered what it means to bless the Lord with everything in him. It is attributed to David, which means it is one of the Davidic psalms that return in Book Four after David’s prayers were formally concluded at the end of Book Two. The return is deliberate. David, the patriarch of prayer, whose voice had taught Israel how to pray through the first two books of the Psalter, is back. And what he is teaching Israel now, at this stage of the Psalter’s journey, is how to bless.

The psalm opens with a command, but the command is addressed not to the people or to the congregation or to the nations. It is addressed to the psalmist’s own soul. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name! The psalmist is coaching his own interior life, summoning every capacity within himself to participate in the blessing. The soul. All that is within me. This is not casual worship. This is the deliberate marshaling of the whole inner person for the act of blessing the Lord. Nothing is to be held back. The mind,

the will, the affections, the memory, the imagination, every faculty of the inner life, all of it, bless his holy name.

This is worth noticing because it is unusual. Most worship is either public (addressed to God in the company of others) or responsive (offered in reaction to something God has done). Psalm 103 is something else. It is a soul commanding itself to worship, in the privacy of its own interior life, whether the circumstances warrant it or not. The psalmist is not waiting for inspiration. He is not waiting for the right mood. He is telling his own soul what to do. Bless. All of you. Right now. This is a discipline, and the fact that the Psalter preserves it in its most beloved form is a reminder that worship is a discipline, not only a response. The mature believer learns to command the soul to worship, and the soul, so commanded over long practice, comes eventually to produce the blessing without needing to be commanded.

Forget Not All His Benefits

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.

The second line of the psalm addresses one of the great weaknesses of the human soul. Forgetfulness. We forget. We receive blessing upon blessing from the hand of God, and within a week, within a day, within an hour, we have forgotten. The benefits fade from memory. The deliverances we celebrated become background noise. The gifts we received become assumed features of our lives rather than gifts we need to remember. And the forgetting slowly diminishes our capacity to bless, because we can only bless the one whose

goodness we remember, and we forget the goodness almost as quickly as we receive it.

David's response to this weakness is to turn to memory as a discipline. Forget not all his benefits. The double negative is emphatic in the Hebrew. Do not forget them. Not any of them. Remember them all. And what follows in the next verses is a catalog of the benefits that the psalmist insists his soul must not forget.

Who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. Five things the Lord does, and David lists them deliberately. Forgives. Heals. Redeems. Crowns. Satisfies. The list is not comprehensive. The Lord does many more things than these five. But these five stand for the whole. Forgiveness is the ground of the relationship. Healing is the restoration of what sin has broken. Redemption is the rescue from the pit. The crown of steadfast love and mercy is the dignity God gives his people. The satisfaction with good is the completeness of his care. All of these benefits belong to the believer, and all of them together form a landscape of blessing that the soul is commanded not to forget.

Every line in this catalog could be expanded into its own meditation. Who forgives all your iniquity. Not some. All. The whole accumulated weight of the believer's sin, from the first childhood disobedience to the latest adult failure, all of it, forgiven. Not managed. Not excused. Not downplayed. Forgiven. Who heals all your diseases. Again, all. The list of the diseases of the soul is long and particular to each believer.

Anxiety, bitterness, shame, envy, fear, lust, greed, pride, the whole catalog of the disorders that the fall has introduced into the human person. And the Lord heals them. Not in a single dramatic moment, but in the slow work of a lifetime under his grace. Who redeems your life from the pit. The Hebrew word for pit is shachath, a word that means both the grave and the place of destruction. The Lord rescues his people from both. From death itself. From the ruin that would otherwise have consumed them. These are the benefits the soul is commanded not to forget.

As a Father Pities His Children

The center of Psalm 103 is one of the most tender descriptions of God's love in the whole Hebrew Bible. As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him. For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust.

As a father shows compassion. The Hebrew word for compassion is rachamim.

Rachamim is from the root rechem, the word for womb. The compassion of God is womb-compassion, the deep visceral tenderness that a mother feels for the child she has carried. But David chooses the father as the image. As a father shows compassion. The point is not the gender of the parent. The point is the quality of the love. It is not distant. It is not measured. It is the love of a parent for a child, and it is freely given to those who fear the Lord.

He knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust. The sentence is one of the most gentle things ever said about the human condition. The Lord, who is from everlasting to everlasting, who made the mountains and the stars, who calls the host of heaven by name, also knows the frailty of the creatures he has made. He knows we are dust. He remembers our weakness. He does not demand of us more than we can bear. He does not hold us to a standard that forgets our mortality. The God of Psalm 90, who sweeps humanity away as with a flood, is the same God of Psalm 103, who remembers gently that we are dust and who treats us with the compassion of a father. Both psalms are true simultaneously. God is eternal and we are brief. And God, in his eternity, knows and remembers and loves our briefness.

As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more. The image from Psalm 90 returns. The grass that flourishes in the morning and withers in the evening. The flower that blooms and fades. The wind that passes over and leaves no trace. The mortality of humanity is described again, not to crush us, but to set the scale for the declaration that follows. But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children's children, to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments.

The contrast is magnificent. Humanity is grass, here today and gone tomorrow. But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting. Our mortality is matched by his eternity. Our briefness is met by his permanence. And the permanence of his love extends not only to us but to our

children and their children. The covenant reaches forward through the generations. What the Lord gives to this generation of his people is given in a way that includes the generations not yet born. The inheritance is real, and it is perpetual, and it is secured by the character of the one who keeps it.

Bless the Lord, You Angels

The psalm ends as it began, with the command to bless the Lord. But the circle of those commanded to bless has expanded dramatically. Bless the Lord, O you his angels, you mighty ones who do his word, obeying the voice of his word! Bless the Lord, all his hosts, his ministers, who do his will! Bless the Lord, all his works, in all places of his dominion. Bless the Lord, O my soul!

The psalm began with the psalmist commanding his own soul. The psalm ends with the psalmist summoning all of creation to join the blessing. Angels. Mighty ones. All his hosts. His ministers. All his works in all places of his dominion. And finally, returning to the voice with which the psalm began, bless the Lord, O my soul. The private worship has become public. The interior act has become cosmic. And the soul that began by commanding itself to bless the Lord ends by summoning the whole of creation to join in the blessing it has been offering.

This is the shape of worship as the Psalter understands it. It begins privately. It starts in the interior life, with the soul commanding itself, with the memory being disciplined, with the benefits being recounted. And it ends by reaching out to

include every creature that has breath. The believer who has learned to bless the Lord in the privacy of his own soul finds, over time, that he cannot contain the blessing. It overflows into the public. It reaches for the angels and the hosts. It invites all of creation to join the song. Psalm 103 is, in miniature, what Psalm 150 will be at scale. The private blessing of one soul, learned in the discipline of remembering, becomes the cosmic blessing of all that has breath.

Christ and the Blessing

Christ and the Blessing: Psalm 103 describes the Lord who forgives all iniquity and heals all diseases and redeems life from the pit and crowns the believer with steadfast love and mercy and satisfies with good. Every one of these actions is fulfilled, in the fullness of time, in Christ. The forgiveness of all iniquity comes through his atoning blood. The healing of all diseases, partially begun in his earthly ministry and completed in the resurrection of the body, is his gift. The redemption of life from the pit is what his resurrection accomplished, for himself and for all who are in him. The crown of steadfast love and mercy is the crown he shares with every believer who is united to him by faith. The satisfaction with good is what he gives to those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Every benefit the psalmist commands his soul not to forget is a benefit the New Testament gathers into the person of Jesus. And the fatherly compassion the

psalm describes is the compassion of the Father who so loved the world that he gave his only Son. Psalm 103 is, in the end, a description of the Christian life with Christ at its center. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name, for he has given you Christ, and in Christ he has given you all things, and the benefits are too many to count.

The Father Who Knows Our Dust

The central verse of Psalm 103, As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him, is worth pausing over longer than the anchor chapter did. This is one of the most important theological claims in the Hebrew Bible, and it is worth making sure the weight of it is felt.

The picture of God as Father was not invented by Jesus. It appears in the Hebrew Bible at crucial moments. Moses, in Deuteronomy 32, describes the Lord as your father who created you. Isaiah, in chapter 63, prays, You are our Father, though Abraham does not know us, and Israel does not acknowledge us; you, O Lord, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is your name. Hosea 11 has God saying, When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The fatherhood of God over his people is not only a New Testament concept. It is woven through the Old Testament, and Psalm 103 is one of the places where the fatherhood is named with particular tenderness.

But Psalm 103 adds a specific note to the fatherhood. The father who shows compassion is a father who knows his child's frailty. He knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust. This is important. The compassion is not the compassion of a stern judge who has decided to be lenient. It is the compassion of a parent who understands what his child actually is. The father knows what his children are made of. He knows the limitations of their bodies. He knows the weaknesses of their minds. He knows the pressures they are under. And his response to them is not the response of a law court. It is the response of a parent.

Every parent who has raised children knows what this means. A child who makes a mistake is not the same as an adult who commits a crime. A child who forgets his lunch at home is not the same as an employee who sabotages a project. The parent responds to the child differently because the parent understands who the child is. The father who knows that his children are dust, who remembers that their frames are fragile, who has a clear-eyed awareness of what they can and cannot do, is the father who can respond to their failures with the kind of compassion that does not crush them. This is the compassion of God. He is not unrealistic about us. He is not disappointed that we have turned out to be less than we should have been. He made us from dust. He knows what we are. And he responds to us accordingly, with a tenderness that is grounded in his realistic understanding of what we actually are.

This is a theological point that should shape how we approach God in prayer. The believer who imagines that God is holding him to an impossible standard, who approaches God with the

sense that he is constantly disappointing him, who cannot bring his actual failures to him because he feels he should have been better, has misunderstood the God of Psalm 103. The God of Psalm 103 knows he is dust. He does not expect him to be something other than dust. He does not want him to pretend he is something he is not. The compassion he has for him is the compassion of a father who is not surprised by the weakness of his child, who loves him precisely in his weakness, and who gathers him up not because he has merited being gathered up but because he is his child and his love does not measure itself by his performance.

The Vastness of the Forgiveness

As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us. Psalm 103 uses an image of cosmic scale to describe the distance at which the Lord places our sins from us after he has forgiven them. Not the north from the south, which have determinate limits at the poles. The east from the west, which are not limited by any boundary. East and west meet only at infinity, if they meet at all. The forgiveness is not partial. It is not measured. It is total, and the distance at which the forgiven sins are placed is a distance that cannot be measured in any finite sense.

This is an aspect of forgiveness that believers often struggle to accept. Many of us carry our forgiven sins with us, not in the sense that we are still guilty of them, but in the sense that we keep thinking about them, rehearsing them, recalling them, letting them cast their shadow over our sense of who we are. Psalm 103 is trying to get us to stop this. The Lord has removed our transgressions. As far as the east is from the

west. The removal is real. The distance is infinite. And the believer's job is to accept the removal, to let the forgiven sins be forgiven, to stop dragging them back into the present as if they had not been dealt with.

Every pastor who has counseled believers for any length of time has met Christians who cannot forgive themselves for sins God has already forgiven. They carry the weight as if God had not lifted it. They live under the cloud as if the cloud had not been dispersed. And the deeper problem, when you get to the root of it, is that they have not trusted Psalm 103. They have not believed that the removal is as total as the psalm says it is. They have not accepted that the Lord's verdict is binding on their own self-assessment. Psalm 103 is trying to heal this. As far as the east is from the west. The forgiveness has that scale. And the believer who has been forgiven is free, truly free, to stop measuring his life by the sins the Lord has placed at an infinite distance from him.

The Blessing of the Angels

The end of Psalm 103, where the psalmist summons the angels and the hosts and all the works of the Lord to join the blessing, is one of the most cosmic moments in the whole Psalter. The private worship of a single soul has expanded to include every creature in every corner of the Lord's dominion. And the expansion is not accidental. It is what worship does, when it is done rightly. It overflows.

The Christian worship of the gathered church participates in this overflow. When the believer gathers with other believers on the Lord's Day to sing and to pray and to hear the word and

to take the supper, he is doing what Psalm 103 describes. The private blessing of his own soul has been joined to the blessing of other souls, and together they are joining the angels and the hosts who never stop blessing the Lord at the throne. The worship of the church is not a separate worship from the worship of heaven. It is the earthly portion of the worship of heaven. The angels sing. The saints in glory sing. The cherubim and seraphim around the throne sing. And the gathered congregation on earth sings with them, and the two songs are the same song, separated only by the present veil that will one day be taken away.

This is one of the reasons gathered worship on the Lord's Day matters. Private worship, which is excellent and necessary, is not the whole of what worship is supposed to be. The Psalm 103 pattern is the pattern of private worship expanding into cosmic worship. The single soul that commands itself to bless the Lord in the privacy of its own interior life is supposed to find itself eventually standing in the congregation, singing with the other souls, joining the angels, participating in the worship that extends through the heavens and around the throne. The private worship that does not expand into corporate worship is incomplete. It is only the first step. The Psalter itself models the expansion. And the church, gathering every Lord's Day for three thousand years, has been carrying out what the Psalter had set as the pattern.

The Enthronement Psalms at the Heart of Book Four

At the literal and theological center of Book Four stand the enthronement psalms, a cluster of psalms that declare again

and again that the Lord reigns. Psalms 93, 95, 96, 97, 98, and 99. Six psalms, tightly grouped, each one hammering on the same central affirmation. The Lord reigns. The Lord reigns. The Lord reigns. The repetition is deliberate. The placement at the center of Book Four is deliberate. And the answer these psalms provide to the covenant crisis of Book Three is one of the most elegant theological moves in the whole Hebrew Bible.

The covenant crisis of Book Three had been a crisis about the Davidic kingship. The throne of David had been cast down in the dust. The anointed king had been rejected. The promises of the Davidic covenant seemed to have failed. And the response of Book Four, in the enthronement psalms, is not to argue that the Davidic covenant has secretly been kept in ways the reader could not see. It is to change the level at which the question of kingship is asked. The Lord reigns. Not David. Not Solomon. Not Hezekiah. Not any human king. The Lord himself, from his own throne, reigns. And his reign has never depended on any human institution functioning.

Psalm 93 opens the cluster. The Lord reigns; he is robed in majesty; the Lord is robed; he has put on strength as his belt. Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved. Your throne is established from of old; you are from everlasting. The throne being described is not the throne in Jerusalem. It is not the earthly Davidic throne that had been overthrown. It is the divine throne, the throne of the Lord himself, which was established from of old and which is from everlasting. The earthly throne could be overthrown. The heavenly throne cannot. And the reader who has walked through the covenant crisis of Book Three is being taught to look past the earthly

throne to the heavenly one, to find in the eternal reign of the Lord the stability that the earthly institutions could not provide.

Psalm 96 presses further. Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth! Sing to the Lord, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples! For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised; he is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols, but the Lord made the heavens. The psalm is universal in its scope. All the earth. All the nations. All the peoples. The Lord's reign is not local. He is not merely the God of Israel, tied to a particular land or a particular dynasty. He is the Lord of the whole earth, greater than all the gods of the nations, the one to whom all the peoples are summoned to sing.

And the psalm closes with a strikingly eschatological note. Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the Lord, for he comes, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness, and the peoples in his faithfulness. The reign of the Lord, which the psalm has been celebrating, is not only the present reign. It reaches toward a coming judgment, a day when the Lord will come to judge the earth, when the trees of the forest themselves will sing for joy at his arrival. This is the same vision that the New Testament will eventually articulate as the second coming of Christ, the day of the Lord when he returns in glory to judge the living and the dead. Psalm 96 had already been pointing toward it. The reign of the Lord is not only a settled fact about the present. It is a movement toward a consummation, and the consummation is the judgment that will set everything right.

The reader who walks through the enthronement psalms in sequence emerges with a different theological posture than the one he had at the end of Book Three. He has been given the answer to the covenant crisis. The Davidic covenant has not failed. The Davidic covenant was always a subset of the eternal reign of the Lord, and the eternal reign of the Lord endures whether the Davidic covenant's human manifestations are functioning or not. And the consummation that the enthronement psalms anticipate will, in the fullness of time, be the consummation that fulfills the Davidic covenant in a way the original formulation could not have anticipated. The Lord who reigns eternally will send his Son, who is David's son and David's Lord, and the Son will establish the throne forever in a form that cannot be overthrown. Book Four is preparing the reader for this fulfillment, even though the fulfillment itself will not be explicit until the New Testament.

The Renewal of Faith Through Memory

One of the distinctive features of Book Four is its concentrated use of memory. Psalm 103 recalls the forgiveness and healing the Lord has extended. Psalm 105 recounts the whole history of the covenant from Abraham to the entry into the land. Psalm 106 recounts the same history from a different angle, emphasizing Israel's repeated unfaithfulness and the Lord's repeated mercy. The book is saturated with the practice of remembering. And this too is part of its answer to the Book Three crisis.

When a person's faith has been shaken, the remedy is often not new arguments but renewed memory. The believer who

has forgotten what God has done is a believer whose faith has no ground to stand on. The believer who remembers, specifically and gratefully, what God has done for him personally and for his people across the generations is a believer whose faith has foundations to stand on. Book Four, at the institutional level, is the book that remembers. After the crisis of Book Three, the people of God need to remember. The exodus. The wilderness provisions. The entry into the land. The kings who walked faithfully. The prophets who spoke. The countless small mercies across the centuries. All of it needs to be brought back into consciousness, rehearsed, given its proper place in the story. And Book Four does this through its historical psalms and its catalogs of God's benefits.

This practice is available to every believer who has gone through a Book Three kind of season. The recovery of faith after a crisis often begins with the deliberate rehearsal of what God has done. The believer writes down, or says aloud, or meditates privately on, the specific ways the Lord has met him in his own life. The answered prayers. The deliverances. The provisions. The comforts. The unexpected graces. The timing that could not have been coincidence. The sermons that spoke directly into a moment of need. The friends who showed up at the right time. The quiet impressions that turned out to be the Spirit speaking. All of these are the personal counterparts of the exodus narratives that Book Four recounts at the national level. And the remembering of them, when faith has been shaken, is part of how the faith is recovered. Book Four teaches the practice. Every believer who follows Book Four into Book Five is being trained in a discipline that will sustain him for the rest of his walk with the Lord.

PSALM 91

Under His Wings

*“He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High
will abide in the shadow of the Almighty.” —*

Psalms 91:1

Psalm 91 is one of the most extraordinary psalms of protection in the whole Psalter. It is the psalm a soldier has whispered before going into battle, the psalm a mother has prayed over a sleeping child, the psalm a believer has clung to in every season when the dangers of the world seemed to press in close. It is also, famously, the psalm Satan quoted when he tempted Jesus in the wilderness, which tells us something important about how the psalm is to be read and how it is not to be read.

He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. The opening verse establishes the condition under which the psalm’s promises operate. This is not a blanket protection offered to anyone who simply invokes the psalm’s words. It is a protection offered to the one who dwells in the shelter of the Most High, who has taken up residence in the shadow of the Almighty. The verbs are verbs of settled habitation. To dwell. To abide. This is not the occasional visit of a soul that sometimes remembers to pray. This is the settled dwelling of a soul that lives continually in the presence of God. And the protection follows from the dwelling.

I will say to the Lord, My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust. The psalmist is modeling the confession that the dwelling produces. The one who lives in the shelter of the

Most High learns to say, of the Lord, that he is my refuge. My fortress. My God. The possessive pronouns matter. This is not a theoretical confession about God in general. It is the personal attachment of one soul to one Lord, named and claimed as my God, the one in whom I trust.

For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence. He will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler. The imagery is bird-like. The believer is covered by the pinions of God, under the wings of God, like a chick sheltered under the outspread feathers of the parent bird. It is one of the most intimate images of protection in the Bible. The Lord is not a distant fortress commanding from a throne. He is a mother bird, covering her young with her own body, absorbing whatever threat might otherwise reach them. This is the tenderness of the protection the psalm promises. Faithfulness is the shield and the buckler, the defensive weapons that keep the threats from reaching the one sheltered.

You will not fear the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness, nor the destruction that wastes at noonday. A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you. The scope of the protection expands. Terrors of the night, dangers by day, plague in the dark, destruction at noon. Every hour of every day, every mode of threat, is named, and the psalm promises that none of them will reach the one who dwells in the shelter. A thousand falling. Ten thousand falling. The believer remains untouched. The language is military and vivid, and it is meant to produce in the reader the settled

confidence that no matter what is happening around him, he is kept.

But here the careful reader has to pause. The history of the people of God is full of believers who have died in plagues and fallen in battles and been struck by arrows. The psalm cannot be read as a guarantee that no believer will ever come to physical harm. The martyrs of the church, beginning with Stephen and running through every century since, testify against that reading. Jesus himself, who quoted this psalm back to Satan in the wilderness temptation, was crucified. Paul, who lived under the providence of the Lord, was beheaded. The early disciples were scattered, imprisoned, killed. Psalm 91 cannot mean what it seems to mean at the surface level. Either the psalm is false, or the protection it describes operates on a different level than the surface level of physical preservation.

The deeper reading is this. The protection the psalm describes is ultimately the protection of the soul, and the ultimate destination to which the soul is being protected is the dwelling in the shelter of the Most High that the psalm began with. The believer who dwells in that shelter may or may not be physically preserved in any particular crisis. But the soul that has taken up residence in God is protected from the one thing that truly matters, which is separation from God. The arrow may strike the body. The pestilence may take the mortal frame. But the soul hidden in God is kept, and the keeping is eternal, and the protection Psalm 91 describes is fulfilled in ways that go beyond any particular moment of earthly deliverance.

This is why Satan's use of the psalm in the wilderness temptation was a misuse. He quoted Psalm 91 to Jesus, inviting him to throw himself down from the pinnacle of the temple on the assumption that the promised protection would catch him. Jesus refused, not because the psalm was wrong, but because the psalm was not an invitation to test God. The protection of the Most High is not a mechanism to be triggered by our demands. It is a settled reality within which the one who dwells in the shelter lives his life, doing the Father's will, walking wherever the Father calls him to walk, and being kept, at the deepest level, by the one whose pinions cover him. Psalm 91 is the psalm of the trusting soul. It is not the psalm of the presumptuous one.

The psalm ends with the voice of God himself. Because he holds fast to me in love, I will deliver him; I will protect him, because he knows my name. When he calls to me, I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble; I will rescue him and honor him. With long life I will satisfy him and show him my salvation. The last line is particularly worth noticing. Not just protection. Not just rescue. I will show him my salvation. The destination of the one who dwells in the shelter is the vision of God's salvation itself. And in the fullness of time, the salvation of God has a name. Jesus. The one who is himself the Lord's salvation, whose name means salvation, who is the deliverance the psalm has been promising all along. Every believer who has dwelt in the shelter of the Most High has been being prepared to see the Son. And the sight of him, in his glory, is the satisfaction that the psalm finally promises.

PSALM 95

Today, If You Hear His Voice

“Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.” — Psalm 95:7–8

Psalm 95 is one of the psalms that has had the deepest liturgical impact of any psalm in the Psalter. In the Christian tradition, from the monastic hours onward, it has been the psalm with which the day’s worship begins. Called the Venite from its first word in Latin, come, Psalm 95 has opened the morning office for centuries. The believer who begins his day with Psalm 95 is doing what monks in the fourth century did, what Benedictines in the sixth century did, what Anglicans in the sixteenth century did, and what Christians around the world still do every morning. There is something about the psalm that lends itself to the opening of the day, the first gathering of the congregation, the beginning of the work of worship.

Oh come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise! The psalm opens with four imperatives, all of them inviting the congregation to do the same thing. Come. Sing. Let us come. Let us make a joyful noise. The fourfold invitation is not accidental. It is the rhetorical pattern of a leader gathering a congregation, calling them to begin the day’s worship, refusing to accept their listlessness as an excuse. Come. Come. Come. And once you have come, sing.

The Lord is named with a significant title. The rock of our salvation. The rock is the image of stability, permanence, refuge. But the rock here is specifically the rock of our salvation. Not a neutral rock, not a rock of any kind, but the rock that is our salvation. The believer's rock is not just strong. It is saving. It is the rock that has done something for us, the rock that has rescued us, the rock whose permanence is the guarantee of the permanence of our deliverance. And this is the rock the congregation is invited to approach with songs of praise.

For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods. In his hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also. The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land. The reasons for praise are cosmic. The Lord is a great God. The Lord is a great King above all gods. The Lord's hand holds the depths of the earth. The Lord's hand formed the dry land. These are creation claims, and they set the scope of the worship that is being invited. The congregation is not praising a local deity or a tribal god. They are praising the one who made the earth and the sea and everything in them. The smallness of the congregation gathered for worship is held against the largeness of the God they are worshipping. The comparison should produce humility, and then, on the far side of the humility, wonder.

Oh come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker! For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. The second movement of the psalm deepens the imagery. The great God who made the earth is our God. The cosmic King is our Maker. And the people who have been invited to come and sing are the sheep

of his hand, the flock of his pasture. The scale shifts from cosmic to pastoral. The enormity of the Lord does not keep him at a distance. He is our shepherd, as Psalm 23 had already taught, and the congregation is invited to come before him in the posture of sheep before their shepherd. Worship. Bow down. Kneel. The verbs of physical posture are not ornamental. They are descriptive of the proper response of the creature before the Creator who has also become the shepherd.

And then the psalm pivots, sharply, to warning. Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, when your fathers put me to the test and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work. The voice in these verses is the voice of God himself, speaking directly through the psalmist, addressing the congregation with an urgent reminder about the wilderness generation. Meribah and Massah were the places in the wilderness where Israel, having just been delivered from Egypt, quarreled with Moses and tested the Lord by demanding water. The place names themselves preserve the memory of the rebellion. Meribah means quarrel. Massah means testing. And the Lord, remembering those places, warns the current generation not to repeat the pattern.

Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts. The word today is the urgent word. The opportunity is now. The voice is speaking. And the choice before the hearer is whether to soften the heart and respond or to harden the heart and refuse. The wilderness generation hardened their hearts, and they forfeited the rest that had been offered to them. As I swore in my wrath, they shall not enter my rest. The forty

years in the wilderness were not the original plan. They were the consequence of the hardening. And the psalmist is warning every subsequent hearer of God's voice not to repeat the pattern.

The writer of Hebrews, in chapters three and four, picks up Psalm 95 and makes it one of the foundational texts for his exhortation to perseverance in the Christian faith. The today of Psalm 95, the writer argues, is still today. The rest that was forfeited by the wilderness generation was not only the rest of the promised land of Canaan. It was a deeper rest, the Sabbath rest that awaits the people of God, the eternal rest that is entered through faith in the one who has sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high. And the warning of Psalm 95 is therefore addressed, across the centuries, to every generation of believers. Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts. The invitation to enter the rest is still open. The voice is still speaking. And the response is still required.

This is why Psalm 95 has been the psalm of the morning office for centuries. The worshiping believer begins his day with the invitation to come and sing, and he also begins his day with the warning not to harden his heart against the voice that is calling him. The worship and the warning belong together. He cannot truly worship the Lord if he has hardened himself against his voice. And the today of his current morning is the only today he has. The psalm reminds him, before any other prayer is prayed, that the opportunity is now, the voice is speaking, and the response is required.

PSALM 96

Sing to the Lord a New Song

*“Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord,
all the earth!” — Psalm 96:1*

Psalm 96 stands near the center of the enthronement section of Book Four. Together with Psalms 93, 97, and 99, it sounds the great refrain *Yahweh malach*. The Lord reigns. The Lord has become king. The phrase, which appears in some form in each of these four psalms, is the answer Book Four gives to the unresolved covenant crisis of Book Three. The Davidic throne has fallen. The sanctuary has been destroyed. The people are in exile. And in the middle of that crisis, the Psalter raises its voice with the declaration that has not lost its force in three thousand years. *Yahweh malach*. The Lord reigns.

The psalm has a remarkable historical pedigree. First Chronicles 16 records that when David brought the ark of the covenant up to Jerusalem, he assigned a psalm to be sung before the ark by Asaph and his brothers. The psalm recorded in 1 Chronicles 16:23-33 is, almost word for word, the text of Psalm 96. The psalm we have, then, is not only a literary composition. It is the psalm David himself sang on the day the ark came into Jerusalem, the day the Lord visibly took up his dwelling in the city that would become his throne city. The psalm of the enthronement section was, in its first context, the psalm of the actual enthronement.

Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth! The new song is a recurring image in the Psalter. It appears in Psalm 33, in Psalm 40, in Psalm 98, in Psalm 144, and again

in Psalm 149. And it appears in the New Testament in Revelation 5 and Revelation 14 as the song the redeemed sing around the throne of the Lamb. The new song is the song that has not been sung before, the song that names a deliverance the old songs could not name, the song that creation will sing when the Lord comes to judge it in mercy.

Sing to the Lord, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples! The praise is missionary. It is not a private exercise of the worshiping community. It is a public declaration intended to reach the nations. The peoples are to hear what Israel has heard. The earth is to be told what only Israel has yet been told. The Lord who reigns over Israel reigns over the nations as well, and his reign must be proclaimed before he comes to take it in fullness.

For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised; he is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols, but the Lord made the heavens. The polemic is unmistakable. The nations have their gods. The gods of the nations are nothing. The Lord, who is to be praised among them, is the One who made the heavens that those nations look up to without knowing whose handiwork they are seeing. The psalm assumes the existence of other religions and announces, without apology, that they are mistaken.

Then the central declaration. Say among the nations, The Lord reigns! Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved; he will judge the peoples with equity. The Yahweh malach formula is to be carried to the nations. The reign that Israel knows is to be declared to those who do not yet know it. And the reign, when it is declared, will be heard not as threat

but as good news. Because the One who reigns will judge with equity. The judgment of the Lord, in this psalm, is not the terror of an arbitrary tyrant. It is the relief of a long-awaited justice finally come.

Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; let the field exult, and everything in it! Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the Lord, for he comes, for he comes to judge the earth. The closing is one of the most beautiful passages in the Psalter. Creation itself rejoices at the coming of the One who will judge it. The heavens are glad. The earth rejoices. The sea roars. The fields exult. The trees sing. The judgment of the Lord is not feared by creation. Creation has been groaning under the weight of human rebellion, and the judgment is the moment when the groaning ends.

He will judge the world in righteousness, and the peoples in his faithfulness. The judgment is in righteousness and in faithfulness. Not in caprice. Not in vengeance. In the qualities the Lord revealed at Sinai and that Psalm 86 and Psalm 145 have lifted back to him. The same qualities by which he saves are the qualities by which he judges. The judgment of the One who is merciful and gracious will be the judgment that completes the mercy and the grace.

For the Christian reader, Psalm 96 is the song of the kingdom that has come and is coming. The Lord reigns. The new song has been begun, in Christ, at the resurrection, and the song will be completed at his return. The nations are being told even now. Creation is even now groaning toward the day when the trees will actually sing. The judgment will come, in

righteousness and faithfulness, and it will be the good news that the psalm already calls it.

PSALM 100

Enter His Gates with Thanksgiving

“Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise! Give thanks to him; bless his name!” — Psalm 100:4

Psalm 100 is one of the shortest psalms in the Psalter. Five verses. Forty-some words in Hebrew. And yet it has been set to music more often than almost any other psalm, memorized by countless believers, recited in countless worship services, and loved across centuries of Christian practice. The psalm is small, but it carries enormous weight, and the weight is in the specific quality of the invitation it extends.

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth! Serve the Lord with gladness! Come into his presence with singing! The psalm opens with three imperatives. Make a joyful noise. Serve with gladness. Come with singing. All three verbs are addressed to all the earth. This is not a local worship. This is not the worship of Israel alone, or of the temple alone, or of the priests alone. This is the worship of all the earth, summoned into the presence of the Lord to offer what creatures were made to offer. The joyful noise, the gladness, the singing.

The word translated joyful noise is *teruah*, which can mean a shout of triumph, a blast of the trumpet, or the acclamation of

a crowd. It is a loud word. Psalm 100 is not inviting the congregation to a quiet reverent worship. It is inviting them to a loud one, a shouting one, a triumphant one. Whatever dignified whisper we sometimes associate with worship, the psalm is pressing for something more. Make a joyful noise. Let the worship be heard. Let the gladness be unmistakable. Let the whole earth know what is happening when the people of God gather to worship.

Know that the Lord, he is God! It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture. The grounds of the worship are now given. Know that the Lord, he is God. The Hebrew construction is emphatic, it is he, no one else, who is God. The worship the psalm is inviting is not a generic religious worship that could be offered to any deity. It is the worship of the one true God, the Lord, the God of Israel, and the recognition that he is God is itself an act of worship. It is he who made us. The creation claim is the ground of the relationship. And we are his. The belonging is real. We are his people, the sheep of his pasture. The shepherd imagery returns, this time in the corporate mode, the whole congregation as the flock of the one shepherd.

Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise! Give thanks to him; bless his name! The movement of the psalm is now toward the temple, or toward whatever the temple has become for the worshiper. Enter his gates. Enter his courts. The psalm is describing the approach of pilgrims to the sanctuary, the moment when the worshipers pass through the outer gates and into the inner courts, the moment when the approach becomes the arrival. And the instruction is clear. Enter with thanksgiving. Enter with praise. Do not come into

his presence empty-handed. Do not come in silence. Come giving thanks. Come blessing his name. The posture of the entering matters as much as the fact of the entering.

For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations. The final verse gives the deepest reason for all of it. The Lord is good. His steadfast love endures forever. His faithfulness to all generations. Three declarations, each of them a settled truth about the character of the God who is being worshiped. Goodness. Steadfast love. Faithfulness. These are not just things the Lord does. They are things he is. And they are the reasons the psalm has been inviting all the earth to worship.

For the Christian, Psalm 100 has been the most approachable of the psalms of praise. It is short enough to memorize in a single sitting. It is simple enough for children to understand. It is universal enough to be prayed by the whole church from Sunday to Sunday. And it carries, in its five short verses, the whole theology of the Psalter's final movement. Praise is the destination. All the earth is invited. The Lord, who is our maker and our shepherd, is the one whose gates we are entering, and his goodness and steadfast love and faithfulness are the reasons we have come.

There is one more thing worth noting about Psalm 100. It is, in the Psalter's arrangement, the doxology of the enthronement psalms of Book Four. The psalms that preceded it in the book, from Psalm 93 through Psalm 99, had been declaring, again and again, that the Lord reigns. Psalm 100 is the response. Given that the Lord reigns, this is what the nations are to do. Make a joyful noise. Serve with gladness. Come with singing. The short psalm is, in effect, the point

toward which the previous seven psalms had been reaching. The Lord reigns, and therefore the nations worship. The Lord is king, and therefore the whole earth is summoned into his presence. Psalm 100, small as it is, is the doxology at the heart of Book Four, and every subsequent psalm in the book and in Book Five will be building on what it has declared.

Reading the Promises Rightly

Psalm 91 has been, across the history of Christian practice, both the most comforting and the most misused of the psalms of protection. It has been prayed faithfully by countless believers in genuinely dangerous circumstances, and it has also been misread by presumptuous ones who imagined the psalm guaranteed them immunity from the ordinary sufferings of the world. A word about how the psalm should be read, beyond what the anchor chapter already offered.

The first thing to notice is the conditional structure. The psalm's promises are addressed to one who dwells in the shelter of the Most High, one who abides in the shadow of the Almighty, one who has made the Lord his refuge, one who has said of the Lord, my God in whom I trust. The protection is not unconditionally promised to anyone who happens to open the Bible to Psalm 91. It is promised to the one whose interior life is settled in the presence of God. The promise attaches to a particular kind of soul, and the soul in question is the one who has taken up continuous residence in the Lord's shelter.

The second thing to notice is that the promises describe spiritual realities in concrete imagery. The arrow that flies by day and the pestilence that stalks in darkness are real dangers.

The psalm promises that such things will not come near the one who dwells in the shelter. But the history of the faithful includes many believers who were struck by literal arrows and died of literal pestilences. The promise cannot mean what its surface words seem to say. Either the psalm is wrong, or the surface reading is inadequate.

The adequate reading, which the church has held for centuries, is that the psalm is describing the ultimate safety of the soul that dwells in God. The arrows of the enemy may strike the body. The pestilence of the age may take the mortal frame. But the soul hidden in God is kept, and the keeping is eternal. No arrow can reach the believer's standing before God. No pestilence can separate him from the love of Christ. The protection the psalm describes, at its deepest level, is the protection of the union with Christ that no created thing can break. Paul captures the same reality in Romans 8. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? Through all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. The list of Romans 8 includes the very things Psalm 91 lists. And Paul's answer is the same as the psalm's answer. None of these things can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This reading does not empty the psalm of its comfort. It deepens the comfort. A psalm that promised immunity from physical suffering would be a psalm that the martyrs could not have prayed. But a psalm that promises the ultimate keeping of the soul, through every physical suffering and through death itself, is a psalm every believer can pray, including the martyrs. And the martyrs did pray it. Stephen, as he was being

stoned, saw the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. The keeping was operating exactly as Psalm 91 had promised, even while the stones were being thrown. The arrows flew. The pestilence stalked. And the soul of Stephen was kept, brought home to the presence of Christ, received by the one whose shelter he had dwelt in through the whole of his earthly life.

Every Christian who has buried a faithful believer has had to grapple with Psalm 91. Why did the believer die? Why did the pestilence reach him? Why did the Lord not keep him in the sense the surface of the psalm seems to promise? The answer is that the Lord did keep him, in the sense that matters ultimately. He is with him. His soul is in the shelter. The pestilence took his body, but the body is not where the keeping operates at its deepest level. The keeping operated. The shelter held. And the believer who died is now, as Psalm 91 promises, satisfied with long life, but the long life is the life of the resurrection, and he will see the salvation of the Lord in a form the surface of the psalm could only gesture at.

Today, As Long as It Is Called Today

The writer of Hebrews makes Psalm 95 the foundation of one of the most extended exhortations in the New Testament. Hebrews 3 and 4 unpack the today of the psalm in ways that deserve the believer's sustained attention, because the application reaches forward through every generation and lands directly in the present moment of every reader who picks up the text.

The argument of Hebrews 3 begins by quoting Psalm 95 in full. Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion. Then the writer applies the warning. Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called today, that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. The today of Psalm 95, the writer is arguing, is not a today that has passed. It is a today that is still today, every day that the church is gathering, every morning that a believer wakes up to a new opportunity to hear God's voice. The deceitfulness of sin is not a problem the wilderness generation faced and the church has overcome. It is a problem the church faces continually, and the antidote is the daily exhortation of one believer to another, the continual reminder that today is today, and the response to God's voice cannot be postponed indefinitely.

This is one of the most pastoral arguments in the New Testament, and it has shaped the church's understanding of how believers are to walk together. Christianity is not primarily a solitary religion. The believer who tries to walk alone, without the daily exhortation of other believers, is in genuine danger. The deceitfulness of sin is not visible to the one being deceived. The hardening of the heart is not noticed by the one whose heart is hardening. By the time the believer recognizes that something has gone wrong, the hardening has often progressed past the point where he can correct it on his own. What he needs is the voice of another believer, speaking the today into his life, calling him back from the drift before the drift becomes a fall. Hebrews is exhorting the church to be

that voice for one another, and Psalm 95 is the foundation on which the exhortation is built.

The writer continues into chapter 4. So then, there remains a sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his. Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. The rest the wilderness generation forfeited was not only the rest of the promised land of Canaan. It was a deeper rest, the sabbath rest that awaits the people of God, the eternal rest that is entered through faith in the one who has sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high. And the entry into this rest is not automatic. It requires striving, faith, perseverance, the continual hearing of the voice and the continual softening of the heart in response. Psalm 95's warning is not addressed to a vanished people. It is addressed to every generation of believers who hear God's voice today and who must respond to that voice today.

This is why Psalm 95 has been the morning office psalm of the Christian church for more than fifteen centuries. The believer who begins his day with this psalm is being reminded, before any other thought enters his mind, that the today he has been given is the today in which God is speaking. The voice will be heard if he will listen. The hardening of the heart will be avoided if he chooses to soften. The rest is open if he will enter. And tomorrow is not promised. Today is the day. The Venite has been sung at dawn for centuries because every dawn is the dawn of a new today, and the response of the worshiper to today's voice will shape the whole day that follows.

* * *

Book Four has done its work. The covenant crisis of Book Three has been answered, not by argument but by the deeper reality that the Lord himself has been the dwelling place of his people in all generations. Moses has returned to remind the reader that the foundation is older than the institutions that the crisis had shaken. The enthronement psalms have declared, again and again, that the Lord reigns regardless of the political fortunes of any human king. And the pattern of remembering, through Psalms 103, 105, and 106, has rehearsed for the reader the long history of God's faithfulness across the generations.

Book Five, which we now approach, is the longest book of the Psalter and the most diverse in its moods. It opens with a psalm that gathers the redeemed from the four corners of the earth. It contains the Songs of Ascents, the pilgrim songs that carry the worshipers up to Jerusalem. It preserves, at its center, the longest psalm in the Psalter, a meditation on the Torah that reaches across a hundred and seventy-six verses. It returns, near its end, to the Davidic covenant with renewed hope. And it closes with the final hallelujah that summons every breathing creature into the praise of the Lord.

This is a great deal of material to walk, and this volume treats only six psalms from Book Five. The selection is not exhaustive. It is representative. The reader who walks it will emerge with a sense of the book's theological movement and a taste of its dominant flavors, but the walking does not pretend to be a comprehensive commentary. Book Five in its entirety would require its own volume, and perhaps someday

someone will write that volume. For now, the six psalms we have chosen (110, 119, 118, 121, 139, 150) will serve as windows into a book that the reader is commended to explore further on his own.

Let us begin.

BOOK FIVE OF THE PSALTER

The Torah of Praise

Psalms 107–150 | The Journey Home and the Eternal Song

The Deuteronomy Book of the Psalter

Book Five of the Psalter is the longest book in the collection, containing forty-four psalms. It corresponds to Deuteronomy, the fifth book of Moses, and the correspondence illuminates both. Deuteronomy is Moses' final sermon, delivered on the plains of Moab as Israel prepared to cross the Jordan and enter the promised land. It is the book of the second giving of the law, the book in which Moses rehearses the whole journey from Egypt to the border of the land and calls the next generation to renew the covenant before they take possession of what their parents had forfeited. Deuteronomy is the book of return and of anticipation, the book that stands at the threshold of the promised land and looks both backward and forward from that vantage point.

Book Five of the Psalter is similarly threshold-like. It opens with Psalm 107, whose refrain gathers the redeemed of the Lord from east and west, from north and south, from every region to which they have been scattered. It contains the Songs of Ascents, Psalms 120 through 134, the pilgrim songs that accompanied the three annual journeys to Jerusalem for the great feasts. It contains Psalm 119, the longest psalm in the Psalter at one hundred and seventy-six verses, a sustained

meditation on the enduring word of God that corresponds thematically to Deuteronomy's centering on the Torah. And it closes with the final five psalms, Psalms 146 through 150, each beginning and ending with Hallelujah, each more insistent than the last in its summons to the whole creation to praise the Lord.

The dominant mood of Book Five is not the crisis of Book Three or the recalibration of Book Four. It is celebration. The redeemed have been gathered. The exile has ended. The journey is arriving. And the book responds to the arrival in the only way it can respond, with sustained, increasing, finally overwhelming praise. Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. That is the closing line of the whole Psalter, and it is the destination toward which Book Five has been climbing from its first psalm onward.

But this celebration is not naive. It is the celebration of a people who have walked through the whole Psalter. They have learned the individual prayer of Book One. They have cried the communal lament of Book Two. They have sat in the darkness of Book Three. They have found the foundation of Book Four. And now, in Book Five, they have come out into the praise that is the proper end of the journey. The hallelujahs of the final psalms are not shallow. They are the hallelujahs of those who know what the journey costs and who have nevertheless arrived. The whole Psalter is the course of preparation for the final praise, and the final praise, when it comes, has the depth of everything that has come before it.

A note on the selection of psalms in this volume. Book Five contains forty-four psalms, and this volume treats six of them. That is a small sample of a large book. The selection has been

deliberate. Psalm 110 is the Psalter's most explicit messianic text and cannot be omitted from any serious treatment. Psalm 119 is the Torah Psalm, the longest in the Psalter, and its sheer length and thematic importance require treatment. Psalm 118 is the rejected-stone psalm the New Testament quotes repeatedly. Psalm 121 opens the Songs of Ascents with one of the most beloved images in the Psalter. Psalm 139 is the great psalm of God's omniscience and omnipresence. And Psalm 150 closes the whole Psalter with the final hallelujah that is the destination of everything. Six psalms, chosen for their theological weight and for the different facets of Book Five's praise they illuminate. The reader who walks them will emerge with a coherent sense of what Book Five is doing, without any pretense that six psalms can cover the whole of the book's forty-four.

PSALM 110

The Priest-King of Melchizedek

“The Lord says to my Lord: Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.” — Psalm 110:1

The Most Quoted Psalm

Psalm 110 is the most frequently quoted psalm in the New Testament. The apostles and the writer of Hebrews return to it again and again, citing it in arguments about who Jesus is, about his relationship to David, about his priesthood, about his authority over the powers, about his final triumph over all his enemies. No other psalm in the Psalter receives this kind of sustained attention from the New Testament writers. And the reason is that Psalm 110 is, in the New Testament’s reading, the Old Testament text in which the mystery of Christ’s identity is most fully anticipated.

The psalm is short, only seven verses in most translations, but each verse carries enormous theological weight. And the opening verse alone has generated more Christian reflection than almost any other single verse in the Hebrew Bible. Jesus himself quoted it. Peter quoted it at Pentecost. Paul alluded to it in Romans and in 1 Corinthians and in Ephesians. The writer of Hebrews built an entire theological argument around it in chapters five through seven. Psalm 110 is, in a very real sense, the Old Testament text through which the New Testament writers learned to understand who Jesus was.

Before we walk the verses, a note on the superscription. A Psalm of David. This is not a trivial detail. The psalm is attributed to David, and the attribution matters for one of the arguments Jesus will make from it, as we will see. David is the speaker. David is the one who receives the oracle the psalm records. And David is the one whose authority as the ancestor of the Messianic king makes the psalm's declarations carry the weight they carry in the New Testament's reading.

The Lord Says to My Lord

The Lord says to my Lord: Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.

The opening verse is one of the most theologically loaded sentences in the whole Old Testament, and the loading is in a single grammatical feature that English readers often miss. The first word, translated Lord, is Yahweh in Hebrew, the personal name of the God of Israel. The second word, translated my Lord, is adoni in Hebrew, which means my master or my lord, a title of respect addressed to a human superior. The speaker, David, is reporting an oracle in which Yahweh, the God of Israel, is speaking to someone David calls adoni, my Lord. David is addressing this second figure as his superior. And the second figure, David's Lord, is being invited by Yahweh to sit at the right hand of the divine throne.

This creates a puzzle that the New Testament will find decisive. If David is the author of the psalm, and if David's Lord is being invited to sit at Yahweh's right hand, then David's Lord must be a figure greater than David himself. A king is not in the habit of addressing his own son as his Lord.

A father does not, in the normal patterns of Near Eastern kinship, call his descendant my master. So who is this figure, this adoni of David, who is greater than David and who is invited to sit at the right hand of God?

Jesus uses precisely this puzzle in the confrontation recorded in Matthew 22, Mark 12, and Luke 20. The Pharisees have been testing him. He turns the table and asks them a question. What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he? The answer, which every Pharisee knew, was that the Christ would be the son of David, the descendant of the royal line who would fulfill the Davidic covenant. Jesus then asks, How is it then that David, in the Spirit, calls him Lord, saying, The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand. If David calls him Lord, how is he his son? The Pharisees could not answer. The puzzle of Psalm 110 was unsolvable within the framework they had been using. A figure who was both the son of David and the Lord of David required a theological category they had not yet formed.

The New Testament's answer, of course, is that the figure is Jesus. He is the son of David according to the flesh, descended from David through the Davidic line. He is also the Son of God according to the Spirit, the Lord of David in his eternal identity, the one whom David, speaking by the Spirit, addressed as his Lord because David was speaking about a descendant who was greater than himself, greater than any merely human king, the divine-human figure whose right to the title Lord did not derive from his descent from David but from his eternal identity as the Son of the Father. Psalm 110 is, in this reading, the Old Testament text in which the two natures of Christ are most clearly foreshadowed. Son of David,

and Lord of David. Human, and divine. Both, simultaneously, in the one person.

Sit at My Right Hand

Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool. The invitation to sit at the right hand is the invitation to share in the divine sovereignty. The right hand of the king was the place of highest authority, the seat of the one whose rule was exercised alongside the ruler's own. To sit at the right hand of God is to be invited to exercise divine authority, to share in the divine reign, to participate in the work that only God can do. And the one David calls my Lord is being invited to this position.

Until I make your enemies your footstool. The footstool image is vivid. An ancient king, seated on his throne, would sometimes rest his feet on a footstool made in the shape of defeated enemies, or bearing the inscribed names of conquered nations, or simply symbolically representing the subjugation of his foes. The promise is that Yahweh himself will place the enemies of the one at his right hand under his feet. The one at the right hand does not have to defeat his own enemies by his own arm. Yahweh is the one who will make them into the footstool. The Lord at the right hand only has to sit, and the defeating is done by God.

The New Testament applies this verse to the ascension of Christ. Peter, preaching at Pentecost, quotes Psalm 110 and declares that Jesus, having been raised from the dead, was exalted at the right hand of God and from there has poured out the Spirit that the gathered crowd was witnessing. David,

Peter argues, did not ascend into the heavens. It was not David to whom the oracle of Psalm 110 ultimately applied. It was the descendant of David who rose from the dead and who has been seated at the right hand of God, and who is therefore both Lord and Christ. Psalm 110 is not merely a prediction that was fulfilled. It is the theological framework within which the ascension of Jesus has to be understood. He is the one at the right hand. He is the one whose enemies Yahweh is making into his footstool. And the pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost is the proof that the exaltation has occurred.

The Mighty Scepter

The Lord sends forth from Zion your mighty scepter. Rule in the midst of your enemies!

The second verse expands the picture. The Lord sends forth the scepter of the exalted king from Zion, which is to say from the seat of divine authority. The scepter is the symbol of kingship, the rod of rule, the instrument by which the sovereign extends his authority into the territory he governs. And the instruction that accompanies the sending of the scepter is, rule in the midst of your enemies. Not after the enemies have been subdued. Not once the opposition has been cleared away. In the midst of them. Right now. The king is to rule in territory that has not yet fully acknowledged his rule, and the rule itself is part of how the acknowledgment will eventually come.

This is the situation of the church in the present age. The one at the right hand is ruling now. The scepter has been sent from Zion. But the ruling is happening in the midst of enemies who

have not yet been made the footstool. The kingdom of Christ is real and present and powerful, but it is not yet the kingdom in its final form in which every knee has bowed and every tongue has confessed. The not-yet of the kingdom runs through the present age, and the church lives in the tension between the already of the exaltation and the not-yet of the final submission. Psalm 110 captures this tension in a single verse. Rule in the midst of your enemies. That is where the ruling happens. That is where the believer lives. And the believer's task is to live faithfully in the middle of the ruling, trusting that the footstool is being prepared even when the enemies are still active.

Your People Will Offer Themselves Freely

Your people will offer themselves freely on the day of your power, in holy garments; from the womb of the morning, the dew of your youth will be yours.

The third verse is among the most poetic in the psalm, and the poetry is part of what makes its meaning elusive. Your people will offer themselves freely. The Hebrew is *nedabot*.

Nedabot are freewill offerings, the voluntary contributions that Israelites brought to the temple not because they were required by the law but because the heart of the worshiper moved him to bring them. The psalm is saying that the people of the exalted king will come to him as freewill offerings, not compelled, not conscripted, but moved by the heart to present themselves to his service.

This is a crucial detail. The reign of Christ is not a reign of compulsion. He does not drag his subjects to himself against their will. His people come to him freely, because the Spirit has made them willing, because the love of God has drawn them, because the beauty of the one they are serving has captured them in a way that no coercion ever could. On the day of your power, in holy garments. The garments are the garments of the priesthood, and the image is of a people who have themselves become priests, offering themselves as living sacrifices to the one who reigns from the right hand of God. This is the royal priesthood of 1 Peter 2, the kingdom and priests of Revelation 5. The psalm is describing the church, gathered to the exalted king, offering itself freely in the holy garments of priestly service.

From the womb of the morning, the dew of your youth will be yours. The second half of the verse is more obscure in the Hebrew, but the sense reaches toward the freshness and multiplicity of the people gathered to the king. The dew of the morning is young, abundant, fresh. It covers the ground in countless droplets. The people of the exalted king are like that. Fresh. Abundant. Multiplying. Every generation producing a new morning of worshipers, the church ever renewed by the Spirit who was poured out after the ascension.

The Order of Melchizedek

The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.

This is the verse that the writer of Hebrews will build an entire theology on. The exalted king, seated at the right hand of God,

ruling in the midst of his enemies, receiving the freewill offerings of his people, is also a priest. And not just any priest. A priest forever. A priest after the order of Melchizedek.

Melchizedek is a mysterious figure who appears only twice in the Hebrew Bible before the New Testament picks him up. He appears in Genesis 14, where he meets Abraham after Abraham has defeated the kings who had captured Lot, and where he is described as the king of Salem and priest of God Most High. He brings out bread and wine. He blesses Abraham. He receives a tithe from Abraham. And then he disappears, without any further account of who he was, where he came from, or what became of him. The second appearance is here, in Psalm 110, where the exalted king is declared to be a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.

The writer of Hebrews makes much of Melchizedek's strangeness. He was without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life. He was, in the argument of Hebrews, a type of the Son of God, who is truly without beginning and end, truly outside the genealogical succession, truly an eternal priest. The order of Melchizedek is the order of a priesthood that does not end, that is not passed from father to son, that is not dependent on the Levitical line or the Aaronic succession. It is an eternal priesthood, and the one who holds it holds it forever.

This was, to the first-century Jewish reader, a shocking claim. The priesthood of Israel was the Aaronic priesthood. The Levites served in the temple. The high priest came from the line of Aaron. These were the appointed priests of the covenant, and no other priesthood was legitimate within the framework of Israel's religion. But Psalm 110 had been

declaring, for a thousand years, that there was another priesthood, an older priesthood, a priesthood that the Aaronic priesthood was itself a shadow of. And the New Testament picked up this declaration and applied it to Jesus. He is the priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. His priesthood is not Aaronic. It does not depend on Levitical descent. It is the priesthood of the one who is himself the eternal Son, and it is therefore a priesthood that can accomplish what no Aaronic priest could ever accomplish. It can offer a sacrifice that does not need to be repeated. It can mediate a covenant that cannot be broken. It can bring its people into the actual presence of God rather than into a symbolic space that represents that presence.

Hebrews 7 unpacks this. The Levitical priests were many in number, because death prevented them from continuing in office. But he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them. The priesthood of Melchizedek is the priesthood of the one who always lives. His intercession does not cease. His priesthood does not expire. His mediation between God and his people continues without interruption from the moment of his exaltation at the right hand of God through every moment of the church's life until the consummation of the kingdom. This is the priesthood Psalm 110 declared, and this is the priesthood the New Testament sees fulfilled in Christ.

Christ and the Exalted King

Christ and the Exalted King: Psalm 110 is the Psalter's most explicit portrait of the exalted Christ, and every line of it finds its fulfillment in him. The Lord says to my Lord, because the Father addresses the Son. Sit at my right hand, because the ascension has placed him there. Until I make your enemies your footstool, because the consummation has not yet arrived but is certain. The Lord sends forth from Zion your mighty scepter, because the authority of Christ extends from the heavenly Zion into every territory of this world. Rule in the midst of your enemies, because this is the very situation of the church in the present age. Your people will offer themselves freely on the day of your power, because the Spirit has made willing a people who were formerly hostile. You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek, because the priesthood of Christ is eternal and does not pass from him to a successor. Every declaration of the psalm is fulfilled in one person, and the person is Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, the Son of God, the Son of David, the Lord of David, the priest-king at the right hand of the Father, who is even now interceding for his people and ruling in the midst of his enemies and preparing the footstool that will one day be finished, when every knee bows and every tongue confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Psalm 110

was always about him. And every Christian who prays it now prays it to him.

The Melchizedek Puzzle

To understand what Psalm 110 is doing when it declares the exalted king a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek, we have to return to the one other place in the Hebrew Bible where Melchizedek appears. He is named in Genesis 14, in a brief and strange episode that has puzzled interpreters for three thousand years.

The context of Genesis 14 is a regional war. Four kings from the east had invaded the territory around the Dead Sea. Five local kings had rebelled against them. The eastern kings had won the battle and had taken captives, including Lot, Abraham's nephew. Abraham, when he heard about it, gathered his household forces, pursued the eastern kings, attacked them at night, and recovered the captives along with the plunder. He was returning from the victory when he was met by two kings. The king of Sodom, who had been one of the defeated locals, came out to meet him. And another king, Melchizedek, king of Salem, also came out to meet him. Salem was almost certainly an early name for Jerusalem. Melchizedek's name means, in Hebrew, king of righteousness. His title as king of Salem means king of peace. Righteousness and peace. The names themselves are significant.

And Melchizedek, Genesis 14 tells us, was priest of God Most High. El Elyon in the Hebrew. The Most High God. This is one of the most unusual statements in the whole Pentateuch. Before there was an Aaronic priesthood, before there was a

Levitical tribe, before there was even a covenant with Abraham formalized in the Mosaic sense, there was a priest of God Most High, Melchizedek, whose priesthood was entirely outside the framework that would later define Israelite worship. And this Melchizedek brought out bread and wine. He blessed Abraham. He blessed God Most High, the possessor of heaven and earth. And Abraham, the father of the faithful, the one through whom the whole covenant line would run, gave Melchizedek a tithe of everything he had recovered.

This is the detail that the writer of Hebrews will seize on. Abraham gave Melchizedek a tithe. This means, in the logic of the Hebrew Bible, that Abraham recognized Melchizedek as his superior. The one who tithes is the one acknowledging the authority of the one who receives the tithe. And Abraham, the patriarch of the covenant line, tithed to this mysterious priest-king whose lineage is unrecorded, whose birth and death are not mentioned, whose origin and destination are hidden from the reader. Melchizedek appears, blesses Abraham, receives the tithe, and disappears. He is never heard from again in the narrative of Genesis, or in the rest of the Pentateuch, or in any of the historical books of the Hebrew Bible.

Until Psalm 110. A thousand years after Genesis 14, David writes a psalm in which the Lord declares, of David's Lord, You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. The priest-king of Jerusalem, the one who had blessed Abraham, the one whose priesthood was older than the Aaronic priesthood, is invoked as the pattern for the eternal priesthood of the exalted king. And the declaration is sealed with an oath. The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind. The priesthood of Melchizedek, whatever it was, is

being conferred on the one at the right hand of God, and the conferring is permanent, unchangeable, eternal.

What Hebrews Draws Out

The writer of Hebrews, a thousand years after Psalm 110 and two thousand years after Genesis 14, takes up these two texts and builds an extended theological argument around them. Chapters 5, 6, and especially 7 of Hebrews are dedicated to the priesthood of Melchizedek and its fulfillment in Christ. The argument is one of the most sustained pieces of Old Testament interpretation anywhere in the New Testament, and it rewards slow reading.

The writer notes, first, that Melchizedek is presented in Genesis without any genealogy. He is without father, without mother, without recorded ancestry. Having neither beginning of days nor end of life, the writer says. This is not a claim that Melchizedek was literally eternal, a divine being who had come to earth. It is a claim about the silence of Genesis. The text does not tell us where Melchizedek came from. The text does not tell us when he died. He appears, and he departs, and the absence of the genealogical data is itself theologically significant. In the world of the Hebrew Bible, priests had to prove their descent. Levitical priests especially. The whole priesthood of Israel after Moses was dependent on the ability to trace one's lineage to Aaron. But Melchizedek had no such lineage, and he was still, emphatically, a priest of God Most High. His priesthood did not depend on descent.

This is the point the writer of Hebrews is after. The priesthood of Jesus does not depend on descent either. Jesus was not of

the tribe of Levi. He was of the tribe of Judah. If the Aaronic priesthood were the only legitimate priesthood, Jesus could not be a priest at all. But the priesthood of Melchizedek operates on a different basis. It is not a priesthood of descent. It is a priesthood of direct appointment by God, conferred without reference to tribal lineage. And Jesus is a priest in this order, a priest forever, a priest whose office does not depend on the accidents of genealogy.

Consider how great this man was to whom Abraham the patriarch gave a tenth of the spoils! The writer of Hebrews presses the point. Abraham, who is celebrated through the whole Hebrew Bible as the father of the faithful, the recipient of the covenant, the one from whom the whole people of Israel descended, gave a tithe to Melchizedek. This means that Melchizedek, whoever he was, was greater than Abraham. And since Levi, the ancestor of the whole Aaronic priesthood, descended from Abraham, Levi himself was, so to speak, in the loins of Abraham when Abraham tithed to Melchizedek. The whole Levitical priesthood, the writer of Hebrews argues, was anticipatively acknowledging its subordination to the priesthood of Melchizedek through the action of its ancestor Abraham. The Levitical priesthood is a subset. The Melchizedekian priesthood is the larger framework within which the Levitical one operates, and the Messiah, who holds the Melchizedekian priesthood, is greater than any priest who ever served under the Aaronic system.

A Priesthood That Does Not End

The great difference between the Aaronic priesthood and the Melchizedekian priesthood, in the argument of Hebrews, is

that the Aaronic priests died. They held their office for a generation and then passed it on to the next. Generation after generation, priests came and went. The priesthood continued, but no individual priest held it forever. The office was passed on because the holders of the office kept dying.

Jesus' priesthood is different. He holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them. This is one of the most comforting declarations in the whole New Testament. The believer who approaches God through Jesus is approaching through a priest who does not die, whose office does not expire, whose intercession does not pause, whose availability does not fluctuate with the shift changes of an earthly priesthood. Jesus always lives. He always intercedes. Every moment of every day, for every believer who draws near to God through him, he is interceding. The intercession does not stop when the believer stops praying. It does not pause when the believer falls asleep. It does not expire when the believer himself dies. The priest lives forever, and the priesthood is therefore a continuous, uninterrupted reality that runs through the whole Christian life and beyond it into eternity.

This is what Psalm 110 was declaring, a thousand years in advance. The priesthood of the exalted king, the priesthood after the order of Melchizedek, is the priesthood that does not end. The sacrifice does not need to be repeated. The mediation does not need to be reopened each day. The believer who has been brought into the presence of God through the blood of Jesus is in the presence of God permanently, because the

priest who brought him in is permanently serving on his behalf. This is the ground of Christian assurance. This is the foundation of the peace that passes understanding. The priest lives forever, and therefore the believer is kept forever.

The Sacrifice That Does Not Repeat

Alongside the eternity of the priesthood, the writer of Hebrews develops a second point. The sacrifice of the Melchizedekian priest does not need to be repeated. The Aaronic priests offered sacrifices year after year, day after day, sacrifice after sacrifice. The sacrifices accomplished something, but they did not accomplish everything, and their continuing repetition was the visible sign that they were not sufficient. If they had been sufficient, they would have stopped being offered. The fact that they continued was the evidence that the work had not been completed.

Christ's sacrifice, by contrast, was offered once for all. Hebrews 10 is emphatic on this. Every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. The sitting down is the sign of the completion. The priest stands while the work continues. The priest sits when the work is done. And Christ, having offered the one sacrifice that accomplishes what all the repeated sacrifices could not accomplish, has sat down. Psalm 110 had seen this posture a thousand years before it happened.

Sit at my right hand, the Father says to the exalted Son. And the sitting is the sitting of the priest whose work is finished.

This matters immensely for the Christian life. Every believer who has been saved through the blood of Jesus has been saved by a sacrifice that does not need to be repeated. He does not need to add to the work of Christ. He does not need to offer his own supplementary sacrifices to make up for what Christ's sacrifice left incomplete. He does not need to keep coming back to the cross as if the cross had somehow been insufficient the first time. The cross was sufficient. It was more than sufficient. It perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. And the believer who has been brought into this sufficiency lives the rest of his life in the settled assurance that what Christ accomplished is what he now possesses, and what he possesses is not going to be taken from him by any failure of his own.

The logic of Psalm 110's priesthood is the logic of the Christian assurance of salvation. The priest is eternal. The sacrifice is sufficient. The intercession is continuous. The Father, who accepted the work of the Son, does not revisit his acceptance. The believer who has been united to the Son is united to him forever, and the forever is secured by the one who holds the priesthood forever. This is what Psalm 110 was preparing the people of God to understand. And this is what Hebrews, reading Psalm 110 in the light of Christ's resurrection and ascension, finally made explicit.

The Shattering of His Enemies

The psalm does not end on a pastoral note. Its closing verses are fierce, and we should not pretend otherwise. The Lord is at your right hand; he will shatter kings on the day of his wrath. He will execute judgment among the nations, filling them with corpses; he will shatter chiefs over the wide earth. He will drink from the brook by the way; therefore he will lift up his head.

The fierceness of these verses has troubled many modern readers. They prefer a gentler portrait of the exalted Christ, the suffering servant who laid down his life, the shepherd who tends the sheep, the friend of sinners who ate at the tables of tax collectors. These portraits of Jesus are all true. They are all in the gospels. But they are not the whole portrait. The Christ of the New Testament is also the Christ who will return in power, who will judge the living and the dead, who will separate the sheep from the goats, who will say to those on his left, depart from me. The gentle Jesus and the returning judge are the same person, and the Psalter had been saying so for a thousand years before the New Testament made the connection explicit.

Psalm 110 is, in some sense, the text that holds both sides of the portrait together. The exalted priest-king, seated at the right hand of the Father, is the one who intercedes for every sinner who draws near to God through him. He is also the one who will shatter kings on the day of his wrath. The priesthood and the judgment are not in tension. They are two aspects of the same reign. The mercy that has been offered to every sinner during the age of the priesthood will be withdrawn

when the age of the priesthood ends, and the judgment will come, and the enemies who have refused the invitation to kiss the Son will be shattered as Psalm 2 had warned they would be.

This is not a comfortable message, but it is a true one, and the Psalter does not let us have the priesthood without the judgment. The same Lord who intercedes now is the Lord who will judge then. The same king who rules in the midst of his enemies now is the king who will make his enemies his footstool then. The Christian who has learned to love the tender portrait of Jesus has to learn also to reverence the awesome portrait, because they are the same person and the worship of the one requires the worship of the other. Every knee will bow. Every tongue will confess. And the confession will be the glad confession of those who have kissed the Son, or the unwilling confession of those who have been forced to acknowledge what they had refused to acknowledge in the age of grace. Psalm 110 presents both possibilities, and it does not soften either of them.

He will drink from the brook by the way; therefore he will lift up his head. The closing image of the psalm is almost pastoral after the fierceness of the preceding verses. The king, having pursued his enemies and executed judgment, pauses by the roadside to drink from a brook, and then lifts up his head to continue the march. This is the portrait of a king unhurried, unthreatened, secure in his victory. The work of judgment has not exhausted him. The execution of his enemies has not troubled him. He stops to drink, and he continues. And the psalm ends on this note of quiet confident triumph. The exalted king, having accomplished everything the psalm has

described, continues. He goes on. The reign does not end with the victory. The victory is the ground of the continuing reign.

PSALM 119

The Torah Psalm

*“Oh, how I love your law! It is my meditation
all the day.” — Psalm 119:97*

A Psalm Unlike Any Other

Psalm 119 is unlike any other psalm in the Psalter. It is the longest, at one hundred and seventy-six verses. It is the most elaborately structured, composed as an acrostic in which each of the twenty-two sections corresponds to a letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and each section contains exactly eight verses, each of those verses beginning with the same letter. The total word count of the psalm in Hebrew makes it roughly the length of a short prose book. It is, by any measure, a literary achievement of the first order.

And yet the structure is not the point. The point is the subject. Psalm 119 is a sustained meditation on the Torah of the Lord, the word of God, the instruction that comes from the mouth of the Maker. In one hundred and seventy-six verses, eight different Hebrew synonyms for God’s word are used, woven through the stanzas in different combinations. Torah, instruction. Edot, testimonies. Piqudim, precepts. Chuqim, statutes. Mitzvot, commandments. Mishpatim, judgments. Imrah, word or saying. Dabar, word. Each of these synonyms emphasizes a slightly different aspect of what God has spoken. Together they constitute a kaleidoscope of vocabulary for one reality. The revelation of God in his word, received by the soul who loves him.

The placement of Psalm 119 at the approximate center of Book Five is not accidental. Book Five corresponds to Deuteronomy, the book of the second giving of the Torah, the book in which Moses rehearses the law for the generation about to enter the land. And Psalm 119 is, in a real sense, the Psalter's Deuteronomy. It is the soul's meditation on the Torah that Book Five's Pentateuchal counterpart had centered. The whole Psalter has been building toward a psalm of this kind, a psalm in which the delight in Torah that opened the whole collection in Psalm 1 has grown into a sustained hymn of one hundred and seventy-six verses, each of them a different angle on the same fundamental love.

Some Representative Stanzas

A treatment this short cannot walk the whole psalm. A complete commentary on Psalm 119 would be its own book. What is offered here is a brief walk through a few representative stanzas, chosen to illustrate the spirit of the psalm and the patterns that run through it. The reader who wants to pray Psalm 119 thoroughly will need to sit with the full text across many days, letting each stanza give its distinct gift. This section is only a pointer toward that larger practice.

The aleph stanza, verses one through eight, sets the theme. Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord! Blessed are those who keep his testimonies, who seek him with their whole heart. The word blessed is *ashrei*, the same word that opened the whole Psalter in Psalm 1. Psalm 119 begins where Psalm 1 began, with the declaration that the blessed life is the life lived in the law of the Lord. But Psalm 1 was six verses. Psalm 119 is a hundred and seventy-

six. The opening theme is given the full development the psalmist has been wanting to give it since the book began.

The beth stanza, verses nine through sixteen, centers on how a young person can keep his way pure. How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word. I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you. The practical question is answered in practical terms. The word kept in the heart is the guard against sin. Memorization of Scripture, which older generations of Christians took as a given and which modern Christians have mostly abandoned, is defended here as the discipline by which the soul is kept pure. You hide the word in the heart, and the word, hidden there, becomes the barrier against the sin that otherwise would have found no resistance.

The gimel stanza, verses seventeen through twenty-four, names the exile and homesickness that the reader of the whole Psalter has been tracking. I am a sojourner on the earth; hide not your commandments from me. My soul is consumed with longing for your rules at all times. The believer is a pilgrim. The world is not his home. And the thing he longs for, in the middle of his pilgrimage, is the rules of God, which is to say the instruction that guides his walk. The commandments are not a burden. They are a gift to the exile, the map that gets his home.

The mem stanza, verses ninety-seven through one hundred and four, contains what is perhaps the most famous declaration in the psalm. Oh, how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day. Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies, for it is ever with me. I have more understanding than all my teachers, for your testimonies are

my meditation. I understand more than the aged, for I keep your precepts. The love of Torah has produced a wisdom that exceeds the wisdom of the enemies, of the teachers, even of the aged. Not because the psalmist has a greater natural intelligence, but because he has given himself more thoroughly to the Torah than they have. The one who hagahs on the Torah all day long has access to a wisdom that those who do not make this meditation cannot match.

The nun stanza, verses one hundred and five through one hundred and twelve, gives the image that has been beloved for three millennia. Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. The image is of a traveler walking a dark road with an oil lamp. The lamp does not illuminate the whole road from start to finish. It illuminates the next step. It gives enough light for the foot to find the next secure place to stand. This is how the word of God functions in the believer's life. It does not always show the whole future. It shows the next step. Enough light for today. Enough guidance for the present decision. The lamp has always been enough, for every generation of believers who have walked by its light, and the lamp will always be enough for every generation that will walk by it in the years to come.

The psalm closes, in its final stanza, the tau section verses one hundred and sixty-nine through one hundred and seventy-six, with a note of strange humility. I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek your servant, for I do not forget your commandments. The psalmist, after one hundred and seventy-five verses of sustained meditation on the Torah, ends by acknowledging that he is a lost sheep. The delight has been real. The love has been deep. The meditation has been

continual. And the psalmist is still a sheep who has gone astray, still a soul that needs the shepherd to seek him out, still a servant whose grasp of the commandments is imperfect even though the commandments have not been forgotten. This is honest. This is Christian. And this is the proper closing of a meditation this long on the word of God. The word has not made the psalmist sinless. It has made him a sheep who knows he needs to be sought.

The Love That Shapes the Soul

What Psalm 119 teaches, across its one hundred and seventy-six verses, is that the Torah of the Lord is to be loved. Not merely obeyed. Not merely studied. Not merely consulted. Loved. The word appears repeatedly. Oh, how I love your law. Make me love your commandments. Your testimonies are my delight. I delight in your law. This is not the vocabulary of external compliance. It is the vocabulary of internal affection. The Torah has become, for the psalmist, the object of the deepest love of his heart, and the object has become, in the loving, the instrument by which his heart is shaped.

This is what the word of God is supposed to do for the believer. It is not a manual of rules to be consulted when a decision needs to be made. It is not a textbook of theological propositions to be memorized and repeated. It is the voice of the beloved, which the believer learns to love and to turn toward and to treasure in the heart. The soul that has learned to love the Torah has been shaped by the loving. The lover of the Torah becomes, over time, more like the Torah's author. Because what we love, we become.

This is why the recovery of Scripture memorization is so important for the Christian life. Not because memorization is an end in itself. Because memorization is how the word gets into the heart, and the heart, with the word hidden in it, is shaped by what it contains. Believers who have memorized large portions of Scripture testify, generation after generation, that the memorized word surfaces when it is needed, that it sustains them in trials they did not anticipate, that it becomes the vocabulary of their prayer when their own words fail them. The memorization is not mechanical. It is relational. The lover memorizes the beloved's words because the lover wants to carry the beloved with him at all times. Psalm 119 is the portrait of a soul who has done this, whose whole interior life has been shaped by the continual rehearsal of the word.

Christ and the Word

Christ and the Word: Psalm 119 is the Psalter's sustained meditation on the word of God, and every verse of it reaches toward the one who would one day be called, by John, the Word. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The Torah that Psalm 119 loves so deeply was, in the fullness of time, embodied in a person. The commandments the psalmist delighted in were not just instructions. They were the self-expression of the God whose only Son would eventually come and speak them with his own voice. The lamp for the feet and the light for the path became, in Christ, the one who said, I am the light of the world;

whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life. The love of the Torah that Psalm 119 celebrates is, for the Christian, love of the one to whom the Torah was pointing all along. And the meditation on the word that the psalm describes becomes, in the Christian life, meditation on Christ who is himself the Word, and whose voice continues to speak through the Scriptures that bear witness to him.

PSALM 118

The Stone the Builders Rejected

“The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.” — Psalm 118:22

Psalm 118 is a thanksgiving psalm, the final psalm of the Egyptian Hallel, the collection of Psalms 113 through 118 that is sung at the great festivals of Jewish worship, especially at Passover. When Jesus and his disciples sang a hymn at the close of the Last Supper before going out to the Mount of Olives, the hymn they almost certainly sang was the final psalms of the Hallel, and Psalm 118 was the climax of that hymn. The words of this psalm were, in other words, among the last words Jesus sang before his arrest and crucifixion. That is worth pausing over.

Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever. The psalm opens with the refrain that runs through many of the thanksgiving psalms, the declaration that the Lord is good and his chesed is forever. But this psalm’s development of the declaration is specific. It moves quickly to the personal testimony of one who has been delivered. Out of my distress I called on the Lord; the Lord answered me and set me free. The Lord is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me? This is the voice of one who has been rescued, who can testify from experience that the steadfast love of the Lord is real, who now speaks with the confidence of one who has seen the deliverance.

The middle of the psalm is fierce. All nations surrounded me; in the name of the Lord I cut them off! They surrounded me,

surrounded me on every side; in the name of the Lord I cut them off! The enemies are real. The surrounding is not hypothetical. But the name of the Lord has been sufficient, and the deliverance has been accomplished, and the one who was surrounded is now the one giving thanks. Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord. This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter through it. The delivered one approaches the temple, asks for the gates to be opened, and enters to offer his thanksgiving publicly before the congregation.

And then comes the verse that Jesus will quote as his own. The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. The verse is placed in the middle of the psalm's thanksgiving, and at its original level it refers either to the restored Davidic dynasty or to the restored nation of Israel after the exile. The builders of the ancient world, surveying the materials available for their construction projects, had rejected this particular stone. They had thrown it aside as unfit. And now the Lord has taken the rejected stone and made it the cornerstone, the most important stone in the building, the one that determined the alignment of every other stone in the structure. The rejection by the builders was not the final word. The Lord's choice was.

Jesus, in the parable of the wicked tenants, will apply this verse to himself. Matthew 21, Mark 12, and Luke 20 all record the exchange. After telling the parable of the vineyard whose owner sent his son and whose son was killed by the tenants, Jesus turns to the gathered crowd and asks, Have you never read in the Scriptures, The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is

marvelous in our eyes? Peter, in Acts 4, preaching before the Sanhedrin who had condemned Jesus, quotes the same verse. This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved. The verse from Psalm 118, which in its original context had spoken of a restored community, was read by the apostles as a prophetic anticipation of the Christ who would be rejected by his own people and yet would become, by God's action, the cornerstone of a new temple built not of stones but of living believers.

This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. The verse is beloved, and it is often quoted without any sense of its original context. But in the context of Psalm 118, the day the Lord has made is the day of the deliverance, the day when the rejected stone was vindicated, the day when the enemies who had surrounded the psalmist were cut off. It is a particular day, a day of specific deliverance, and the rejoicing is the rejoicing that belongs to the one who has been delivered. For the Christian, the deepest fulfillment of this day is the day of the resurrection, the Easter morning on which the rejected stone was finally vindicated by being raised from the dead. Every Sunday the church meets is, in a real sense, a fresh celebration of this day. Every resurrection day is a recapitulation of the day the Lord made when he raised his Son from the grave.

The psalm closes as it began. Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever. The whole psalm has been held between these two repetitions of the

refrain. And between them, the deliverance has been narrated, the rejected stone has been vindicated, the day of the Lord has been proclaimed, and the gates of righteousness have been opened to the one who was surrounded. The psalm is the voice of the delivered one, and it is the voice Jesus sang on the night before his crucifixion, and it is the voice that the church has continued to sing ever since.

PSALM 121

I Lift Up My Eyes

*“My help comes from the Lord, who made
heaven and earth.” — Psalm 121:2*

Psalm 121 is the second of the Songs of Ascents, but for many readers it functions as the first. Psalm 120 opens the collection with a cry from distress, a psalmist dwelling in Meshech and among the tents of Kedar, which is to say in places far from Jerusalem, longing for the peace that his circumstances do not offer. Psalm 121 picks up from there and sets the pilgrim on the road. I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? The pilgrim has raised his eyes. The distance is visible. The hills stand between him and Jerusalem. And the question is natural. Where does help come from for this journey?

The hills themselves were ambiguous in the ancient Near East. On the one hand, they were the places of refuge, the high places to which a pursued king fled, the strongholds where a defender could hold out against an army. On the other hand, they were the places of pagan worship, the high places where the shrines to foreign gods had been built, the sites where Israel had sometimes been tempted to offer worship to deities other than Yahweh. The pilgrim lifting his eyes to the hills is asking the right question. From where does my help come? The hills themselves are not the answer. The hills can be threats as well as refuges. The gods of the hills can be temptations as well as protectors. The question has to be asked, and the answer has to be given.

My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. The answer is immediate and clear. The help does not come from the hills themselves, or from any being that might be worshiped at the high places. The help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth, the one whose hand shaped both the hills the pilgrim is walking through and the sky above them and everything else that exists. The help, in other words, comes from a source larger than the territory the pilgrim is currently crossing. The Maker of all things is the one who keeps the one who is walking through them.

He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The psalm uses a Hebrew word for keeper that appears six times in its eight verses. Shomer. The one who keeps you. The word has a long history in the Hebrew Bible, going back to Genesis 2, where Adam was put in the garden to *avod* and to *shamar*, to serve and to keep. It appears in Genesis 4, when Cain asks, Am I my brother's keeper? It runs through the Pentateuch in descriptions of God's relationship with his people. And it is concentrated here in Psalm 121, where the Lord's keeping of the pilgrim is named again and again in different formulations, as if the psalmist could not emphasize too strongly that the pilgrim is being kept.

He who keeps you will not slumber. The point is important for the ancient audience. The gods of the pagan nations were famous for sleeping. Baal, according to the taunt Elijah offered the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, might be asleep or on a journey or relieving himself. The pagan gods were not reliable. They could be distracted. They could be unavailable. They could be absent precisely when their

worshippers most needed them. The God of Israel, Psalm 121 declares, is not like this. He does not slumber. He does not sleep. He keeps Israel continuously, without intermission, through every hour of every day and every night. The pilgrim who is walking by day can trust the keeping. The pilgrim who is sleeping at night in a strange inn can trust the keeping. The Lord is awake. The keeping does not pause.

The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade on your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. The protection covers both the heat and the cold, both the day and the night, both the dangers of sunstroke in the Judean hills and the dangers of cold and damp in the darkness. The sun shall not strike you. The moon shall not strike you. Nothing in the whole cycle of the day, and nothing in the whole cycle of the seasons, is outside the shade of the one who keeps you.

The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore. The psalm ends with the widest possible formulation of the keeping. The Lord will keep you from all evil. The Lord will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in. From this time forth and forevermore. The keeping is total, and the keeping is permanent. Nothing is excluded. No time is exempted. The whole of the pilgrim's journey, and the whole of every journey that every pilgrim of the people of God will ever take, is held in the hand of the one who does not slumber.

For the Christian, Psalm 121 has been the travelers' psalm for two thousand years. The believer leaving home on a journey has prayed it. The missionary departing for the foreign field

has prayed it. The soldier going to war has prayed it. The student moving away from his parents for the first time has prayed it. The pilgrim to any of the places where believers have made pilgrimages across the centuries has prayed it. And the psalm has met all of them, because the Maker of heaven and earth is the Lord of every journey any believer takes, and his keeping has not ceased in any age.

PSALM 130

Out of the Depths

*“Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord!” —
Psalm 130:1*

Psalm 130 is short. Eight verses. But the eight verses contain, by common consent of the church across many centuries, the most concentrated statement of the gospel anywhere in the Old Testament. Martin Luther loved this psalm above almost any other. He called it one of the four Pauline psalms, alongside Psalms 32, 51, and 143. He wrote, in one of his prefaces, that if he knew this psalm well, he would be a wise man indeed. John Wesley adapted it for the hymn collection of early Methodism. The Latin title of the psalm, *De Profundis*, became the title of works by Oscar Wilde and by countless others who needed a phrase for what it feels like to cry from the bottom.

It is also a Song of Ascents. One of the fifteen pilgrim psalms that the worshipers sang as they climbed up to Jerusalem for the festivals. The pilgrimage was the slow upward journey toward the temple. The psalms of the pilgrimage are mostly bright, songs of expectation and joy and shared company. Psalm 130 is the exception. It is the song the pilgrim sings when he begins the climb not from joy but from the depths. The pilgrimage to the Lord begins, sometimes, in the place where there is no light. And the psalm gives that beginning its proper words.

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord! The Hebrew is *mim’amaqim*. From the depths. The plural is intensive. Not

from a depth but from the depths. The deep places where one cannot stand. The waters that rise above the head. The psalm does not specify what the depths are. It does not say whether the speaker is in grief, in guilt, in desolation, in fear. The depths are unspecified because the depths are universal. Every believer enters them. The psalm gives the universal vocabulary for the universal experience.

O Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy! The cry is for nothing but to be heard. The speaker does not yet ask for rescue. He asks for attention. The depths produce a particular kind of prayer. Not the considered intercession of one who knows what he wants. The raw plea of one who knows only that he is sinking. Hear me. Listen. Let your ears be open. The prayer is the prayer of someone whose entire request has been compressed into the asking of it.

If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared. Here is the theological core of the psalm, the verse Luther loved. The depths are not, in this case, merely circumstantial. They are also the depths of conscience. The speaker has discovered that if the Lord were to keep a record of his sins, he could not stand. The record would condemn him. The verdict would crush him. And the only thing that makes prayer possible from the depths is the prior fact that the record is not what the Lord keeps. With you there is forgiveness. The forgiveness is in the Lord himself, part of who he is, part of how he relates to those who come to him out of the depths.

That you may be feared. The phrase is striking. Forgiveness produces fear. Not the cringing fear of one who expects

punishment. The reverent fear of one who has been forgiven what he could not pay. The believer who has been forgiven much fears the One who forgives in a way that the unforgiven cannot. The fear is the response of love to a mercy that has cost the One who gave it more than the receiver can know.

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning. The waiting becomes the dominant note of the second half of the psalm. And the simile is the most pastoral image in the whole Psalter. More than watchmen for the morning. The watchmen who stand on the city walls through the long night, who count the hours, who watch for the first gray of the eastern sky that signals the end of their vigil. The waiting believer waits with more intensity than the watchmen. The night will end. The morning will come. The watching is real, but the morning is also real, and the watching has the morning in it as its promise.

The repetition is deliberate. More than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning. The Hebrew repeats it. The psalm does not explain why. It simply repeats. The repetition is the way the psalm performs the waiting. The reader who reads the line twice is, in the moment of reading, being given the experience the psalm names. The waiting is not over in one line. It is repeated, and repeated, and waited through.

O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is plentiful redemption. He will redeem Israel from all his iniquities. The closing turns outward. The individual cry from the depths becomes the corporate hope of the whole people. The forgiveness that is available to the one

praying is available to all Israel. The redemption is plentiful. There is enough for all who come.

For the Christian reader, Psalm 130 is the gospel in eight verses. The depths are real. The record would crush us if it were kept. The forgiveness is real, and it is in the Lord himself, and it is the ground of every prayer from the bottom. The waiting is the discipline of those who know what is coming. The morning is coming. The Lord has, in Christ, gone into the deepest of all depths to make the morning possible. He cried, on the cross, from a depth no other believer has touched. He waited, in the tomb, longer than any watchman has waited. And the morning broke on the third day, and has been breaking, slowly, on those who wait for him ever since. Out of the depths, the believer cries. The Lord, who has been in deeper depths still, answers.

PSALM 139

You Have Searched Me

“O Lord, you have searched me and known me!” – Psalm 139:1

Psalm 139 is one of the most profound meditations on the knowledge of God anywhere in Scripture. It is the believer’s astonished recognition that God knows him completely, that he is seen through and through, that there is no corner of him being that is hidden from him. And it is, surprisingly, not a psalm of discomfort. It is a psalm of comfort. The being known is good news. The being seen is good news. The believer who has grasped that he is fully known by a God who loves him is a believer who has found something no unbeliever can know.

O Lord, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O Lord, you know it altogether. The opening verses accumulate the specificity of God’s knowledge. Sitting down. Rising up. Thoughts. Path. Lying down. Ways. The word before it is spoken. Every detail of the psalmist’s life is already known to the one to whom the psalm is addressed. There is no surface the Lord has not searched. There is no depth he has not seen.

You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it. The psalmist’s response to being so thoroughly known is wonder, not panic. The being hemmed in

by God's knowledge is described as the laying of God's hand upon him. This is protective, not oppressive. And the knowledge is too wonderful, too high, for the psalmist to fully grasp. He cannot attain it. He cannot match it with his own self-knowledge. God knows him better than he knows himself, and the realization is not threatening but astonishing.

Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me. The second movement of the psalm is the affirmation of God's omnipresence. Every direction the psalmist imagines fleeing, the Lord is already there. Up to heaven. Down to Sheol, the realm of the dead. To the wings of the morning, which is to say to the east where the sun rises. To the uttermost parts of the sea, which is to say to the far west. North, south, up, down, east, west, Sheol itself. There is nowhere to go from the presence of the Lord. The geography of God's presence is coextensive with the geography of reality. He is everywhere. And the psalmist does not react to this with the discomfort of one who wants to escape. He reacts with the comfort of one who has found that he cannot be abandoned. Even in Sheol, the Lord is there. Even in the farthest places imaginable, the right hand of the Lord will hold him.

If I say, Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night, even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you. The third movement is about the impossibility of hiding. Even darkness does not conceal the believer from God. Night is bright as day

to him. The psychological weight of this is enormous. Every believer has had moments of wanting to hide, whether from shame or from grief or from the simple desire to be alone with his own thoughts. The psalm is not denying the desire to hide. It is declaring that the hiding is impossible. Wherever the believer is, God is already seeing him. And the seeing, in the context of the psalm, is not judgmental. It is tender. It is the seeing of the one who formed him, who has searched him and known him, whose knowledge of him is too wonderful for him to attain.

For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. The fourth movement is the reason for the knowledge. God knows the psalmist because God made the psalmist. The knitting together in the womb is the image of the intimate, careful, deliberate formation of the individual human being by the hand of the Creator. Not mass-produced. Not an accident of biology. Knitted together, by the same God who laid the foundations of the earth, in the darkness of the womb where no human eye could see the work being done. And the product, the psalmist himself, is fearfully and wonderfully made. The word fearfully carries the sense of awe-inducing. The psalmist looks at himself and is struck by the care with which he has been formed. The body is not an accident. The soul is not a byproduct. He is the result of deliberate creation, and the deliberateness is visible in every detail of his being to the one who did the creating.

Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me,

when as yet there was none of them. The book in which the days of the psalmist's life were written before any of them existed is one of the most startling images in the Psalter. God saw the psalmist before the psalmist existed. God wrote the days of the psalmist's life before the first of them was lived. The knowledge of God is not just knowledge of the present and the past. It is knowledge of the future, the whole future, the whole span of the life from conception to death, written before conception. This is the God before whom Psalm 139 stands in wonder. And the wonder is not squashed by the depth of the knowledge. It is amplified by it.

The psalm ends with a request that has been the prayer of the believer for three thousand years. Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting! The believer who has grasped that he is fully known by God does not flee from that knowing. He invites more of it. Search me. Know my heart. Try me. Know my thoughts. If there is anything in me that should not be there, see it, and remove it, and lead me in the way everlasting. The being known becomes the means of the being purified. The God who sees the grievous way is the God who can lead away from it. And the prayer to be searched, which would terrify someone who wanted to remain hidden, is the prayer of the soul that has placed itself in the hands of a God he trusts.

PSALM 145

The Last Tehillah of David

*“The Lord upholds all who are falling and
raises up all who are bowed down.” — Psalm*

145:14

The Praise That Names the Book

Psalm 145 is the last psalm of David in the Psalter, and it is the only psalm in the whole collection that bears the superscription *tehillah*. The word is the Hebrew root from which the Jewish title for the entire book of Psalms is derived. *Tehillim*. Praises. The whole book is called praises, but only this one psalm is itself called a praise. David’s last word in the Psalter is the praise that gives the book its name. The placement is deliberate. The editors of the Psalter, who arranged the one hundred and fifty psalms in the order we now have them, placed David’s last *tehillah* at the threshold of the closing *hallel*, the five *Hallelujah* psalms that conclude the Psalter. Psalm 145 is the hinge. It is the last psalm spoken in the voice of a single individual. The five psalms that follow it, Psalms 146 through 150, all open and close with *Hallelujah*, and they belong, in the canonical arrangement, to the praise of the whole congregation, the whole creation, the whole company of those who have breath.

David’s last word, then, is the cue. The closing five psalms are the response. The single voice that has dominated the Psalter from Psalm 1 onward yields, in Psalm 145, to the chorus. And the cue is itself a praise, the praise that names the book. The

whole Psalter is being told, by the placement of Psalm 145, what it has been doing all along. The Psalms have been *tehillim*. Praises. Even the laments have been praises in their deeper register, because they have been addressed to the One whose character makes praise possible. The book is, finally, a book of praise. And the last David psalm is the one that names what the whole book has been.

Psalm 145 is also an acrostic. Like Psalm 119, which precedes it in the canonical order, and like Psalm 25 and Psalm 34 and a handful of others, each verse begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet, from aleph through tav, the first letter through the last. The Hebrew text of Psalm 145 actually has a small irregularity. The nun verse, which would have begun with the fourteenth letter of the alphabet, is missing from the standard Masoretic text. The Septuagint and the Dead Sea Scrolls preserve a nun verse (Faithful is the Lord in all his words and gracious in all his works), and the ESV restores it in verse thirteen on that textual basis. The acrostic is, therefore, complete in the original. Every letter contributes its line.

The acrostic is not merely a literary device. It is a claim. The praise of the Lord is comprehensive. The praise begins with the first letter and ends with the last. Every letter of the alphabet is mustered to praise the Lord, because the Lord's character cannot be praised with a partial vocabulary. Every letter is needed. The whole language of Israel is required for this praise, and the acrostic structure is the way David indicates that the praise has, in some real sense, drawn on the whole resource of the language. There is nothing in Hebrew that has been held back from this praise. There is no word, no

letter, no syllable, that is not in service of the praise of the King.

Every Day I Will Bless You

I will extol you, my God and King, and bless your name forever and ever. Every day I will bless you and praise your name forever and ever. The opening is personal. The praise is the praise of a single voice, the voice of David, the king who has spent his life learning to bless the name of the Lord. And the praise is daily. Every day. Yom yom. The blessing is not reserved for the great occasions, the festivals and the deliverances, the coronations and the victories. It is folded into the rhythm of ordinary days, each one offering its line of praise to the One whose greatness is beyond the reach of any single day's offering.

This is a quietly revolutionary note. Most religious praise in the ancient world was occasional. It was offered at the festivals, in the great moments of national life, in the temple at the appointed times. David's praise is not occasional. It is daily. The discipline of blessing is the discipline of an ordinary day. The king, who has the resources to mount the greatest praises of any individual in Israel, says he will bless the Lord every day. The implication is that the praise is not finally about the magnitude of the offering. It is about the constancy of the soul that is offering it. Every day. A small offering daily, kept up across a lifetime, becomes, in retrospect, an immense offering.

Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised, and his greatness is unsearchable. The psalm moves quickly from the personal

to the universal. The greatness of the Lord cannot be measured. The Hebrew phrase for unsearchable is *ein cheker*. It names a quality that has no bottom. The Lord's greatness is not a quantity that, with sufficient effort, could be totaled. It is a depth that no investigation reaches the floor of. The believer who has been praising the Lord for sixty years has not exhausted the praise. The praise still has further to go. The Lord still has further depths to disclose. The greatness is unsearchable, which means the praise can never end.

One generation shall commend your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts. The praise is also generational. It passes from parents to children, from one generation to the next, an unbroken chain of testimony that no single generation completes. The phrase *shall commend* translates a Hebrew verb that means to praise, but also to recount, to narrate, to pass the story along. The commendation is the telling. Parents tell their children what the Lord has done. The children, hearing, learn what to praise. They, in turn, become the ones who tell. The chain is the way the praise of the Lord crosses the generations.

And the necessity of the generations is more than logistical. It is theological. The Lord whose praise is being passed is eternal. His greatness, the psalm has just said, is unsearchable. No single generation has time enough to praise the One who exists outside of time. The lifespan of a generation is, against the eternity of the Lord, infinitesimal. A single generation could spend its entire span on the praise of the Lord and not reach the end of what is praiseworthy. The praise must therefore be generational, not because the parents are unwilling to keep praising, but because the praise

of the eternal God exceeds the capacity of any one generation to complete. One generation begins. The next continues. The generation after that adds its line. And the praise that is being offered, across the centuries, is the only kind of praise large enough to address the One whose greatness has no bottom. The eternal One requires eternal praise, and eternal praise requires the unbroken handing on of the song from one generation to the next.

Gracious and Merciful, Slow to Anger

On the splendor of your majestic glory I will meditate, and I will declare your wondrous works. The center of the psalm contains the great confession that runs from Exodus 34 through the whole Old Testament. The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The Hebrew is identical to the formula David used in Psalm 86. Chanun v'rachum Yahweh, erech apayim u'gdol chesed. Gracious and merciful. Slow to anger. Great in steadfast love. The five qualities the Lord named about himself to Moses on Sinai are the qualities David is now praising in this final tehillah.

David, in Psalm 86, lifted these qualities up to the Lord as the ground of his prayer. David, in Psalm 145, lifts them up to the Lord as the substance of his praise. The same self-disclosure of the Lord serves both functions. It is the basis of every petition. It is also the content of every praise. The believer prays the qualities, and the believer praises the qualities. The qualities are the same qualities. The Lord who has revealed himself in these terms is the Lord whom the believer's whole life of prayer and praise turns around.

The Lord is good to all, and his mercy is over all that he has made. The mercy reaches every creature, not only Israel. The praise that is gathered in Psalm 145 is the praise of the universal Lord whose mercy covers all that he has made. This is one of the broadest statements about the scope of the Lord's mercy in the whole Old Testament. The mercy is not narrow. It is not reserved for the covenant people only. It is over all that he has made. Every creature is held in it. The sparrow that fell to the ground in the Gospel, and that the Father saw fall, was held in the mercy of Psalm 145 long before the Son named it in the Sermon on the Mount.

All your works shall give thanks to you, O Lord, and all your saints shall bless you! They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom and tell of your power, to make known to the children of man your mighty deeds, and the glorious splendor of your kingdom. The praise extends from creation itself, which sings without words, to the saints, who sing with words, to the children of man, the human race in general, who are taught the mighty deeds by the praise of those who know them. The acrostic praise of David becomes, in this central section, a missionary praise. It exists not only to express the heart of the worshiper but to make known to those who do not yet know the Lord what his greatness is.

Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures throughout all generations. The kingdom theme returns. Psalm 145 is, among other things, a kingdom psalm. The kingdom of the Lord is not the kingdom of David, though David is the one who sings it. The kingdom of the Lord is eternal, embracing every generation, outlasting every earthly throne, including David's own.

The Lord Upholds All Who Are Falling

The Lord is faithful in all his words and kind in all his works. The Lord upholds all who are falling and raises up all who are bowed down. The center of the kingdom-section of Psalm 145, and arguably the deepest pastoral verse in the whole psalm, is this one. The Lord upholds all who are falling. The Lord raises up all who are bowed down. The Hebrew for upholds is *somech*, a verb that means to lay hold of, to support, to bear up. The Lord puts his hand under those who are falling. He does not wait until the fall is complete to act. He acts while the falling is still happening. The verb is in the participial form, which in Hebrew indicates continuous action. The Lord is, always, in this moment, upholding those who are falling.

This is one of the deepest mercies of the Lord, and it is one of the mercies the believer often does not see until much later. The fall, when it is happening, feels like a fall that nothing is interrupting. The believer who is going through a season of difficulty so heavy that every day feels like another step downward does not, in the moment, feel the upholding. The fall feels uninterrupted. The bottom feels close. The hand that is holding him does not feel like a hand. It feels like nothing. And yet the participle is in the present tense. The Lord is, in this moment, upholding. The fall the believer feels is not the fall the believer is actually taking. The Lord's hand is under him. The *somech* is happening. The believer cannot see it. The Lord is doing it anyway.

And the Lord raises up all who are bowed down. The Hebrew for bowed down is *kafaf*, a verb that names the posture of one whose head is bent under a weight. The bent over. The

doubled over. The one whose body has been compressed by grief or shame or affliction into a posture that cannot stand upright. The picture is concrete. There are people in this condition. They are physically bent, or spiritually bent, or both. They cannot lift their heads. The weight is too much. They have been pushed down by what has come upon them, and they cannot rise on their own.

The Lord raises them. The Hebrew verb for raises up is *zaqaf*, which is the opposite of *kafaf*. The one means to bend down. The other means to straighten up. The Lord straightens what has been bent. He takes the bent posture and restores it to the upright posture. He puts his hand under the bowed head and lifts. He does not require the bowed one to lift his own head first. The lifting is the Lord's work. The bowed one does not have to recover his own strength before the Lord acts. The acting is what gives him back the strength. The lifting comes first. The standing comes after.

This is the verse that has carried more bowed-down believers through more long seasons than perhaps any single line in the Psalter outside of Psalm 23. It has been the verse that the bent over have clung to when nothing else seemed to apply to them. It has been the verse that the falling have whispered to themselves when the fall felt total. It has been the verse that the grieving have repeated to themselves when the grief had crushed every other word out of them. The Lord upholds all who are falling. The Lord raises up all who are bowed down. The promise is in the present tense. The verbs are continuous. The Lord is doing this now. He is doing it for those who are falling now. He is doing it for those who are bowed down now. The doing is not in the future. The doing is in this moment.

The word all is also important. The Lord upholds all who are falling. Not some. Not the deserving. Not the strong. All. The promise has no qualification. Every believer who is falling is being upheld. Every believer who is bowed down is being raised. The promise extends to the whole company of the bent and the falling, without distinction, without exception, without selection. If you are falling, this verse is about you. If you are bowed down, this verse is about you. The plural all is the way the Lord names the universality of the mercy that is, in this very moment, being done.

The believer who has lived through a season of being upheld in the falling will, looking back, see the upholding more clearly than he saw it at the time. The verb is participial. The action was continuous. While the falling was happening, the upholding was also happening. The two were not sequential. They were simultaneous. The fall that felt uninterrupted was, in fact, being interrupted, moment by moment, by the somech of the Lord. The reason the believer did not break is not that the believer was strong. The reason the believer did not break is that the One who upholds those who are falling was upholding him. The reason the bowed-down believer eventually stood again is not that the believer rose by his own strength. The reason is that the Lord raises up those who are bowed down. The standing was the Lord's work, performed slowly, often invisibly, while the bowing was still in process.

This is the deep pastoral substance of Psalm 145. The praise that names the book of Psalms is the praise of the One who does these things. The acrostic that begins with aleph and ends with tav is the praise of the One whose mercy upholds the falling and raises the bowed down. The five qualities of

Exodus 34, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, are the qualities that make these particular actions possible. The God who is good to all and whose mercy is over all that he has made is the God whose hand is, in this very moment, under everyone in this present world who is falling.

The Great One Who Stoops

There is a particular kind of comfort that only arrives when greatness and tenderness turn out to be the same thing. Most of the time we keep them apart. We expect the powerful to be remote and the gentle to be weak, and we arrange our hopes accordingly, asking the strong for protection and the kind for company, but never both from the same hand. The Scriptures refuse this division. In Deuteronomy and again in Psalm 145, the height of God and the lowness of God's mercy are pressed into a single sentence, and the seam between them disappears.

The passage in Deuteronomy that meets Psalm 145:14 most directly is Moses' closing summation in Deuteronomy 10. For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. Moses is near the end of his life and the people are near the edge of the land. He gathers everything he wants them to remember and presses it down into a few towering lines. God of gods and Lord of lords, Elohei ha-elohim va-Adonei ha-adonim, doubling the words back on themselves the way Hebrew does when ordinary speech cannot reach high enough. Then come

the three titles. Ha-gadol, the great. Ha-gibbor, the mighty. Ve-ha-nora, the awesome, the one before whom you fall silent. These are not warm words. They are words that put you in your place.

And then the sentence turns, and the turn is the whole point. This great, mighty, awesome God shows no partiality and takes no bribe. Lo-yissa fanim, literally, he does not lift faces. He cannot be flattered by the impressive or purchased by the wealthy. You would expect such impartiality to make him cold. Instead it makes him the one safe refuge for those who have nothing to offer. Because he will not be bought, he is free to defend the ones who cannot pay. The verse runs straight on without pausing for breath. He executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. The hand that refuses the bribe of the powerful is the same hand that puts bread and a coat into the arms of the powerless.

This is the quiet scandal of the passage. Moses had every rhetorical option available to him. He could have finished the sentence with cosmic power, the great, the mighty, the awesome God, who commands the stars and holds the seas in place. He could have finished it with military triumph, who crushed Pharaoh and scattered the nations before you. He could have finished it with ontological supremacy, before whom all other gods are nothing. Instead, after stacking those three towering titles, Moses lands the sentence on the orphan, the widow, and the sojourner. The proof of God's greatness is not that he subdues enemies but that he defends the defenseless. The evidence of his might is not that he commands armies but that he feeds the immigrant. The

demonstration of his awesomeness is not that he terrifies the nations but that he clothes the exposed. The three titles set you up for a display of overwhelming force, and what you get instead is bread and a coat for someone who has no one else to provide them. The greatness bends. The might stoops. The awesome One, before whom you fall silent, turns out to be the One whose attention is fixed on the people everyone else overlooks.

This reframing changes everything about how to understand power. In most ancient Near Eastern theology, the gods proved their greatness by conquest, by cosmic order, by the subjugation of chaos. Here, the Lord proves his greatness by advocacy for the powerless. The orphan has no father to defend him. The widow has no husband to provide for her. The sojourner has no land, no citizenship, no standing. And the God of gods, the Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, the awesome, this God makes their case his concern.

What Deuteronomy states as principle, Psalm 145 sings as praise. The psalm opens in the same high country. Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised, and his greatness is unsearchable. Gadol Yahweh, the same word, gadol, that Moses set first among the titles. The psalm piles up the vocabulary of majesty. His mighty acts, gevuroteikha. His awesome deeds, nora'oteikha. The roots are the same ones Moses stacked, great, mighty, awesome, only here they are spread across the song and set in motion, no longer titles fixed to a throne but deeds running loose in the world. The psalm does not merely call God great. It watches him being great.

And then, exactly as in Deuteronomy, the height bends toward the low. The Lord upholds all who fall, and raises up all who

are bowed down. Somech Yahweh le-khol ha-noflim, zaqaf le-khol ha-kefufim. There it is, in the plainest possible image. Ha-noflim are the falling, the ones whose legs are going out from under them. Ha-kefufim are the bent, folded over, doubled down, unable to straighten on their own. And the verb God answers them with is zaqaf. He straightens what is bent. He sets the collapsed body upright again. The psalmist does not say God explains the bending or lectures the bent. He lifts them.

Here is the image that arrests the imagination. The Great One stoops to straighten those who are stooping. The stooping of God mirrors the stooping of the bent, but his stooping is voluntary, deliberate, and restorative. He comes down to where they are in order to bring them up. The posture matches the posture, but the direction is opposite. They are bent under weight they cannot bear. He bends under no weight at all but chooses to lower himself to reach them. The One who has no burden takes on the posture of the burdened so that the burdened can stand upright again. This is not condescension in the pejorative sense. It is condescension in the literal sense, a coming down with, a voluntary descent into the place where the fallen have fallen, so that the lifting can begin from underneath.

The two texts say one thing from two directions. Deuteronomy names the protected ones by their station. Orphan, widow, sojourner, and standing just behind them the poor, the dal bent under his load. Psalm 145 names them by their condition. The falling, the bowed down. The first list is a roster of who has no patron. The second is a portrait of what their bodies look like under the strain. But the God is identical, and so is

the movement. The One too exalted to be flattered or bribed is the very One who stoops to the ground to lift what has been crushed against it.

Neither passage treats the lifting as a lowering of God's dignity. This is the quiet correction both texts make to the way we instinctively think. We assume that to stoop is to diminish, that greatness is preserved by distance. Scripture says the opposite. The stooping is the greatness on display. The proof that he is God of gods is not that he keeps his distance from the bent but that he closes it. Nearness is not a concession the great God makes. It is the shape his greatness takes.

I write this not as abstraction but as witness. Some time ago I was walking through a deep valley of sorrow. The weight of it had folded me over. I found myself unable to lift my head, not knowing how to rise. The grief was so heavy that even the effort of looking up seemed beyond me. And it was in that season, in that posture, that the Lord used this psalm to reach me. Psalm 145:14 became the word that lifted my countenance. The Lord upholds all who are falling and raises up all who are bowed down. I did not lift myself. I could not. He lifted me. The verse that I had read many times before became, in that dark hour, the hand of God underneath me. The somech was happening to me. The zaqaf was being done. The Great One Who Stoops had stooped to where I was, and he was straightening what had been bent.

The Eyes of All Look to You

The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season. You open your hand; you satisfy the desire of every

living thing. The provision is universal. Every creature looks to the Lord, whether the creature knows it or not. The hand of the Lord opens, and the desire of every living thing is met. This is the line Jesus would echo when he taught his disciples to pray for daily bread, and the line that creation itself sings in every moment that a sparrow finds a seed and a fawn finds a stream.

The opening of the hand is a striking image. The Lord does not throw provision at the world from a distance. He opens his hand, deliberately, in a posture of giving. The creation eats from the hand of the Lord. Every meal a creature has ever taken has come from the opened hand. The believer who pauses before a meal to give thanks is acknowledging the source of what is in front of him. The thanksgiving is not invention. It is recognition. The food has come from the opened hand. The praying recognizes what is already true.

It helps to sit with the smallness of the gifts Deuteronomy named. Not deliverance in the grand sense, not an explanation, not the removal of the weight, but bread and a coat. Food and clothing. The most ordinary provisions for a body that has been left exposed. God's care for the bent often arrives in exactly this register, not the dramatic reversal we keep asking for, but the daily mercy that keeps us fed and covered while we are still bent, until the day he straightens us. The open hand of Psalm 145 is the same hand that refused the bribe and gave the orphan his coat. It is open now, in the particular need of this particular season.

Righteous in All His Ways

The Lord is righteous in all his ways and kind in all his deeds. Verse seventeen is the structural center of the psalm's character analysis. The kingdom of the Lord is everlasting. The dominion is universal. The sustenance is for every creature. But what is the character of the One who reigns? The verse gives the answer in two Hebrew words that have to be felt as much as translated.

The first word is tzaddik. Righteous. The word names structural integrity, the bedrock of divine nature, the unwavering uprightness that does not flex under circumstance. The Lord is tzaddik in all his ways, b'khol d'rakhav. Not righteous on his good days. Not righteous when convenient. Righteous in every way, every road, every path his governance takes. The whole pattern of his action is straight.

The second word is chasid. The English translates it kind, but the Hebrew is richer. Chasid is built on chesed, the great covenant word for steadfast love, for committed loyalty, for faithfulness that does not break. The chasid is the one whose character is shaped by chesed, whose deeds are not occasional good actions but the natural expression of a nature whose constant is loyal love. The Lord is chasid in all his works, b'khol ma'asav. Every work he does is shaped by chesed.

And behind both words stands the deepest Hebrew root of mercy in the Hebrew Bible. Rachamim. The compassion of the Lord. The Lord is full of rachamim. And the root is rechem, the Hebrew word for womb. Mercy, in the Hebrew Bible, is womb-love. It is the visceral, instinctive tenderness of a mother for the child of her own body. The Lord's mercy is not

abstract benevolence. It is womb-love at the cosmic scale. The Lord has, in his very nature, the kind of feeling toward his creatures that a mother has toward the child she carried. He cannot look at them and remain neutral. The rachamim moves in him the way it moves in her.

This is the deep ground of the verse seventeen confession. The Lord is tzaddik in all his ways. The justice is real, structural, unbending. The Lord is chasid in all his deeds. The kindness is real, covenantal, loyal. And the chesed and the tzaddik are not in competition. They are not two qualities trading off against each other, where the more of one means the less of the other. They are co-equal and co-present in the One whose character includes both as essential and inseparable.

This matters because human governance, in the believer's experience, tends to make these qualities trade off. A judge can be either strict or merciful, but rarely both. A parent can be either firm or tender, but rarely both at once. A government can be either just or compassionate, but the two pull in different directions. We have learned to live with the trade-off as if it were the structure of reality. Psalm 145 names the trade-off as foreign to the Lord. He is justice and kindness without compromise of either, and the reason both can be present is that the abundance of his mercy is what makes the strictness of his justice survivable. If his mercy were scarce, his justice would crush. Because his mercy is, as the psalm has earlier said, over all that he has made, his justice can be exercised without exterminating the creatures it touches. The mercy is the framework that allows the justice to be sustained.

The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. The verse eighteen declaration follows directly from

the character of the One being described. The Lord whose ways are righteous and whose deeds are kind is near. The nearness is the natural consequence of the character. A God who is rigorous and cold would not be near. A God who is gentle but distant would not be near. A God who is rigorous and near, who is gentle and present, is the God who is both tzaddik and chasid, both just and kind, both unchangeable in his standards and committed in his love. The nearness is the daily expression of the character.

But the verse adds a clause that matters. To all who call on him in truth. The Hebrew is *be'emet*. In truth. In sincerity. In honesty. The Lord is near to those who call on him as he actually is, not as they have invented him to be. The nearness is conditional on the calling. The Lord cannot draw near to a prayer that is addressed to a god the speaker has imagined, because the imagined god is not the Lord. The prayer addressed in truth, addressed to the Lord whom the psalm has been describing, is the prayer the Lord hears. The prayer addressed to a flattering caricature, or to a sentimental projection, or to a manipulable benefactor, is not the prayer the Lord can answer, because the Lord is not the one being addressed.

This is one of the quietest pastoral lessons in the Psalter. The believer who wants the Lord to be near must learn to call on the Lord as he is. The work of learning who the Lord actually is, through psalms like this one, is part of what makes prayer possible. The Hebrew Bible has been describing the Lord for thousands of words across its books. The believer who has done that work of letting the description sink in, who has come to call on the Lord by his own self-disclosure, who calls

in be'emet, is the believer the Lord can be near to. And the believer who has not done that work, who calls on a god of their own invention, will find the heavens silent and not understand why.

He fulfills the desire of those who fear him; he also hears their cry and saves them. The verse nineteen promise hinges on a relationship the previous verses have been building. The desire that gets fulfilled is the desire of those who fear him. The Hebrew word for fear is yirah, and the meaning is closer to awe than to terror. It is the proper recognition of who the Lord is. The trembling reverence of one who has seen the One who reigns. And the yirah, the psalm assumes, has done something to the one who has it. The fear of the Lord has refined the will. The desires of the one who has truly seen the Lord are no longer the same desires he had before the seeing. The unrenewed heart wants things the renewed heart no longer wants. The renewed heart, shaped by yirah, wants what the Lord wants. And the Lord can fulfill the desire of such a heart because the desire has been brought into alignment with what the Lord intends.

This is the answer to a question the verse otherwise might seem to raise. If the Lord is full of rachamim, full of womb-love, why is fulfillment conditional on fearing him? Why not on simply asking? The answer is that the Lord, who is also tzaddik, cannot fulfill desires that are themselves outside the bounds of his goodness. The believer who has not been refined by yirah will, often, want things that would, if granted, do him harm. The Lord, who loves him, cannot grant such desires. The yirah is the discipline that brings the desire into the territory the Lord can answer. The fear is what makes the

fulfillment possible, not as a price the Lord exacts but as a condition the desire itself requires.

The Lord preserves all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy. The verb in the first clause is *shomer*. The Lord *shomer* all who love him. The Hebrew word means to guard, to watch over, to keep. It is the verb of the night watchman, of the shepherd tending the flock, of the priest pronouncing the Aaronic benediction (the Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord *shomer* you). And the verb is reserved here for a particular group. Those who love him. The universal provision of the open hand, two verses earlier, is for every creature without distinction. The *shomer* protection is for the company of those who have come into the love-relationship that the psalm has been describing all along. The provision is universal. The guardianship is relational. Both are true. And the psalm does not collapse them into one.

But all the wicked he will destroy. The closing note of the section is sobering. The same Lord who is *tzaddik* and *chaside*, who is full of *rachamim*, who opens his hand to every creature, is also the Lord who finally destroys the wicked. The mercy that has been over all his works is not the same as the indefinite postponement of all consequences. The wicked, who have refused the mercy that was extended to them, who have refused to enter the love-relationship that was offered, who have refused to call on the Lord in *be'emet*, will receive the final accounting that their refusal has been working toward. The destruction is not the contradiction of the mercy. It is the mercy's necessary closure. The mercy that is over all the Lord's works cannot also indefinitely shelter the willful enemies of those works. At the end, the justice the Lord has

been administering with kindness will produce its proper outcome. The wicked will be removed, so that the kingdom that has been arriving in mercy can be consummated in peace.

Let All Flesh Bless His Holy Name

My mouth will speak the praise of the Lord, and let all flesh bless his holy name forever and ever. The psalm ends as it began, with David's personal vow to praise and the expansion of that praise into the praise of all flesh. The single voice of the king becomes the chorus of every creature. The acrostic of David becomes the song of the whole creation. And then Psalm 145 yields, in the canonical sequence, to Psalms 146 through 150, the five hallel psalms that close the Psalter with Hallelujah and that take up Psalm 145's universal call and answer it. Let all flesh bless his holy name. Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. The last psalm of David has been the cue. The closing five psalms are the response.

For the Christian reader, Psalm 145 is the praise of the Davidic king who would, in due time, be revealed as the Lord who is praised. The acrostic David sang is now also the acrostic the church sings of Christ, the King whose kingdom is everlasting, whose mercy is over all his works, who feeds the multitudes with bread, who opens his hand on the cross and satisfies the desire of every living thing for the forgiveness it could not provide itself.

The verse about the bowed down has a particular weight in the Christian reading. The Lord raises up all who are bowed down. The lifting of the bent and the falling has, in the gospel, become incarnate. The Son of David, who is also the Son of

God, walked the roads of Galilee lifting the bowed down. The woman bent over for eighteen years by a spirit of infirmity, who could not raise himself, was raised by the touch of the Lord in Luke 13. The picture is the picture of Psalm 145 made flesh. The bowed-down woman is lifted. The verb of Psalm 145, *zaqaf*, is the action of Christ. The Lord raises up all who are bowed down. The Son of David does what the psalmist sang. The promise is kept.

The ultimate demonstration of the great, the mighty, the awesome God stooping down to lift up the bent was the incarnation itself. The One before whom the seraphim cover their faces took on flesh and dwelt among us. He who commanded the stars submitted to a carpenter's shop in Nazareth. He who held the seas in place allowed himself to be held in the arms of a young Jewish mother. And the peak of this stooping, the lowest point of the voluntary descent, was the cross. At Calvary, the Great One Who Stoops bent lowest of all. He who raises up all who are bowed down was himself bowed down under the weight of our sin. He who upholds all who are falling allowed himself to fall into death. And in that falling, in that bowing, in that ultimate stooping, he accomplished the lifting of the whole world. The cross is the place where the God of gods, the Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, the awesome One, stooped so low that no one, however bent, however fallen, however crushed, is beyond his reach.

And the promise has not stopped being kept. Every believer who has, in the darkness of his own bowing, found himself slowly lifted by a strength not his own, has been the recipient of what Psalm 145 names. The Lord still upholds those who

are falling. The Lord still raises up those who are bowed down. The participles are still in the present tense. The acrostic is still being prayed by the church. The mercy is still over all that he has made. The praise that began with David's last tehillah continues, in every generation, in the mouths of those who have been lifted, until the day when all flesh, fully gathered, fully raised, fully restored, will bless his holy name forever and ever.

David's last praise is, in the gospel, the church's first praise. And the chain of generations David named, one generation commending the Lord's works to another, has now reached us. The praise has passed through Israel to the apostles, through the apostles to the early church, through the early church to every generation since, and now to ours. Our task is to receive it and pass it on. Every day I will bless you, and praise your name forever and ever.

PSALM 150

Let Everything That Has Breath

“Let everything that has breath praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!” — Psalm 150:6

Psalm 150 is the final psalm of the Psalter. It is six verses long. And it is one of the most carefully constructed psalms in the whole collection, placed at the end by the editors for exactly the effect it produces. The whole journey of the Psalter has been climbing toward this moment, and when the reader arrives at Psalm 150, the destination has been reached. Everything that has breath is summoned to praise the Lord. And the summons is the last word of the book.

Praise the Lord! Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens! The psalm opens with the imperative that runs through all six of its verses. Praise. The word appears thirteen times in these six verses, making Psalm 150 the most praise-saturated psalm in the Psalter. Every verse contains the imperative, often more than once. And the scope of the praise is immediate. Praise him in his sanctuary, which is the earthly place of worship. Praise him in his mighty heavens, which is the cosmic scope of the creation he has made. The sanctuary and the heavens are the two poles of the praise, and the praise reaches from one to the other and includes everything in between.

Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his excellent greatness! The reasons for the praise are given. His mighty deeds, the acts of power by which he has created, redeemed, sustained, and delivered his people across all their

history. His excellent greatness, the sheer magnitude of his being, the quality of his existence that exceeds every other existence. These are the reasons the whole earth is summoned to praise, and they are sufficient reasons. The praise does not need additional justification. The deeds and the greatness of God are the justification.

Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp! Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe! Praise him with sounding cymbals; praise him with loud clashing cymbals! The instruments of the ancient Israelite temple are now catalogued. Trumpet. Lute. Harp. Tambourine. Dance. Strings. Pipe. Sounding cymbals. Loud clashing cymbals. Every instrument known to the worship of the temple is summoned. No instrument is excluded. No mode of musical praise is too loud or too soft or too percussive or too melodic. Everything that can produce sound is invited into the service of the praise.

And then, in the final verse, the scope expands to its widest possible extent. Let everything that has breath praise the Lord! Praise the Lord! Not just the instruments. Not just the sanctuary. Not just Israel. Not just the congregation of the faithful. Everything that has breath. Every creature that breathes. Every living thing. The whole breathing creation, from the sparrow in the tree to the whale in the ocean to the human being made in the image of God, all of them, summoned into the praise that the psalm has been building toward.

This is the destination of the whole Psalter. This is where the book has been going from its first verse onward. The blessed man of Psalm 1, rooted by streams of water, meditating on the

Torah day and night, has now been joined by every creature that breathes, and together they are offering the praise that was always the end point of the journey. Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. The invitation is extended to every reader. The invitation is extended to the whole creation. And the invitation is the last word of the Psalter, held in the air, expecting an answer that will come not only from those who have read the book but from every living creature that will ever be given breath by the God who gave it to them all.

The Hebrew ends with Hallelu Yah. The English translations vary. Praise the Lord. Praise Yah. Hallelujah. Whichever form is used, the psalm ends on the compressed form of the summons that has run through its whole six verses. And the Psalter ends with the same word. The book that began with the blessed man meditating on the Torah ends with the whole breathing creation hallelujah-ing the God who made them. The journey has arrived. The song has reached its destination. And the last word of the book is the word that will continue to be sung by the people of God, in every generation, until the final hallelujah of the consummated kingdom, when the breath that God has given will return to him in the praise he has been training his creatures to offer from the first moment of the first morning of the world.

*Christ and the Final Hallelujah: Psalm 150
summons everything that has breath to praise the
Lord, and the breath by which the praise is
offered was given by the one through whom all
things were made. He is the Logos through whom
every creature was created, and he is the Lord in
whose presence every creature will one day*

stand. The hallelujah of Psalm 150 is the hallelujah of the whole Bible, reaching its climax in the final vision of Revelation, where every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea is heard saying, To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever. The Psalter ends on the hallelujah. The Bible ends on the hallelujah. And the destination of every breath God has given to every creature in every age is the hallelujah that will never end. Christ is the one to whom the hallelujah is offered. And Christ is the one who, in his own humanity, has taught every believer to offer it. Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. Praise the Lord.

The Day That the Lord Has Made

The verse from Psalm 118 that has been most quoted, often without much sense of its original context, is verse 24. This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. The verse has been embroidered on greeting cards, painted on wall art, used as the opening line of countless morning devotionals. And it deserves the affection it has received. But the verse means more in its original setting than the modern citations often capture, and it is worth restoring some of the depth.

The day in question is not just any day. The day in question is the day of the deliverance the psalm has just narrated. The

rejected stone has become the cornerstone. The Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes. The Lord has acted decisively. The salvation has occurred. And the day on which this salvation has occurred is the day the Lord has made. Not in the sense that he made every day, which is also true, but in the sense that he made this particular day for the purpose of the deliverance that has just been described. The day is the appointed day. The day is the day of the Lord's decisive act. And the response is to rejoice and be glad in it, because the deliverance is real, and the rejoicing is the proper response to it.

For the Christian, this verse takes on its deepest meaning when read in the light of the resurrection. The day the Lord made is, supremely, the day on which he raised his Son from the dead. Easter morning. The day of days. The day when the rejected stone, condemned and crucified and buried, was vindicated by being raised, and was made the cornerstone of the new temple, the new humanity, the new creation. Every Sunday the church meets is, in a real sense, a fresh celebration of this day. Every resurrection day is a recapitulation of the day the Lord made when he raised Jesus from the grave. And the rejoicing of the church on every Sunday is the rejoicing the psalm calls for, the gladness that the deliverance produces in those who have grasped what was done for them.

This explains why the early church almost immediately shifted its primary day of worship from Saturday to Sunday. The Jewish sabbath, observed on the seventh day, was the day of completion of the original creation. The Christian Lord's Day, observed on the first day, is the day of the new creation that began with the resurrection. Every Sunday, the church

gathers to celebrate the day the Lord has made, the day of the resurrection, the day on which the deliverance was secured. And the rejoicing is not optional. It is the proper response, and the church has been making the response for two thousand years, every Sunday, all over the world.

The verse can also be applied, more privately, to any day in the believer's life on which the Lord has acted decisively. The day of conversion. The day of a particular deliverance. The day of an answered prayer. The day of a reconciliation. The day of a healing. Any day on which the believer can look back and see the hand of God doing something that could not have been done apart from his action. Each of those days is, in a smaller way, a day the Lord has made, and the rejoicing is the proper response to each of them. The verse is not only the corporate verse of the church on Easter morning. It is also the private verse of every believer who has ever been able to say, of any particular day, the Lord did this, and I am glad.

Blessed Is He Who Comes

Another verse from Psalm 118 that the New Testament picks up explicitly is verse 26. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! We bless you from the house of the Lord. The verse appears in all four gospels at the moment of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. The crowd shouted these very words as Jesus rode into the city on the donkey. Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!

The crowd that day was quoting Psalm 118, perhaps without realizing how exactly they were applying it. The blessed one

who comes in the name of the Lord, the one whom the gathered worshipers are blessing from the house of the Lord, is the one whom the psalm had been pointing to all along. Jesus, riding into Jerusalem at the beginning of the week of his passion, was the one the psalm had described. The crowd was not making this connection in any sophisticated theological way. They were, many of them, simply caught up in the enthusiasm of the moment. But the words they shouted were the words the Spirit had inspired centuries before for exactly this moment. And the Pharisees who told Jesus to rebuke his disciples received from him the answer that even if his disciples were silent, the very stones would cry out. The moment was the moment Psalm 118 had been waiting for, and the moment could not be silenced.

Within five days, of course, the same crowd that had shouted blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord on Sunday would be shouting crucify him on Friday. The reception of the king on Palm Sunday turned out to be temporary, conditioned on his fulfilling the political expectations the crowd had projected onto him. When he disappointed those expectations, the welcome turned to rejection, and the rejection led to the crucifixion. But the words the crowd shouted on Sunday were truer than they knew. He was the blessed one who came in the name of the Lord. He was the one whom the house of the Lord was supposed to be blessing. The crowd's reception was rejected by their later actions, but the words themselves remained, preserved in all four gospels, as the testimony that even in their flawed welcome the crowd had unwittingly fulfilled the psalm.

Jesus himself uses the same verse, in a different way, near the end of his Jerusalem ministry. In Matthew 23, after the long woes against the scribes and Pharisees, he laments over Jerusalem. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Jesus is quoting Psalm 118, applying it to the future. The day will come, he is declaring, when Jerusalem will say these words again. And on that day, his return will be visible to those who had not seen him before. The verse from Psalm 118 has, in the mouth of Jesus, an eschatological dimension. It points forward to the day when every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that he is Lord, and the blessing of the one who comes in the name of the Lord will be sung by every voice that has ever been given the breath to sing.

The Keeper Who Does Not Slumber

One detail of Psalm 121 deserves further attention. The Hebrew word that runs through the psalm, appearing six times in its eight verses, is the word *shomer*.

Shomer means keeper, watcher, guard, protector. It is the word Genesis 2 used of Adam's commission to avad and to shamar, to serve and to keep the garden. It is the word Genesis 4 uses when Cain asks, Am I my brother's keeper? It is the word that describes the priests and Levites keeping the tabernacle, the watchmen keeping the walls of

the city, the shepherds keeping their flocks. It is the word of guardianship, of careful watching, of the preservation of something precious.

Psalm 121 applies this word to the Lord repeatedly. He who keeps you will not slumber. He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord is your keeper. The Lord will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in. Six times, in eight verses, the keeping is named. And each naming deepens the reality. The keeping is total. The keeping is continuous. The keeping is personal. The keeping is eternal.

For the pilgrim on the road to Jerusalem, walking through the hills where bandits could lurk and wild animals could surprise and the heat of the day could exhaust and the cold of the night could kill, the declaration that the Lord was her shomer mattered. She was not traveling alone. She had a keeper. And the keeper did not slumber. Every hour of every day, every hour of every night, the keeper was keeping. The pilgrim could walk in confidence, not because she was unaware of the dangers, but because she was aware of the keeper whose attention did not lapse.

For the Christian, the Lord Jesus has taken up this shomer role in his own ministry. I am the good shepherd, he said in John 10. I know my own and my own know me. I lay down my life for the sheep. The verbs he uses are the verbs of the shomer. He knows his sheep. He lays down his life for them. He gathers the scattered. He brings them into the one flock. And he has promised, explicitly, that no one will snatch them from his hand. The keeping that Psalm 121 attributed to the Lord is the keeping that the Lord Jesus continues now at the right hand of the Father. And every believer who belongs to

him is kept by him, continuously, without interruption, through every hour of his life and beyond.

The Lord of the Journey

There is one more thing worth saying about Psalm 121 before we move on. The psalm addresses a pilgrim in transit. The one who is walking to Jerusalem. The one who has not yet arrived. And the keeping that the Lord provides is the keeping of the journey, not only the keeping of the arrival. The Lord is the one who watches over the going out. He is the one who watches over the coming in. The keeping covers both ends of every trip, and the steps in between.

This is worth noticing, because many believers find that their confidence in God is highest when they are at the beginning of a journey or at its end, and lowest when they are in the middle of it. The beginning is exciting. The end is the arrival. But the middle is often discouraging. The energy of the beginning has worn off. The destination is still far away. The terrain is not yet familiar. The daily slog becomes tiring. And many believers lose heart in the middle of their journeys, whether the journey is a marriage, a career, a course of education, a long illness, or the Christian life itself.

Psalm 121 is the psalm for the middle of the journey. The Lord is the keeper of the whole trip, not only of its endpoints. The going out is kept. The coming in is kept. And the walking, the continuous walking that happens between the going out and the coming in, is also kept. He who keeps you will not slumber. Not today. Not tomorrow. Not next month when the journey is at its most discouraging. He does not slumber. The keeping

does not pause. And the believer who has come to understand Psalm 121 deeply is the believer who has learned to trust the keeping through the long middles of his journeys, not just through the dramatic beginnings and endings. This is the psalm for the persistent traveler. It has been the psalm of the persistent traveler for three thousand years. And it will be the psalm of the persistent traveler for every believer who learns to pray it.

The Fearful and Wonderful Making

One verse in Psalm 139 that deserves fuller treatment than the companion chapter offered is verse 14. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. The verse has become beloved in Christian usage, often cited in contexts related to the dignity of unborn human life or the sanctity of the human body. It deserves all the weight it has been given, but it also deserves to be read for what it specifically says.

The Hebrew phrase translated fearfully and wonderfully made is *nora'ot niflethi*.

Nora'ot niflethi carries a sense of awe-producing distinction. The psalmist is not merely saying he was well-made. He is saying he was made in a way that inspires fear in the one contemplating the making, a reverent awe at the carefulness of what has been produced. The making was done with such attention, such skill, such deliberate care, that the result induces awe in anyone who considers what has been made.

For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. The verbs are intimate. Formed. Knitted. The first, *yatsar*, is the verb used in Genesis 2 when the Lord formed the man from the dust of the ground. The second, *sachach*, suggests the weaving of threads, the interlocking of fibers to produce a finished garment or tapestry. Both verbs describe hand-work, the kind of work done slowly, carefully, by a craftsman who is paying attention to every detail. The psalmist was not mass-produced. He was formed and knitted, attended to individually, carefully, by the hand of the Maker.

This carries immense implications for how the believer understands himself. Every Christian who has ever looked in the mirror and been dissatisfied with what he saw, who has ever measured his body against some cultural standard and found it wanting, who has ever wondered whether his existence was an accident or a mistake, needs to sit with Psalm 139. He was knitted together. He was formed. He was made with the hand-work of a craftsman who does not produce substandard work. And the making was done by a Maker who knew what he was doing and who declared, after every stage of the creation in Genesis 1, that what he had made was good. The believer is good, in the sense the Maker means the word, because the Maker made him and does not make bad things.

Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them. The book in which the days of the psalmist's life were written before any of them were lived is one of the most theologically rich images in the Hebrew Bible. The days exist in the mind of God before they exist in time. The life is known before it is lived. The future is

already visible to the one who made the future. And this is not determinism in the sense of squashing human freedom. It is the providence of a God who sees from outside of time the pattern of the life he is bringing into time, and who brings the life into time knowing what it will contain.

The believer who has grasped this realizes that her life is not an accident, is not a string of random events, is not the product of chance or fortune. Her life is the unfolding of something the Lord had seen before she was born. The hard days were seen. The easy days were seen. The turning points, the losses, the small mercies, the moments no one else noticed, all of them seen. The book has the whole shape of the life recorded, and the life that is being lived is the life that was already written, and the Author of the book is the one who knows where the story is going even when the character in the story does not. This is the deepest ground for the peace that the Christian life produces in those who have grasped it. Your life is not an accident. The Lord saw it before you lived it. And the Lord who saw it is the Lord who is with you in it, knitting the days together with the same care he used when he knitted together your frame in your mother's womb.

The Geography of the Praise

One of the striking features of Psalm 150, worth noticing more carefully than the anchor chapter did, is the spatial logic of the summons to praise. The psalm moves through a series of locations, and the locations tell a theological story of their own.

It opens in the sanctuary. Praise God in his sanctuary. The sanctuary is the earthly place of worship, the temple in Jerusalem where the Lord had placed his name, the tabernacle before that, the mercy seat where the high priest met with God on the Day of Atonement. The praise begins where the covenant community gathered to worship in its local and particular form. And then the psalm immediately expands. Praise him in his mighty heavens. The heavens are the cosmic dwelling of God, the expansive scope of his rule that extends beyond the particularity of the temple to the whole of the created order. The praise moves from the particular to the universal in the space of two lines.

Then the psalm catalogs the reasons. Praise him for his mighty deeds. The mighty deeds are the specific acts of God in history, the creation, the exodus, the conquest, the deliverances, the redemptions, the moments when his power has been manifest in the lives of his people. Praise him according to his excellent greatness. His greatness is not only what he has done but what he is, the sheer magnitude of his being that exceeds every other being in the whole of reality. The praise is grounded both in his deeds and in his nature, and both are sufficient reasons.

Then the psalm catalogs the instruments. Trumpet, lute, harp, tambourine, dance, strings, pipe, sounding cymbals, loud clashing cymbals. Every instrument of the ancient Israelite temple worship is listed. Wind instruments. Stringed instruments. Percussion. Even dance. The praise is not limited to any single mode. It recruits every sound-making possibility, every rhythm-keeping capacity, every bodily

expression available to the worshipers. Nothing is excluded. The praise will be made with every available means.

And then the final verse expands the scope to its widest possible extent. Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. Not only the sanctuary worshipers. Not only the trained musicians with their instruments. Not only the congregation who knows the songs. Every creature that has breath. Every living thing that has been given the gift of respiration by the one who breathed into the nostrils of Adam the breath of life. All of them, summoned. All of them, invited. All of them, expected to join the praise that the Psalter has been building toward from its opening meditation.

This expansion is, in miniature, the expansion of the whole biblical story. From a particular covenant with a particular people at a particular place (the sanctuary) to a universal summons to all of creation (everything that has breath). The Bible moves in this direction from beginning to end. Genesis begins with the creation of all humanity in the image of God. It narrows to the family of Abraham, and then to the nation of Israel, and then to the tribe of Judah, and then to the line of David, and then to one particular descendant of David. And from that one particular descendant, the movement reverses. The Gospel goes out from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria to the ends of the earth. The universal summons that was implicit in the creation becomes explicit in the Great Commission. And the final vision of the book of Revelation gathers every tribe and tongue and people and nation into a single worshiping congregation around the throne of the Lamb.

Psalm 150 is, in its own way, a preview of this gathering. The sanctuary worship expands to cosmic worship. The local community of Israel expands to every breathing creature. And the final breath of the Psalter is given to the summons that will, at the consummation of all things, actually be fulfilled. Every creature that breathes will praise the Lord. Because the breath they have was given by him, and because the praise of the Creator is what breath was ultimately made for. Psalm 150 is not just the end of the Psalter. It is the anticipation of the end of all things, when the purpose of creation is finally realized and every breath returns to the one who gave it in the form of the hallelujah he has been training his creatures to offer.

Praise as Destination

Why does the Psalter end in praise? This question deserves a moment's attention before the synthesis begins.

The Psalter has included every kind of prayer across its hundred and fifty psalms. There have been laments, confessions, thanksgivings, declarations, questions, protests, meditations, songs of trust, songs of teaching, songs of history, songs of the enthroned king. No genre of prayer has been excluded. The Psalter is thoroughly comprehensive in the range of prayers it preserves. And yet the book ends on praise. Not on lament. Not on confession. Not on question. On praise.

This is theologically significant. The Psalter is telling us something about the destination of the whole life of prayer. The laments are legitimate. The confessions are necessary.

The questions are appropriate. The Psalter has preserved them all, unflinchingly, including the unresolved darkness of Psalm 88. But the destination of the life of prayer, the endpoint toward which all the other kinds of prayer are moving, is praise. The praying life arrives, eventually, at the hallelujah. Not because the problems have all been solved. Not because the suffering has all ended. But because the God to whom the prayers have been offered is worthy of praise, and the soul that has been shaped by years of praying has learned, finally, to rest in the worthiness of the one he has been praying to.

This is also true of the individual believer's walk with God, though not always in the specific chronology the Psalter suggests. The believer who has walked with the Lord for many years finds, increasingly, that her prayers shift toward praise. The early prayers are often requests. The middle prayers are often confessions. The later prayers, more and more, become simply the worship of the one she has come to know. Not because the requests have stopped being appropriate. They have not. But because the requests begin to nest inside a larger posture of worship, and the worship becomes the dominant note even when requests are still being made. The life of prayer ends in praise. Psalm 150 is the pattern. Every believer who walks long enough with God walks her own version of it.

The final hallelujah of the Psalter is therefore not only the Psalter's destination. It is the destination of every Christian life. And it is the destination that awaits the consummation of all things, when every tongue confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father, and the glory becomes the subject of the praise that will fill the new heavens and the

new earth forever. The Psalter ends where the whole biblical story ends. In worship. And the worship is the destination because the one being worshiped is the one toward whom everything has been tending from the first moment of the first morning of the world.

The Songs of Ascents

A note on the Songs of Ascents, which occupy the center of Book Five and deserve their own attention. Psalms 120 through 134, fifteen psalms, each bearing the superscription A Song of Ascents, form a distinct collection within Book Five. The tradition associates these psalms with the pilgrim journeys to Jerusalem for the three great annual festivals. Three times a year every Israelite male was commanded to appear before the Lord at the sanctuary. Passover in the spring. The Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost, fifty days later. And the Feast of Booths, or Tabernacles, in the autumn. The journeys to Jerusalem for these festivals were significant events in the life of the covenant community, and the Songs of Ascents were the music of the journeys.

The geography of the pilgrimage mattered. Jerusalem sits on a hill in the central highlands of Judea. The approach to the city, from any direction, involves climbing. From the east, the traveler coming from across the Jordan had to climb out of the Jordan valley and up to the heights where the city stood. From the west, the traveler coming from the coastal plain had to climb through the Shephelah and up into the hill country. From the south, the traveler coming from the Negev had to climb through the wilderness of Judah and up to the Mount of Olives before finally seeing the city. Every pilgrim, regardless of origin, ascended to Jerusalem. The name Songs of Ascents captured this. The journey itself was an ascent, and the songs were the music of the climbing.

The fifteen psalms taken together trace the arc of a pilgrimage. Psalm 120 opens with a cry from distress, a psalmist dwelling

in faraway places and longing for peace. Psalm 121 sets the pilgrim on the road with eyes lifted to the hills. Psalm 122 has the pilgrim arriving at the gates of Jerusalem. Psalms 123 through 125 reflect the life of the covenant community gathered at the city. Psalms 126 through 128 celebrate various blessings of the covenant life. Psalms 129 through 131 look back over the journey, with Psalm 131 in particular closing on the note of the quieted soul resting like a weaned child on its mother. Psalms 132 through 134 bring the collection to a close with reflections on the Davidic covenant and the blessing of those who minister in the Lord's house.

The collection therefore traces, in microcosm, the shape of the whole Psalter's journey. Distress, departure, ascent, arrival, reflection, closure. Every pilgrim who walked to Jerusalem for a festival was walking, whether she knew it or not, the shape of the whole Christian life. And the church that sings these psalms now, in its own season of pilgrimage between the resurrection of Jesus and his return, is walking the same shape. The Songs of Ascents are, for the church, the songs of the long journey home, and every believer who prays them is being formed by the pattern they describe.

The Final Five Psalms

The Psalter closes, as we have seen in the chapter on Psalm 150, with the final five psalms forming a single crescendo of praise. Psalms 146 through 150 each begin and end with Hallelujah. Together they are sometimes called the Final Hallel, the concluding doxology of the whole book. And they deserve a moment of architectural attention before this volume closes.

Psalm 146 is the psalm of the individual soul blessing the Lord. Praise the Lord, O my soul! The pattern is the same as Psalm 103. The private worship, the personal commitment to bless the Lord through the whole span of one's life. I will praise the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God while I have my being. This is the individual voice, carrying the praise into every hour of the one life the psalmist has been given.

Psalm 147 is the psalm of the gathered congregation blessing the Lord for his works. The building up of Jerusalem, the healing of the brokenhearted, the numbering of the stars, the sending of the word that runs swiftly. The praise is communal, corporate, focused on the specific works the Lord has done for his people. How good it is to sing praises to our God; for it is pleasant, and a song of praise is fitting.

Psalm 148 is the psalm of the whole cosmos blessing the Lord. From the heavens down to the depths of the earth, every created thing is summoned to praise. Angels, sun and moon, shining stars, highest heavens, sea creatures and all deeps, fire and hail, snow and mist, stormy wind, mountains and hills, fruit trees and cedars, beasts and livestock, creeping things and flying birds, kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and rulers, young men and maidens, old men and children. Every part of the creation is called by name. And the call is the same. Let them praise the name of the Lord.

Psalm 149 is the psalm of the saints, the faithful ones, blessing the Lord for the salvation he has worked out on their behalf. Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise in the assembly of the godly! Let Israel be glad in his Maker; let the children of Zion rejoice in their King! The new song is the song of those who

have been given new hearts, who have experienced the salvation, who rejoice in the King who has rescued them.

Psalm 150 is the final psalm, the cosmic hallelujah, the summons to every creature that has breath. And the Psalter ends on the highest possible note. Everything that has breath. Praise the Lord.

The five psalms together form an expanding circle of praise. The individual soul. The congregation. The cosmos. The saints. Everything that has breath. The circle widens at each step, and by the time it reaches its final expansion at Psalm 150, it includes every living thing in every corner of the creation. This is the destination the Psalter has been reaching toward from its first word. The private meditation of the blessed man of Psalm 1 has grown, across one hundred and fifty psalms, into a praise that includes everything that breathes. And the destination is not only the Psalter's. It is the destination of the whole redemptive history. Revelation 5 will show us every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea saying, To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever. This is what Psalm 150 was always pointing to. And the church that sings Psalm 150 now is singing the song it will sing forever, in the presence of the Lamb, when the breath he has given every creature is returned to him in the praise he has been training his creation to offer from the first morning of the world.

The Messianic Synthesis

The Golden Thread Through the Whole Psalter

“Then beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.” —

Luke 24:27

The Thread

We come now to the final major section of this two-volume companion, and it is the section toward which everything else has been building. Across the pages of both volumes we have glimpsed him. In the Blessed Man of Psalm 1, perfectly delighting in Torah. In the enthroned Son of Psalm 2, crowned on Zion. In the suffering voice of Psalm 22, pierced in his hands and his feet. In the shepherd of Psalm 23, whose staff protects and whose table overflows. In the king celebrated in Psalm 45 and called, impossibly, God. In the ascending triumph of Psalm 68. In the coming king of Psalm 72, whose dominion reaches to the ends of the earth. In the betrayed friend of Psalm 41 and the hated one of Psalm 69. In the crown cast down in the dust of Psalm 89. In the priest-king of Psalm 110, forever after the order of Melchizedek. In the rejected stone of Psalm 118, made the cornerstone. In the beloved one of Psalm 132, to whom the Lord has sworn a sure oath.

He walks through the whole book. The golden thread runs from Psalm 2 to Psalm 150. Announced in the first two psalms, celebrated through Book Two, questioned through

Book Three, reaffirmed through Book Four, and returned in Book Five as the priest-king whose reign will have no end. The whole Psalter is, in some sense, about him. The New Testament writers saw this. The early church sang this. And this final section of the work draws the threads together into a single sustained portrait of the one to whom the whole Psalter has been pointing.

This is not an imposition of Christian meaning on a Jewish book. The Psalter itself invites this reading. Its own editors, in shaping the final form of the collection, placed messianic psalms at crucial structural points. Psalm 2 at the opening. Psalm 72 at the close of Book Two, with the editorial note that the prayers of David are ended. Psalm 89, the covenant-crisis psalm, at the close of Book Three. Psalm 110 in the middle of Book Five. Psalm 132 near the end, recapitulating the Davidic covenant. The editors were telling the reader that the Psalter has a messianic structure, that the king announced at the opening is the king returned near the end, that the whole book is a sustained meditation on the one through whom God's promises would finally be kept.

The New Testament writers, reading the Psalter in this way, were not inventing a reading. They were recognizing the reading the Psalter itself had been inviting. And they were identifying the figure the Psalter had been describing. The figure had a name, and the name was Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of David, the Son of God, the Messiah, the Christ, the Lord.

The King Announced

The messianic portrait begins with the coronation. Psalm 2 announces him. The Lord has said, You are my Son; today I have begotten you. The Son, enthroned on Zion, receives the nations as his inheritance. The rage of the peoples does not prevent the enthronement. The plotting of the rulers does not delay it. The Father's decree has been issued, and the installation has occurred. And the psalm closes by inviting all who hear it to take refuge in the Son. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

Psalm 8 names him as the Son of Man. The writer of Hebrews reads the psalm Christologically, seeing in it the Son of Man who was made for a little while lower than the angels but is now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death. The dominion that Adam lost has been restored in the Last Adam, and through him will be extended to all who belong to him. The king announced in Psalm 2 is also the Son of Man celebrated in Psalm 8, the representative of the human race who will reclaim the dominion that humanity lost in the fall.

Psalm 16 anticipates his resurrection. Peter quotes the psalm at Pentecost, arguing that David wrote it not about himself but about a descendant, because David did die and his body did see corruption. The one whose body would not be abandoned to Sheol, whose flesh would not see decay, was not David. It was the Messiah who would rise from the dead before his body saw decay. And the resurrection of Jesus, Peter argues, is the fulfillment of Psalm 16's anticipation. The king announced in Psalm 2 has been vindicated in Psalm 16. The coronation

cannot be ended by death, because the one who is crowned is the one whose body will not decay in the grave.

Psalm 45, called a wedding song for the king, addresses him in terms that strain beyond any human monarch. Your throne, O God, is forever and ever. The scepter of your kingdom is a scepter of uprightness. The king is called God, directly, in the second person, in a psalm that the Hebrews writer will quote at length in his first chapter as evidence that the Son is greater than the angels. The king announced in Psalm 2 is, according to Psalm 45, God himself, received by the Father, worthy of the divine address, enthroned forever and ever. The two natures of Christ, which the later ecumenical councils would articulate, are already implicit in the Psalter's opening descriptions of the king.

The King Who Suffers

But the Psalter does not only celebrate the king. It shows him suffering. This is the mystery that the Old Testament reader could not resolve within its own pages, and the mystery that the cross would reveal as the only way the king's coronation could be accomplished.

Psalm 22 opens with the cry of dereliction that Jesus would pray from the cross. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? The psalm describes the specific sufferings of crucifixion a thousand years before the Romans invented the form of execution. Pierced hands and feet. Dislocated bones. Dehydration. The dividing of garments by lot. The mocking of passersby. All of it, described in David's psalm, fulfilled to the letter in Christ's passion. And the psalm closes with the

declaration that he has done it, the very words, in the Hebrew, that Jesus spoke from the cross just before he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. It is finished. The suffering king of Psalm 22 is the crucified Christ of Calvary.

Psalm 41 predicted his betrayal by a close friend. Even my close friend, in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted his heel against me. Jesus quoted this verse in the upper room at the Last Supper, identifying Judas as the betrayer who would fulfill the psalm. Psalm 69 described his being hated without cause, and having zeal for his Father's house consume him, and being given vinegar to drink in his thirst. John specifically notes the fulfillment of this psalm at the crucifixion, recording that the soldiers placed a sponge full of sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to the mouth of the dying Savior. And Psalm 109, one of the most severe of the imprecatory psalms, was applied by Peter in Acts 1 to Judas's end. The Psalter had anticipated the betrayal, the hatred, the abandonment, and the specific details of the passion. The suffering of the Messiah was not a failure of the messianic mission. It was the messianic mission.

And Psalm 89 carried the weight of the apparent failure. The king's crown was cast down in the dust. The covenant had seemed renounced. Where is your former great love, the psalm asked, which by your faithfulness you swore to David? The question hung unresolved at the end of Book Three. And the answer, when it came, was not that the covenant had not actually been broken, or that appearances had been deceiving. The answer was that the covenant had been fulfilled in a way the crisis could not have anticipated. The king whose crown was cast down in the dust would wear a new crown, one that

could never be defiled. The throne that had been overthrown would be rebuilt in a new location, at the right hand of the Father in heaven. And the descendant of David who would hold the throne forever would be the one whom the cross seemed to defeat, the one whom the resurrection vindicated, the one whose kingdom would have no end.

The Shepherd and the Lamb

Alongside the king who suffers, the Psalter places the shepherd who tends. Psalm 23 describes the Lord as the personal shepherd of the one who trusts him. He leads. He feeds. He protects. He sets the table. He anoints. He pursues with goodness and mercy all the days of the believer's life. And Jesus, in John 10, identified himself with this shepherd. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The shepherd of Psalm 23 became, in the fullness of time, the lamb who was slain, the one who laid down his life for the sheep he had been tending. The shepherd and the lamb converge in one person, and the convergence is the heart of the gospel.

The shepherd who became the lamb is also, in the Psalter's messianic vision, the one who rides in the heavens. Psalm 68 celebrated the ascent on high, the leading of captives in train, the receiving of gifts. Paul reads the psalm in Ephesians 4 as fulfilled in the ascension of Christ after his resurrection, with the captives being those he freed from sin and death, and the gifts being the spiritual gifts he distributed to his church at Pentecost. The shepherd who became the lamb is also the Lord who ascended, seated at the right hand of the Father,

from whom the Spirit was poured out on those who would be his body in the world.

The Priest-King

The fullest portrait of the exalted Christ is in Psalm 110, which this volume treated in detail earlier. The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand. The exalted one, invited to share in divine authority. Until I make your enemies your footstool, the promise that the final subjugation is coming, though not yet complete. Rule in the midst of your enemies, the declaration that the ruling is happening now, in territory not yet fully surrendered. Your people will offer themselves freely, the description of the willing church drawn to the king by the Spirit. You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek, the declaration that the exalted king is also the eternal priest.

The priesthood of Christ is, according to the New Testament, the fulfillment of everything the Aaronic priesthood had pointed to and could not accomplish. The Aaronic priests offered sacrifices year after year that could not take away sins. Christ offered one sacrifice for sins forever. The Aaronic priests died and were succeeded by other priests. Christ, because he continues forever, holds his priesthood permanently and is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him. The Aaronic priests mediated a covenant that proved unable to produce righteousness in the people. Christ mediates a new covenant in which the law is written on the heart and sins are remembered no more. Psalm 110's declaration of the priesthood of Melchizedek is the Old Testament anticipation of all of this. The priest-king of Psalm

110 is Jesus Christ, and his priesthood is the foundation of the Christian life.

The Rejected Stone

Psalm 118's rejected stone is the image that Jesus himself took up in his ministry and that the apostles carried forward into their preaching. The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. The rejection was real. The Messiah was rejected by his own people. The religious leaders of his day pronounced him unfit. The political authorities condemned him. The crowds that had welcomed him on Palm Sunday called for his crucifixion on Friday. The building-up of a new Israel around him seemed to have failed. The rejected stone was discarded.

But the Lord took the rejected stone and made it the cornerstone. The resurrection is the vindication. The stone that the builders rejected became, by God's action, the foundation of a new temple, a temple built not of dead stones but of living believers, a temple whose cornerstone is the risen Christ and whose walls are built up of every soul who has been grafted into him by faith. This is the building Peter describes in 1 Peter 2, the spiritual house in which the believers are living stones, being built on the cornerstone that the builders rejected. The rejection was real. And the rejection has been overturned. The stone is now the cornerstone, and the building rises on him.

The Davidic Covenant Fulfilled

Psalm 132 returns, near the end of Book Five, to the Davidic covenant that Psalm 89 had seen cast down in the dust. The Lord swore to David a sure oath from which he will not turn back: One of the sons of your body I will set on your throne. If your sons keep my covenant and my testimonies that I shall teach them, their sons also forever shall sit on your throne. The covenant is restated. The promise is renewed. And the psalm closes with the declaration that the Lord has chosen Zion, has desired it for his habitation, and has vowed that his anointed one will be crowned with the flourishing the Lord will give him.

But the crowning described in Psalm 132 could not be accomplished by any merely human descendant of David. The historical monarchy had already proved that. Generation after generation of Davidic kings had fallen short of the covenant. The line that had seemed so permanent in David's own time had been broken by the Babylonian exile. If the Davidic covenant was to be fulfilled, it would have to be fulfilled by a descendant whose faithfulness matched the faithfulness of God. And there was only one such descendant. Jesus of Nazareth, the son of David according to the flesh, the Son of God according to the Spirit, whose whole life was obedient to the covenant, whose death was the atonement that covered the covenant-breaking of every other son of David, and whose resurrection inaugurated the eternal reign that Psalm 132 had described.

This is the fulfillment the Old Testament could not have spelled out in advance. The covenant required a faithful son of

David. None of the historical kings were that son. The crisis of Psalm 89 was the recognition that the historical monarchy had failed to produce the covenant's fulfillment. And the answer, which took a thousand years to arrive, was the arrival of the one son of David who could finally keep the covenant, who could do so because he was also the Son of God, who could do so because his faithfulness was the faithfulness of the Creator himself stepping into the line of his creature David and walking the covenant perfectly from the inside. The Davidic covenant was not broken. It was being filled up in the person who had not yet been born when the Psalter's editors gave it its final shape.

The Whole Portrait

Let us draw the threads together into a single portrait.

The Messiah of the Psalter is a king, announced in Psalm 2 and celebrated in Psalms 45, 72, and 110. His reign is universal, extending to the ends of the earth. His throne is eternal, enduring as long as the sun and moon endure. His people will offer themselves freely to his service. And his enemies will be made his footstool in the Lord's time.

The Messiah of the Psalter is divine. Psalm 45 addresses him as God directly. Psalm 110 has David calling him Lord. Psalm 102 describes him as the one who laid the foundations of the earth, whose years never end, who remains when the created order grows old like a garment. He is not merely a human king. He is the divine king who took on human form, and the Psalter had been describing both natures for a thousand years before the incarnation made them visible.

The Messiah of the Psalter is human. He is a descendant of David, a son of a Jewish woman, a man who will be born and will live and will die. Psalm 22 describes his physical sufferings. Psalm 40 speaks of his coming in a body prepared for him. Psalm 69 describes his emotions, his zeal, his thirst. He is fully divine and fully human, and the Psalter gives us both, side by side, in a combination that only the incarnation would resolve.

The Messiah of the Psalter is a shepherd. Psalm 23 portrays him as the personal shepherd of every soul who trusts him. He leads through the valley of the shadow. He prepares a table before the enemies. He pursues with goodness and mercy. And his care is not impersonal. It is the care of the one who lays down his life for the sheep.

The Messiah of the Psalter is a priest. Psalm 110 declares him a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. His priesthood is eternal. It does not pass to a successor. His sacrifice does not need to be repeated. His intercession at the right hand of the Father continues without interruption for every believer who draws near to God through him.

The Messiah of the Psalter suffers. He is betrayed by a close friend. He is hated without cause. He is pierced in his hands and his feet. He is forsaken at the moment of his death. He is given vinegar to drink. His garments are divided by lot. His bones are not broken. He is counted among the transgressors. And in the midst of his suffering, he prays the words of Psalm 22, the very words that had been written a thousand years before him and that described, with extraordinary precision, what was about to happen to him.

The Messiah of the Psalter triumphs. He rises from the dead without seeing decay, fulfilling Psalm 16. He ascends on high, leading captives in his train, fulfilling Psalm 68. He sits at the right hand of the Father, fulfilling Psalm 110. He has become the cornerstone of a new temple, fulfilling Psalm 118. He rules in the midst of his enemies until the Lord makes them his footstool. And his people offer themselves freely to his service, in holy garments, as a royal priesthood, a people who have been brought into the life of the King by the Spirit the King has sent to them.

All of this, every line of it, is Jesus of Nazareth. The apostles saw this. The early church sang this. And the church in every generation since has read the Psalter with the eyes opened by the Spirit to see the Christ who was always there. The Psalter is not a book about an anonymous king. It is a book about Jesus. And the two volumes of this companion have been trying, in different ways on different pages, to help the reader see what has been there all along.

The Invitation

If you have walked the whole Psalter with this companion, from the Blessed Man of Psalm 1 to the final hallelujah of Psalm 150, you have walked a long journey. You have learned the individual prayer of Book One. You have cried the communal lament of Book Two. You have sat in the darkness of Book Three. You have found the foundation of Book Four. And you have arrived at the praise of Book Five. The journey has not been easy. The Psalter does not pretend that the life of faith is easy. But the journey has been worth walking, and the destination has been worth arriving at.

And the destination, in the deepest sense, is not a psalm. It is a person. The Psalter has been pointing, from its first word to its last, to Christ. The Blessed Man of Psalm 1 is him. The enthroned Son of Psalm 2 is him. The shepherd of Psalm 23, the sufferer of Psalm 22, the ascending Lord of Psalm 68, the priest-king of Psalm 110, the rejected stone of Psalm 118, the coming king of Psalm 132, all of them, him. The journey of the whole Psalter is the journey to him. And the final hallelujah of Psalm 150 is the praise offered to him by the breathing creation he has redeemed.

If you have not yet met him, he is standing at the end of the journey, waiting to be recognized. He has been waiting for you through every page of the Psalter. He has been the subject of the meditation, the answer to the prayer, the shepherd of the soul, the priest at the right hand of God who is interceding for every sinner who comes to him. The invitation that the whole Psalter extends is the invitation to come to him, to kiss the Son, to take refuge in him, to find in him the salvation and the light and the life that every other refuge has failed to give. He is Jesus. He is the Christ. He is the Lord. And he is the one who is waiting at the end of the Psalter for every reader to know him as the one whom the whole book has been describing.

If you have met him, if you know him, if you have tasted and seen that the Lord is good in his particular person, then the Psalter is now a different book for you. It is the prayer book of the one who has loved you from before the foundation of the world. It is the vocabulary given by the Spirit for your conversation with the Father through the Son. It is the school of prayer in which you will be trained for the rest of your life,

as every believer who has walked with God for long has been trained, through the continual rehearsal of the words the Spirit has given to teach us how to speak to him.

Either way, the invitation at the end of the Psalter is the same. Come. Pray. Sing. Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. Praise the Lord. Because he is worthy, and because his people have always praised him, and because the hallelujah that the Psalter ends on is the hallelujah that will be sung by the redeemed forever in the presence of the Lamb who was slain and who lives forever and ever. Amen, and amen.

The Psalter and the Gospel

One more reflection before the Messianic Synthesis closes. The Psalter is, in its own terms, a prayer book. The Gospel is, in its own terms, a proclamation of what God has done through Christ. On the face of it, these are two different kinds of literature, produced in different ages, serving different functions. But the deeper reading shows that the Psalter and the Gospel are, in a real sense, the same story told twice.

The Psalter tells the story by anticipation. Across a thousand years of composition, from the time of David through the post-exilic community, the Psalter preserved and assembled the prayers of the people of God. And those prayers, when assembled and read carefully, turn out to tell a coherent story. The story of a King who is announced, who suffers, who is vindicated, who ascends to reign, who will return in judgment. The story of a people who are called out of exile, gathered home, and brought into the presence of their Lord. The story of a creation that is summoned, at the end, to praise the one

who made it. This is the Gospel, told in the idiom of a prayer book, spread across a hundred and fifty psalms, worked out slowly and carefully by the Spirit across many generations of faithful writers who did not always know how much they were saying when they said it.

The Gospel tells the same story by fulfillment. Jesus of Nazareth arrived, in the fullness of time, and lived the whole story the Psalter had been anticipating. He was born of a woman, descended from David, announced as the Son of God. He lived a life of perfect obedience, delighting in the Torah of the Lord, fulfilling every line of Psalm 1's portrait of the blessed man. He suffered at the hands of those who rejected him, fulfilling Psalms 22 and 69 and the broader pattern of the suffering servant. He died, was buried, and rose again, fulfilling Psalm 16's anticipation that the Lord would not abandon his holy one to see decay. He ascended to the right hand of the Father, fulfilling Psalm 110's declaration that the exalted one would sit at God's right hand until his enemies became his footstool. He poured out the Spirit, fulfilling the pattern of Psalm 68's triumphal ascent. And he will return in glory, fulfilling Psalms 96, 97, 98, and many others that anticipate the coming judgment when the Lord will come to judge the earth in righteousness.

This is what the New Testament writers saw. They read the Psalter with the eyes of those who had known Jesus, and they saw him everywhere in the book. The apostolic preaching, recorded in the book of Acts, is saturated with quotations from the Psalter. Peter quotes Psalm 16 and Psalm 110 at Pentecost. Paul quotes Psalm 2 at Antioch of Pisidia. The apostles, when they preached the Gospel to Jewish audiences, quoted the

Psalms as their primary proof texts, because they recognized that the Psalms had been saying what the Gospel now declared. Jesus had fulfilled what the Psalms had been anticipating. And the anticipation, in hindsight, was unmistakable.

This is why the Christian reading of the Psalter is not an arbitrary imposition on a Jewish text. It is the reading the apostles received, the reading they taught, and the reading the Spirit himself opened to the early church. The Psalter and the Gospel tell the same story. The Psalter tells it in advance, in the idiom of prayer. The Gospel tells it after the fact, in the idiom of proclamation. The two tellings belong together. Neither is complete without the other. And the Christian who reads the Psalter with the Gospel in mind and the Gospel with the Psalter in mind has begun to understand how the Spirit has been speaking the same message across three millennia of biblical history.

Coda: The Song That Does Not End

The two volumes of this companion have walked the whole Psalter together. Volume One, the descent. Volume Two, the return and the synthesis. And we have arrived at the end of the companion, but we have not arrived at the end of the song.

The song continues. The Psalter has been sung by the people of God for three thousand years. It is still being sung. In every time zone of the world, at every hour of the day, some community of believers is singing the Psalms right now. The song does not stop. And the song will not stop until the day when every creature in heaven and on earth joins the song,

and the last hallelujah of Psalm 150 is caught up into the hallelujah of the consummated kingdom, and the song that began with David in the hills of Judea becomes the song of the redeemed gathered around the throne of the Lamb.

You have been taught to sing. That is what these two volumes have tried to do. Not to give you information about the Psalter, though information has been given along the way. Not to convince you of a particular theological position, though positions have been taken. The main work of the two volumes has been to teach you to sing. To help you pray the Psalter. To give you the tools by which the Psalter can become, over the rest of your life, the prayer book that it has been for every generation of believers before you. If you have learned to sing even a little through these pages, the two volumes have accomplished what I hoped they would.

Now go back to the Psalms. Sing them. Pray them. Let them carry you through the years. And when your own time comes to join the song that does not end, you will find yourself singing with a congregation that has been gathering for three millennia, in the presence of the one to whom the whole song has always been offered, forever and ever. Amen.

A Final Gathering

Before the Messianic Synthesis closes and this volume moves toward its afterword, let me gather one more observation that belongs at the end of the whole two-volume work.

The reader who has walked both volumes has been walking, in a sense, the whole of salvation history. Genesis to Deuteronomy, in the correspondence with the five books of

the Psalter. Creation to consummation, in the broader biblical narrative. And the center of the whole walk, from the first word of Psalm 1 to the last word of Psalm 150, has been Christ. He has been the Blessed Man we have been looking at from the opening. He has been the shepherd, the sufferer, the king, the priest, the cornerstone, the returning Lord. He has been the subject of every psalm, even when the psalm itself was only looking partially at him. And he has been the destination of the whole journey, the one whose arrival at Bethlehem and whose crucifixion at Calvary and whose resurrection on the third day and whose ascension to the right hand of the Father fulfilled the whole work the Psalter had been anticipating.

This is the Christian reading of the Psalter, and it is not an innovation of the church. It is the reading the apostles taught. It is the reading the early church received. It is the reading that has sustained Christian worship for two thousand years. And it is, if the reading of the New Testament writers can be trusted, the reading Jesus himself gave on the road to Emmaus when he opened the Scriptures for the disciples and interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. The Psalter was one of those Scriptures. The things concerning himself were in it. And the disciples whose hearts were burning within them as he walked with them on the road were hearing, from the lips of the risen Christ, the same reading of the Psalter that this volume has tried, in small ways, to offer.

If you have read both volumes of this companion, you have been on a road like the road to Emmaus. Not literally, of course, and not with the physical presence of the risen Christ walking beside you. But the reading of the Psalter, done

carefully and prayerfully with the awareness that Christ is the subject, is a reading that the Spirit of Christ opens for every believer who will come to the Psalter with the right posture. And the heart that has come to burn while the Psalter has been read is a heart that has been touched by the same Spirit who opened the Scriptures on the road to Emmaus. The experience is not unique to the original disciples. It is available to every believer. And the volumes you have read have been trying, across many pages, to facilitate exactly this experience. The opening of the Psalms so that Christ may be seen in them.

Now you are being sent out, as every believer has been sent out through the ages, to live by what the Psalter has taught you and to come back to it when you need to be taught again. The Psalter will not fail you. It has carried the church for three millennia. It will carry you for whatever years remain of your own pilgrimage. And the Christ who is its subject will carry you himself, by his Spirit, through every day and every night and every hour of every circumstance, until the journey arrives and you find yourself in the presence of the one whom the whole Psalter has been pointing to. The Blessed Man. The enthroned Son. The suffering servant. The shepherd. The priest-king. The rejected stone become cornerstone. The returning Lord. All of him, in all his fullness, forever.

Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. Praise the Lord.

What the Two Volumes Have Done

Let me say, at this late point in the volume, what the two-volume work as a whole has been trying to accomplish. A

reader who has walked the full journey deserves to be told, explicitly, what the work has been aiming at.

First, the work has tried to present the Psalter as a coherent literary and theological whole. Most Christian engagement with the Psalter treats it as a collection of individual prayers to be drawn on occasionally. The Psalter is that, and the individual prayers are genuinely useful on their own terms. But the Psalter is also more. It is a carefully assembled book, shaped by editors who arranged its contents with theological intention, structured around a five-book architecture that mirrors the five books of Moses. The Christian who has grasped this architecture reads the individual psalms differently. Each psalm is located within a larger conversation. The shape of the whole gives depth to the parts. And the parts, read in the light of the whole, mean more than they could have meant as isolated texts.

Second, the work has tried to trace the correspondence between the five books of the Psalter and the five books of Moses. Book One to Genesis. Book Two to Exodus. Book Three to Leviticus. Book Four to Numbers. Book Five to Deuteronomy. The correspondence is not invented by modern scholarship. It has been recognized by careful readers for millennia, and it runs deeply enough in the texts themselves to reward sustained attention. The Christian who has seen the correspondence has a map for the whole Hebrew Bible, a sense of how the Psalter is responding to and being shaped by the Pentateuch that produced it. This map is one of the gifts the Psalter offers to the patient reader, and the two volumes of this companion have tried to make the map visible.

Third, the work has tried to show that the Psalter is, from its first word to its last, about Christ. This is the deepest claim of the two volumes, and it is the claim that the final Messianic Synthesis has been working toward. The Psalter is not primarily about David, though David wrote many of its psalms. It is not primarily about Israel, though Israel was the community within which it was preserved. It is primarily about the Messiah, the Anointed One, the King announced in Psalm 2 and enthroned by Psalm 110 and celebrated in Psalm 150. And the Messiah, in the New Testament's reading, is Jesus of Nazareth. The Christian who has grasped this has not imposed Christ on the Psalter. He has recognized the Christ who was always there, the figure whom the editors themselves, under the guidance of the Spirit, were deliberately placing at the center of the book's architecture. This is the claim that has been running through every page of both volumes, and the synthesis at the end of Volume Two has tried to gather the claim into a single sustained portrait.

Fourth, the work has tried to teach the reader to pray the Psalter for himself. The companion has been a companion, not a replacement. The hope has been that the reader, having walked through the volumes, would have the tools to continue praying the Psalter long after the companion has been set aside. The book has tried to model what careful, devotional, Christ-centered reading of the Psalms looks like, and to invite the reader into the practice. Whether the reader will take up the practice is beyond the scope of the book itself. But the book has tried to make the practice more accessible, more rewarding, more intelligible than it might otherwise have been for a lay reader without formal training.

Whether the two volumes have accomplished these four aims is for each reader to judge. Some will feel the work has been clarifying. Others will feel it has been incomplete. No single companion can do everything, and the two volumes have chosen their emphases deliberately, at the cost of other possible emphases that another writer might have chosen differently. What I hope is that the reader, having walked the journey, feels more at home in the Psalter than he did when he began. The Psalter has been the prayer book of the people of God for three thousand years. May it be the prayer book of your own life for as many years as you have left, and may the God of the Psalter meet you in its pages through every season that is still ahead of you.

Three Turning Points in the Two-Volume Work

As we approach the end of this volume, it is worth naming three turning points that have shaped the two-volume journey, because the reader who has walked the whole journey may not have noticed all of them as they passed.

The first turning point came at the opening of the work itself, in the gateway psalms of Book One. Psalm 1 introduced the blessed man whose delight is in the Torah of the Lord. Psalm 2 introduced the enthroned Son who receives the nations as his inheritance. The two psalms together opened the Psalter on a high note of confidence. The blessed life was possible. The Son was reigning. The two ways were laid before the reader. And the choice was clear. Walk the way of the righteous, take refuge in the Son, and find life. Walk the way of the wicked, and perish. The opening of the Psalter set the

framework for everything that would follow. The journey would unfold within the territory the gatekeepers had defined.

The second turning point came at the end of Volume One, in the closing of Book Three. The covenant crisis of Psalm 89 left the reader with the question that the first half of the Psalter could not answer. Where is the Lord's steadfast love of old, sworn to David in his faithfulness? The Davidic throne had been overthrown. The covenant seemed to have been revoked. The first three books of the Psalter had walked the descent, and the descent had ended in unresolved darkness. Volume One closed where Book Three closed, with the reader holding the question in the air. This was a deliberate ending. It was the right ending. And it was the necessary preparation for what Volume Two would do.

The third turning point came at the opening of Volume Two, in the first verse of Psalm 90. Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Moses returned, and the answer began. The covenant crisis of Book Three was not answered by an explanation of how the Davidic covenant had secretly been kept. It was answered by a deeper return. The Lord himself had been the dwelling place of his people from before the mountains were brought forth. The foundation was older than the institutions that had been shaken. And the recovery of faith after the crisis was not a matter of restoring the institutions but of remembering the foundation. Volume Two has walked the recovery, and the walking has led, finally, to the praise of Book Five and the synthesis that has now closed.

These three turning points define the architecture of the two-volume work. The opening, the descent, the recovery. And

within the architecture, every individual chapter has been doing its small part of the work. The reader who has walked the whole journey has been formed, in some way, by the architecture itself. He has experienced, in the order of his reading, the order of the spiritual life. The blessed beginning. The hard descent. The recovery on the far side. And the destination, which is praise, has been reached not because the suffering has ended but because the God who reigns through the suffering and beyond it has been seen, and the seeing has made the praise possible.

The Patience of the Psalter

One last observation about the Psalter as a whole, before this volume closes. The Psalter is patient. It does not rush. It walks the journey of faith at the pace the journey actually takes. The descent of Books One through Three is not hurried through to get to the recovery of Book Four. The recovery is not collapsed into a single quick chapter. The praise of Book Five is not sung without the long preparation of the previous four books. The Psalter takes its time, because the spiritual life takes time, and the prayer book of the people of God has been calibrated to the actual rhythms of the actual life it is meant to serve.

This patience is one of the deepest gifts the Psalter offers to the modern reader, who is impatient about almost everything. We want quick conversions, immediate spiritual breakthroughs, dramatic answers to prayer, fast resolutions to our crises. The Psalter does not promise any of these. It promises something better. It promises the long companionship of a God who walks with his people through every season at the speed those seasons actually unfold. The

Psalter is willing to spend a hundred and seventy-six verses meditating on the Torah of the Lord. The Psalter is willing to leave Psalm 88 unresolved at its dark close. The Psalter is willing to take seventeen psalms to walk the crisis of Book Three before Book Four begins to answer. This is patience. This is the patience the Spirit has put into the book. And the believer who has learned to read the Psalter slowly is being formed by the patience the book itself models.

Modern Christianity often suffers from the opposite of patience. The pressure to produce visible results, to give dramatic testimonies, to demonstrate spiritual progress on a measurable timeline, can shape a Christianity that has lost the patience the Psalter has always taught. The Christian who has learned the Psalter is the Christian who has learned that the long walk is the real walk, that the slow seasons are not failures of faith, that the dark passages are not signs of God's absence, that the rebuilding takes time and the rebuilding is the work and the work is the gift. Psalm 90 took its time before getting to its request to be taught to number our days. The whole Psalter takes its time across the hundred and fifty psalms before arriving at the final hallelujah. And the believer who has been trained by the Psalter is the believer who has learned to take his own time, trusting that the God who has been patient with the whole biblical history is the God who can be patient with his own slow walk through the years.

With this, the two volumes draw to their close. The Psalter has been opened. The journey has been walked. The Christ at the center has been named. And the reader is being sent back to the Psalms themselves, with whatever the companion has given him, to live by the Psalter for the rest of his days. May

the patience of the Psalter become your patience. May the praise of Psalm 150 become your destination. May the Christ of the whole book become, more and more deeply with each year that passes, the one in whom you live and move and have your being. Amen.

Afterword

The End That Is a Beginning

We have arrived at the end of the two-volume journey. Volume One walked the descent of the Psalter. Volume Two walked the return and the synthesis. Together they have traced, across a hundred thousand or more words of companion prose, what I consider the architecture of the Psalter as a whole and the Christ to whom the whole Psalter points.

But you have not come to the end of your journey with the Psalter, even if you have come to the end of this book. A companion is a temporary thing. It walks beside the reader for a stretch of the road. The book has been walking beside you. The Psalter is the road itself. And the road continues, as long as you have breath, as long as you draw near to the God who has given you his prayer book for the whole of your life.

Return to the Psalms. Return often. Return when things are hard and when things are easy and when you have nothing to say and when you have too much to say. The book has always been sufficient. It has carried believers across three thousand years. It will carry you. Let the Psalter be the prayer book of your mornings and your evenings, of your crises and your celebrations, of the ordinary days and of the unusual ones. It will meet you in all of them.

And most of all, let the Psalter lead you to Christ. The Messianic Synthesis has tried to show, in its last section, that the whole book points to him. He is the Blessed Man, the

enthroned Son, the suffering servant, the shepherd and the lamb, the priest-king, the rejected stone, the coming king. Every page of the Psalter is about him. And the prayers of the Psalter are prayers to him, through him, and with him. The believer who has learned to pray the Psalter has learned to pray in his company.

The God who gave us the Psalter is the God who has promised not to forsake us. The Son who fulfilled the Psalter is the Son who is with us to the end of the age. The Spirit who inspired the Psalter is the Spirit who now prays the Psalter through us when our own words fail. And the consummation of the Psalter, in the final hallelujah of Psalm 150, is the destination toward which every believer is walking. Let everything that has breath praise the Lord.

Thank you for walking the journey with me. May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. May the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. Now and forever. Amen.

Primary Scripture References

Psalms Treated in Volume Two

This reference section summarizes the eleven psalms that receive chapter-length treatment in Volume Two, in the order they appear in the Psalter, with brief notes on the theological weight each carries in the architecture of the whole.

Psalm 90, the Dwelling Place of All Generations, is the only psalm attributed to Moses in the Psalter, and its placement at the opening of Book Four is the editorial hinge of the whole book. It answers the covenant crisis of Book Three by reaching past the Davidic covenant to the more ancient reality that the Lord himself has been the dwelling place of his people from everlasting to everlasting. The prayer to be taught to number our days in order to gain a heart of wisdom is one of the most counter-cultural prayers in the Psalter.

Psalm 103, Bless the Lord, O My Soul, is David's sustained act of worship, in which the psalmist commands his own soul to bless the Lord and forget not all his benefits. The catalog of the Lord's actions (forgives, heals, redeems, crowns, satisfies) is the anatomy of the saving relationship. The comparison of the Lord's compassion to that of a father for his children, and the memory that he knows we are dust, is one of the most tender passages in the Hebrew Bible.

Psalm 91, Under His Wings, is the great psalm of protection, describing the Lord's keeping of the one who dwells in the shelter of the Most High. The psalm's promises must be read carefully; they describe the protection of the soul rather than

the automatic preservation of the body. Satan misused this psalm in the wilderness temptation, and Jesus refused to use it as a test. The believer prays it trustingly, not presumptuously.

Psalm 95, *Today If You Hear His Voice*, has been the opening psalm of the Christian morning office for centuries. It summons the congregation to worship while warning against the hardening of heart that cost the wilderness generation their entry into God's rest. The writer of Hebrews, in chapters three and four, makes this psalm the foundation of his exhortation to perseverance in the Christian faith.

Psalm 100, *Enter His Gates with Thanksgiving*, is the short and universally loved psalm that serves as the doxological response to the enthronement psalms earlier in Book Four. Its five verses summon all the earth to worship the Lord who made them and whose steadfast love endures forever.

Psalm 110, the *Priest-King of Melchizedek*, is the most frequently quoted psalm in the New Testament. Its opening line, in which David addresses his own descendant as Lord, provides the grammatical puzzle Jesus used to confound the Pharisees. The declaration that the exalted one is a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek provides the theological foundation for the argument of Hebrews 5 through 7 about the eternal priesthood of Christ. This is the Psalter's most explicit messianic text, and the anchor chapter of Book Five.

Psalm 119, the *Torah Psalm*, is the longest psalm in the Psalter at one hundred and seventy-six verses, structured as an acrostic in which each of twenty-two sections corresponds to a letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Eight different Hebrew

synonyms for the word of God are woven through the psalm in various combinations. The psalm is the sustained meditation of a soul who has learned to love the Torah, and its central image, your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path, has been one of the most beloved verses in the Hebrew Bible for three thousand years.

Psalm 118, the Stone the Builders Rejected, is the final psalm of the Egyptian Hallel, sung at Passover, and almost certainly the hymn Jesus and his disciples sang at the close of the Last Supper. Its central verse about the rejected stone becoming the cornerstone was applied by Jesus himself, by Peter, and by the writer of 1 Peter to the rejection and vindication of the Messiah.

Psalm 121, I Lift Up My Eyes, is the second of the Songs of Ascents, the pilgrim songs that accompanied the journeys to Jerusalem for the great festivals. The psalm's refrain about the Lord as the shomer, the keeper, who does not slumber and does not sleep, has been the travelers' psalm for three millennia.

Psalm 139, You Have Searched Me, is the great psalm of God's omniscience and omnipresence. The believer's response to being so thoroughly known is not fear but wonder, and the psalm ends with the invitation for the Lord to search the heart further, to reveal any grievous way in the psalmist, and to lead him in the way everlasting.

Psalm 150, Let Everything That Has Breath, closes the whole Psalter with the final hallelujah. The word praise appears thirteen times in the six verses of the psalm, and the summons expands from the sanctuary to the heavens to every

instrument to finally everything that has breath. This is the destination of the whole Psalter, and this is the note on which the book of the Psalms ends.

A Reader's Guide to Volume Two

Ways to Use This Book

A final word on how to use this volume, much as Volume One had its own reader's guide at the close.

For the Reader Coming from Volume One

If you have walked Volume One and have now completed Volume Two, you have walked the whole Psalter in the company of this companion. That is a real accomplishment. Take a moment before you set the book down. Consider what the two-volume journey has given you. The individual prayer of Book One. The communal cry of Book Two. The crisis of Book Three. The foundation of Book Four. The praise of Book Five. And the Christ who walks through all of them and who has, in the final synthesis, been gathered into a single portrait.

Now go back to the psalms themselves. This book has been a companion, not a destination. The destination was always the Psalter itself, and the Psalter is not something you finish. It is something you return to, over and over, across the decades of your life. You are at the beginning of a lifelong friendship with a book that has been the prayer book of the people of God for three thousand years. Welcome to the fellowship of those who have made this book their own. May you return to it often and find it sufficient for every season of the journey you have not yet walked.

For the Reader Who Began with Volume Two

If you started with Volume Two without reading Volume One, you have read the brighter half of the Psalter and the synthesis of the whole. You have missed the descent that makes the ascent meaningful. Book Four's declaration that the Lord reigns is most powerful when it is heard against the silence of Book Three's covenant crisis. The final hallelujahs of Psalm 150 carry the most weight when they are heard by a reader who has walked through the darkness of Psalm 88.

I commend Volume One to you, if you can find the time for it. The two volumes are designed to be read together, and reading only the second without the first is a little like attending the resurrection without having attended the crucifixion. The Easter story is still good news on its own. But it is differently good news when it has been preceded by Good Friday. Volume One is, in that sense, the Good Friday to Volume Two's Easter. Whenever you can read it, the reading will repay the time.

For the Preacher and the Teacher

If you are a pastor or a teacher who has come to this volume hoping for material you can use in your ministry, please use what helps. The messianic synthesis especially is offered as a preaching resource. Many chapters of the New Testament become clearer when the Psalter's anticipations are understood. Many Old Testament texts open up when their messianic weight is recognized. The connection between the Psalter and the gospel is the bridge between the two

Testaments, and any preacher who wants to preach the whole counsel of God will eventually have to walk this bridge.

Consider preaching a series on the messianic psalms. Consider teaching a class on the five-book architecture of the Psalter. Consider leading a small group through the psalms of ascent during a season of Lent. The material is here to serve you, and the goals of your ministry are your own. If anything in these pages helps you help your people meet the Psalms, the book has done its work.

For the Believer in Any Season

Wherever you find yourself in your own walk with the Lord, the Psalter has a psalm for you. If you are in a season of beginnings, return to Book One. If you are crying out for deliverance, Book Two is there. If you are in the darkness of crisis, Book Three has made room for you. If you are rebuilding, Book Four will remind you of the foundation. If you are in praise, Book Five will carry you. The book has psalms for every season, and the two volumes of this companion have tried to open each of them for you.

The Psalter does not discriminate between the seasons. All of them belong to it. All of them belong in it. And the God of the Psalter is the God of every season of his people's lives. He meets the blessed man in Book One and the broken sufferer in Book Three and the returned pilgrim in Book Five. He meets you in whatever season you are in now. And he will meet you in every season that is yet to come.

May the Lord bless you and keep you, all the days of your life, through the Psalms that he has given to carry you. Amen.