

# JOURNEY THROUGH THE PSALMS



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## About the Author:



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## Introduction: Why Psalms?

I mean, I *wanted* to love it. I felt like I *should* love it. But I spent a lot of years of my life feeling like I was reading something meant for someone else.

That sounded like the opening sentence of a twelve-step program, I do realize. But I have a growing awareness of a tiny black pearl of a secret, and I suspect a lot of us are carrying it: In our private heart of hearts, many of us secretly feel like the Bible is boring. It seems to be irrelevant, questionable, meant for someone else living a much holier or more religious life than ours. That kind of secret doubt can make us feel like we need an anonymous support group fueling its members with acceptance and strong coffee.

**Here's me raising my coffee cup. Cheers.**

Perhaps that is not quite how you expected this eBook about the Psalms to begin. Perhaps you are feeling right now that I should begin with stories about mission trips and sacrificial giving and spring-break fasting. But I've discovered that living and loving the Bible right where I am in my everyday life looks a little—or a lot—different from what we all may have expected.

**I am not a seminarian, an academician, or a theologian; I am not a Bible teacher or even a Bible scholar.**

I am a lover of messy people, a tarbled mom of two teenage boys who are often late for school and wearing mismatched socks. My vacations are not called mission trips; I have been known to absentmindedly doodle in the margins of overdue library books; I have battled depression and anxiety to degrees that have nearly drowned me; I have begged the Lord for miracles that only he could provide; and somewhere in the midst of all of that, I fell hopelessly in love with the Word of God as a light for my next step and the air for my next breath.

And the Psalms have been one book that has truly ministered to me. When I lost my first husband, I struggled to read God's Word. One day, I delivered my little boys to preschool, and I packed up my pens, my journal, and my Bible, and I went to Starbucks. I ordered my decaf grande salted caramel mocha, I took a spot at the corner table, and I waited. I waited for words. I waited for feelings. I waited for presence and goosebumps and inspiration. But just because I showed up didn't mean I knew what to say.

**The Bible still seemed so foreign to me, a treasure map I couldn't read.**

I didn't want the Old Testament stories. (See previous point.)

I didn't want the New Testament stories. (See previous point.)

So I started somewhere in the middle. The book of Psalms.

The Psalms are a great collection of songs, poetry, and prayers written by many different writers, and together they reflect the heart, soul, and emotions of humanity. Martin Luther once said that this book “might well be called a little Bible,” since it holds “most beautifully and briefly” everything that is in the entire Bible.<sup>1</sup>

The book is entirely void of clichés, which is maybe my favorite thing about it. As we read through the Psalms, we'll find writers saying the honest thing, not the easy thing. They are honest as they cry out to God from the deepest moment of their darkest night, and we will also find them honest as they sing in the heights of celebration.

**This practice, this pouring out of words, doesn't guarantee healing or a softer heart. But it is a path to honesty.**

When we rely on empty words and recited phrases that we've repeated for decades, we limit our communication with God. Sure, he hears our words and he understands our attempts, but he longs for genuine communication. Since I am a longtime avoider of small talk, one who dives deep and fast, I like to think that our desire for authentic conversation is part of being made in the image of God. He knows us, and he wants us to know him.

**I have learned this about God—he doesn't let us languish in monologues. He's a conversational God.**

As we learn to listen, as we speak out the words of our deepest pains and longings, eventually, we hear him speaking back. The path to any level of understanding must begin with honesty, and the psalmists pave the way. They show us how to tell God the truth about how we feel, what we've done, where we've been, what we love, and what we need. We can borrow their words until we find our own.

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, *Preface to the Psalter*; accessible here: <http://www.wolfmueller.co/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Prefaces-to-the-Books-of-the-Bible-with-cover.pdf>.

## Journey Through the Psalms

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### Reflection Questions:

- Have you allowed yourself to be honest with God about your struggles?
- Have you listened to him “speak back”? What have you learned about God throughout this time of difficulty?

## The Psalms in Our Grief

**When I was thirty-one years old, my husband died on my bedroom floor.**

My sons were five and three years old, fatherless before kindergarten. The doctors thought he had the flu, but they missed a sepsis diagnosis, an infection in his bloodstream that attacked his heart and his lungs over just a matter of hours. They sent him home from the hospital to recover with popsicles and Gatorade. They said, “He won’t die from this, but he will feel like it.”

He died the next morning. He was thirty-five and healthy, and he was suddenly gone. It was two days before Christmas, the eve of Christmas Eve.

**If you and I are new to each other, I’m sorry to throw that curveball at you.**

It’s a lot to take in, isn’t it, that paragraph of raw facts? There isn’t really a gentle or easy way to say it, to read the words on the page, or to hear them hang in the air. I know this well. That curveball hit my life with the velocity of an asteroid. It blew my world to bits.

If you and I have known each other for a while, if we have journeyed together through a book or two of mine, then you may be wondering if I’m going to tell the whole story again. Maybe you’re wondering what more there is to say. These are fair questions.

I have learned many things, more than a decade after it all happened.

Some wounds become a scar that doesn’t show. It doesn’t bleed anymore, and it doesn’t need the constant care it once required. Healthy tissue has been grafted over the scar, and sometimes even I no longer see it.

But it’s there, part of the landscape of my life. Sometimes, during a hard rainstorm or a change of seasons, it feels tender once more.

I have had a lot of names in my adult life, and the long string of my first, middle, maiden, married, widowed, author, married-once-again monogram could make a bracelet long enough to wrap around your wrist twice. Every name of mine is like a nesting doll tucked inside the newest version. I am all of them together, and I am

each, one at a time. At the very center is the smallest doll, tucked away, and all the other dolls work hard to keep her safe. She's in there.

### **I didn't always love the Bible.**

When Robb died, the Bible and I were not the best of friends. I didn't know what to do with it, this Old Testament that portrayed an angry God who let people die if they broke the rules, or this New Testament Savior who seemed to perform miracles only for people with enough faith. So, it could be said that either Robb died because we made God mad, or he died because I didn't have enough faith to keep him alive.

Everything felt like too much or not enough.

I closed the Bible for a while, like an amateur athlete who hangs up her equipment. I didn't know how to use it, and I felt like I didn't want to learn. What good could it do now? I felt like it was my right to say, "No, thank you." If God was going to take away my husband and leave my children fatherless, then I was going to silence him for a bit. A long bit. He didn't keep his end of the deal, so I didn't intend to keep mine.

The word *entitled* comes to mind. I felt entitled to shut him out.

Entitled to numb myself.

Entitled to take my questions elsewhere.

### **But here's what entitlement gives you: very little. You can "right" your way down the wrong path.**

Everything felt empty. I remember trying to lose myself in a mindless novel, but I couldn't make sense of the plot, couldn't identify with these shallow characters. I remember trying to numb myself with the endless updates of social media, but I felt infuriated by a newsfeed of updates that were filled with inflated optimism or contrived crises. Once again, everything was too much or not enough.

At some point, I began to discover that I had nowhere else to go. And that triggered a memory buried deep inside my mind, of Jesus' friends coming to the very same conclusion. Jesus had said some very difficult things that most of his followers didn't want to hear. This life he had invited them to wasn't easy, shiny, or sparkling



with wealth and popularity contests. They wanted something easier, and they began to turn away.

**Jesus looked at the Twelve and asked, “You do not want to leave too, do you?”**

And Peter, in his straightforward way that makes me love him so much, replied, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”<sup>2</sup>

Peter didn’t say, “I love every word you say.” Or “This is easy to understand, and I have no questions.” Or “I will never wonder or wander again.”

Essentially, he said, “This is difficult, but I think it would be harder still without you. I would rather walk through this with you—and find meaning—than take another path that leads to meaninglessness, no purpose, no healing, and no life.”

In my mind, I imagined Peter, weary in his eyes and tired in his bones, saying, “You’re my only hope. Let’s do this.”

In his moment with Jesus, Peter answered for me too.

I told you how when the Bible felt so foreign to me, I turned to the Psalms as I sat in a coffee shop. I opened to the very first one, and I began to copy it into my journal.

I copied one psalm, then another. Then another. And I’ll be honest—sometimes the words felt empty still. But the words gave me something to do with my thoughts; the copying gave me something to do with my hands; and the practice gave me something to do with my mornings.

And here’s what I found.

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<sup>2</sup> John 6:67-68.

**I found prolific writers who cried out to God in the midst of real conversations in their actual lives.**

I found writers begging God to listen.

*O LORD, hear me as I pray;  
pay attention to my groaning.*

Listen to my cry for help, my King and my God,  
for I pray to no one but you.<sup>3</sup>

I found writers in very real pain, wondering how bad this could get.

Have compassion on me, LORD, for I am weak;  
Heal me, LORD, for my bones are in agony.

I am sick at heart.

How long, O LORD, until you restore me?<sup>4</sup>

I found people who were sleepless from crying.

I am worn out from sobbing.

All night long I flood my bed with weeping,  
drenching it with my tears.

My vision is blurred by grief.<sup>5</sup>

I found praise that was also a plea to God to keep his promises.

Arise, LORD! Lift up your hand, O God.

Do not forget the helpless. . . .

But you, God, see the trouble of the afflicted;  
you consider their grief and take it in hand.

The victims commits themselves to you;  
you are the helper of the fatherless.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Psalm 5:1-2, NLT. Emphasis mine.

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 6:2-3, NLT.

<sup>5</sup> Psalm 6:6-7, NLT.

<sup>6</sup> Psalm 10:12, 14.

**I found poetry that was transparent despair, sistered with deliberate truth telling.**

*The cords of death entangled me;*  
the torrents of destruction overwhelmed me.

The cords of the grave coiled around me;  
the snares of death confronted me.

In my distress I called to the LORD;  
I cried to my God for help.

From his temple he heard my voice;  
my cry came before him, into his ears.<sup>7</sup>

I found words I could claim in the darkness, even if I couldn't feel anything.

But as for me, I will trust in you.<sup>8</sup>

But I will keep on hoping for your help;  
I will praise you more and more.<sup>9</sup>

I found longing that said exactly what I felt.

"Oh, that I had the wings of a dove!  
I would fly away and be at rest.

I would flee far away  
and stay in the desert;

I would hurry to my place of shelter,  
far from the tempest and storm."<sup>10</sup>

Over time, as I copied the psalms, I began to weave my words into theirs, adapting the psalms to become my own, becoming a modern-day psalmist in the pages of my journals. I would write the psalmists' words on the left side of the page, and I'd write my own on the right. I watched the pages turn, and I felt my heart soften.

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<sup>7</sup> Psalm 18:4-6. Emphasis mine.

<sup>8</sup> Psalm 55:23, EHV.

<sup>9</sup> Psalm 71:14, NLT.

<sup>10</sup> Psalm 55:6-8.

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How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever?  
How long will you hide your face from me?  
How long must I wrestle with my thoughts  
and day after day have sorrow in my heart?  
How long will my enemy triumph over me?<sup>11</sup>

How long do I have to do this?  
How long will I feel this way?  
Why did you let this happen to my life?  
How long must I wrestle with my own thoughts  
and every day have sorrow in my heart?  
My enemies are depression, anxiety, panic, and wrenching loss.  
My enemies do not lurk with swords,  
but they lurk in the darkness,  
and they threaten to swallow me whole.  
Is this okay with you?  
How much longer?

Show me where to walk,  
for I give myself to you.<sup>12</sup>

Show me what to do.  
Show me how to do this.  
Show me.  
Be patient with me, please.

The LORD is close to the brokenhearted  
and saves those who are crushed in spirit.<sup>13</sup>

Jesus, I feel too tired to try.  
My days blend into one another.  
How is the next one different from the one before?  
My heart feels timid and afraid.  
It is hard to find courage when anything I try produces panic exhaustion.  
I am paralyzed.  
Be near. You said you would.

But I trust in your unfailing love.  
I will rejoice because you have rescued me.  
I will sing to the LORD

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<sup>11</sup> Psalm 13:1-2.

<sup>12</sup> Psalm 143:8, NLT.

<sup>13</sup> Psalm 34:18.

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because he is good to me.<sup>14</sup>

In your amazing love, you are holding me above bitterness.  
I have felt every shade of sadness, but I do not question your sovereignty.

I feel a quiet purpose in this.

I do not feel like it is some horrifying mistake.

I have grieved the injustice of loss, the unfairness of death.

But I have not believed you to be unjust or unfair.

You have gifted me in many ways.

Two of these gifts are faith and discernment.

These are in full effect:

I believe you are on your throne,

and I believe there is purpose in your plan.

This is your grace.

This is your gift to me.

Hear my voice when I call, LORD,  
be merciful to me and answer me.

My heart says of you, "Seek his face!"

Your face, LORD, I will seek.<sup>15</sup>

O Lord, how I hunger for you.

You have become the only one I want to be with,  
and I want to be with you for hours.

You are my safest place.

I have never known such contentment in simply sitting.

Be still and know.

You are God.

### Reflection:

- Have you walked through the "valley of shadow and death?"
- How have the Psalms ministered to you?

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<sup>14</sup> Psalm 13:5-6, NLT.

<sup>15</sup> Psalm 27:7-8.



## The Psalms of Our Hope

I shared my personal grief story of unexpectedly losing my husband, Robb. Overnight, I became a single mom of two preschoolers and had to rebuild my life. I shared how the Psalms ministered to me during those difficult days and how the Lord washed me anew.

Just as the Psalms can minister to us in times of grief, there is also great hope in the Psalms and times of great celebration. We're often reminded of this hope in times of challenge.

For years, I carried Scripture around on notecards, verses I could look at quickly and remember God's faithfulness to me. During my early mothering years, when time was precious and fleeting, these little cards were a lifeline.

I spent years gathering these note cards, carrying them in my pocket, carrying a tattered Ziploc in the diaper bag, keeping the words close. And in a way I couldn't have expected, they met me in my darkest hour.

On the morning that Robb got so sick, so fast, as the paramedics deposited me at the kitchen table so they could work hard to save his life, I reached into my purse and gathered my Scripture cards, the hand-written 3 × 5 companions I'd carried along with me for more than two years. And I will tell you, here and now, in that moment of panic, the Lord quieted my heart with a peace that passes understanding.

I held this card in my hands:

*I lift my eyes toward the mountains.  
Where will my help come from?  
My help comes from the LORD,  
the Maker of heaven and earth.  
He will not allow your foot to slip;  
your Protector will not slumber.  
Indeed, the Protector of Israel  
does not slumber or sleep.  
The LORD protects you;  
the LORD is a shelter right by your side.  
The sun will not strike you by day*

*or the moon by night.  
The LORD will protect you from all harm;  
He will protect your life.  
The LORD will protect your coming and going  
both now and forever. Psalm 121, HCSB*

Again and again, I read those words. Long moments passed. So many. I heard the sounds of rescue upstairs. The sounds of great efforts. The sounds of courageous men doing all they could do.

An officer came into the kitchen. He said quietly, “Are you his wife?”

“I am.”

He said, “Ma’am, we’ve been working on him for forty minutes, and we’re doing all we can. But there is no heartbeat or breath sounds, and there have not been any. We’re going to need to tell you he has passed.”

***We’re going to need to tell you.***

As in, not yet, but soon we’ll need to. I have since learned that they say it this way to ease the news. Just in case I may fall to the floor and they would have a second patient on their hands, they wanted to break it gently. *We’re going to need to tell you.*

My wise and brave mom looked to him and said, “Is that the final word? Is he gone?”

The officer looked to me. “Yes, Ma’am. I’m so very sorry. He’s gone.”

Have you ever wondered what you might say if a police officer tells you the person you love most has died? I never imagined it this way, but I simply said, “Okay.”

And I looked at the tattered card in my hands. On a far brighter day, my own handwriting had captured this truth, now delivering it freshly to me in that moment of shattering awareness.

*I lift my eyes toward the mountains.*

*Where will my help come from?*

*My help comes from the LORD,  
the Maker of heaven and earth.*

He is gone. Okay. My help comes from the Lord.

### **Reflection:**

Think back to a time in your life when you experienced great hardship and yet great hope. How did the Lord give you peace despite the pain?

## Writing Your Own Psalm

One of the great joys of my life is a writing workshop that I teach called *The Pen and The Page*. Writers of every age and stage come together, anyone who enjoys the art of chasing their thoughts on the page, and we explore the practice of writing as a way to understand ourselves better, to let our words find fresh life and meaning, and for many of us, to talk to God and let him speak over our stories.

### I call it worship.

Every single weekend feels like a feast of new friendship, words, and authenticity. There is something magical that happens when the pen meets the page, and I believe that the Spirit of God shows up.

I teach this practice of exploring the Psalms and making them your own by looking closely at the beauty of Psalm 136.

First, take a moment to read and reflect on this psalm:

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good.

*His love endures forever.*

Give thanks to the God of gods.

*His love endures forever.*

Give thanks to the Lord of lords:

*His love endures forever.*

to him who alone does great wonders,

*His love endures forever.*

who by his understanding made the heavens,

*His love endures forever.*

who spread out the earth upon the waters,

*His love endures forever.*

who made the great lights—

*His love endures forever.*

the sun to govern the day,

*His love endures forever.*

the moon and stars to govern the night;

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to him who struck down the firstborn of Egypt

*His love endures forever.*

and brought Israel out from among them

*His love endures forever.*

with a mighty hand and outstretched arm;

*His love endures forever.*

to him who divided the Red Sea asunder

*His love endures forever.*

and brought Israel through the midst of it,

*His love endures forever.*

but swept Pharaoh and his army into the Red Sea;

*His love endures forever.*

to him who led his people through the wilderness;

*His love endures forever.*

He remembered us in our low estate

*His love endures forever. . . .*

and freed us from our enemies.

*His love endures forever.*

He gives food to every creature.

*His love endures forever.*

Give thanks to the God of heaven.

*His love endures forever.*

*His love endures forever.*

**Oh, my friends, these words get me every time.**

Do you see that bumpy road in the left column? This is not all sunshine and daisies, all good days to remind us that God's love endures forever. No, this God who paints the mornings and poured the oceans is the same Maker who divided the Red Sea into a walking path and swept Pharaoh and his armies right into it. He hung the moon and named the stars, and he remembers us in our darkest nights.  
*His love endures forever.*



### **Take a moment (or many moments) to imagine your own timeline.**

Imagine a long line from the left to the right, stretching across the horizon of your life. On the farthest left, the day you were born. On the farthest right, today. Let it play out before you like a movie reel of your best—and worst—scenes.

### **Make a list of your life's headlines.**

You don't have to go into detail; just use a few words you can recognize. Consider people who came in and out of your life, births and deaths. Write down a move into or away from communities that grounded you or wounded you. Include any marriages, their beginning or ending. Jobs awarded and eliminated. Wandering career paths and the mentors you picked up along the way. Health victories and losses, maybe some that only you and God know about. Consider each year of your life, and bring your timeline right up to this day.

### **And now, one headline at a time, write your psalm of praise to a God whose love endures forever.**

This is what mine looks like, pulled from the season of Psalms and Starbucks:

I was born six days past the anticipated due date, on July 24, 1979.

*His love endures forever.*

Twenty-two months later, my brother was born,  
My first friend and the sunshine of my life.

*His love endures forever.*

I had many teachers in my life, some who loved me, one who didn't.

*His love endures forever.*

I became a teacher, my life's goal.

*His love endures forever.*

I married Robb on July 22, 2000.

*His love endures forever.*

We lost our first child the day before Thanksgiving,  
when there was no heartbeat on the ultrasound screen.

*His love endures forever.*

My first son was born.

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We lost a second child during pregnancy.

*His love endures forever.*

My youngest son was born.

*His love endures forever.*

I stayed at home with my little boys, changing diapers and reading stories and making lunch and folding laundry and feeling tired.

*His love endures forever.*

Robb and I nearly lost one another in the tyranny of raising small children.

*His love endures forever.*

Then we found each other again. Just in time.

*His love endures forever.*

Then he died in my arms.

*His love endures forever.*

It was so hard and so sad for so long.

*His love endures forever.*

The Lord became so real to me, my faithful companion.  
I could not get enough of him. He is all I wanted.

*His love endures forever.*

He is near to the brokenhearted. He is close to those who are crushed in spirit.

*His love endures forever.*

*His love endures forever.*

In that original psalm, and in my adaptation, I discovered something: God's timeline continues, and his mercies to his people are a great continuendo from the beginning to the end. How I wish I could sit with you and listen to your timeline, your headlines, your poetry. His love connects the dots from your constellations to mine.

*His love endures forever.*

### Reflection:

Take a moment to write out your own timeline.

- What are some of the key events on your timeline?
- Where have you been reminded that "His love endures forever"?
- How does writing a psalm allow you connect more deeply with God's Word?