



SHELTERING MERCY

PRAYERS INSPIRED BY THE PSALMS

BY
RYAN WHITAKER SMITH
& DAN WILT



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AND DAN WILT**



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INTRODUCTION

In his book *Reflections on the Psalms*, C. S. Lewis makes a simple but profound observation about praise. He notes that “the humblest, and at the same time most balanced and capacious minds” praise most, “while the cranks, misfits, and malcontents praise least.”¹ In other words, the humble (or, to use the common parlance of the Psalms, *righteous*) find occasion for praise even in the worst of circumstances, while the cranks (or *wicked*) are notoriously silent when it comes to thanks—even as their riches increase and their victories abound.

To be sure, the Psalms are chiefly concerned with the subject of praise. The ornamentation of many churches today attests to this fact, and rightly so. But praise, according to the psalmists, is a more complicated matter than our modern Christian use of the term might suggest. For every comforting turn of phrase fit for a hand-painted wood plank or colorful banner, there are dozens more one would do best not to mention in the company of children.

1. C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2017), 109–10.

Yes, the praise we find in the Psalms is often joyful. Exuberant. A tune fit for dancing. But there is praise of another sort—the praise of the forgotten. The destitute. The fearful. The guilty. For these, praise often looks like utter desperation. Immobilizing panic. Fury. Trembling lips and a stuttering heart. The Psalms pull no punches. They remind us that worship is not only celebratory, but often mournful—the cry of those so overcome with grief, so lost in darkness, that the world of light and laughter and sun and sky seems like a half-forgotten memory. The God we serve—the One who is relentlessly present with us, even when He seems as distant as the peace we long for—is with us both in triumphant victory and in crushing defeat. In consolation and in desolation. In darkness and in light. In weeping and in rejoicing. In death and in life.

The Psalms cover the wide gamut of human experience and human emotion. They are refreshingly honest. Tactlessly blunt. They move us. Shock us. Invite us to join them in their joy and in their lament. For God is present in it *all*.

The Psalms have been used as prayers by the faithful for a few thousand years. Excellent translations are available, as well as paraphrases, commentaries, and additional resources for those wishing to study the Psalms. So what exactly are we attempting to add here?

The first prayers written for this book emerged organically from times of private devotion as an attempt to engage thoughtfully and creatively with the text—*prayerful responses*, mirroring each psalm in its tone and content. The idea was birthed from friendship—years of walking together as fellow disciples of Jesus through the ebbs and flows of life and bearing one another’s burdens in prayer.

We are vocational writers in different fields—Ryan Whitaker Smith in the sphere of filmmaking and storytelling, and Dan Wilt in the world of teaching, worship, and spiritual formation. We share in common not just an abiding belief in the power of prayer, but a love for language and the cadence and musicality of lyrical poetry.

In December of 2019, we shared a small booklet with friends and family that contained twenty psalm-inspired prayers. The enthusiastic responses we received confirmed that we might, in fact, be on to something. So we continued writing.

The prayers contained in this book (covering the first seventy-five psalms) are the fruit of our labors. They are not translations or paraphrases. Neither of us pretend to be qualified for such a task. Rather, they are *responses*—prayerful, poetic sketches—written in *harmony* with Scripture. We've taken to calling them *free-verse renderings*, which is just another way of saying they are impressionistic poetry without the limitations of meter or rhyme.

Imagine a painter roaming the countryside who, stumbling upon a hidden valley, scrambles for her canvas and paints in an attempt to capture the vista before her: the rocky hillsides spilling down into a meadow of green and violet, the sun straining through the clouds to scatter its golden light across the scene. The painting that results is not the valley itself, but an *impression* of it—an attempt (however feebly) to harmonize with its beauty. We have attempted to do something like that here. The psalms are holy ground, and these prayers are lyrical paintings of what we have seen, heard, and felt while sojourning there.

Each prayer adheres to the general movement of the psalm it references, while not being constrained by it. As a result, one phrase in the original text might inspire several lines of prayerful response. We allowed ourselves the freedom to follow where the text was leading us on a personal level as we prayed along with it, and to rejoice (and frequently wrestle with) what we found there.

We have included Scripture references wherever possible. One of the unexpected joys of this endeavor was finding that the whole body of Scripture was providing content for these prayers. Which brings us to another important point: as followers of Jesus, we felt the freedom to approach these prayers through the lens of the New Testament. Christ is the central figure of the Bible and the One the Hebrew Scriptures anticipate, hint at, and long for. As a result, these prayers are unapologetically *Christocentric*.

At the time of this writing, the Psalms are enjoying a historic revisitation in the broadest streams of the twenty-first-century Church. We hope the prayers offered in this book will contribute in some small way to a rediscovery of not only the Psalms, but the entire canon of Scripture.

Ultimately, our hope is that these prayers would lead you into the presence of the God who inspired the psalmists—the God who sanctifies the praise we bring and the ground on which we tread.

—Ryan Whitaker Smith and Dan Wilt

 PSALM 1 

RIVER TREE

Lord,
Your presence is life to me:¹
joy of my heart;
strength of my soul.

Grant me the grace to walk in Your ways;²
to cherish Your friendship
over the fellowship of the fallen,
soul-shaped as I am by the company I keep—
pressed and formed,
for good or for ill.

I refuse to march with those who mock Your mercy;
who revel in the unraveling of sacred things.
They stumble down trackless wastes,
training others in the ways of their wandering.

But You will be my delight, Lord;
Your Word my mirth and meal—
and I like an oak,³
drawing strength from fertile soil,
growing in grace,
safe in the circumference of Your mercy.

So I will flourish,
a river tree drinking from the deep—
fruit heavy on my branches;⁴
leaves thrumming with life.
Though seasons shift around me,
I will stand.

1. Ps. 16:11. 2. Ps. 86:11. 3. Isa. 61:3. 4. Gal. 5:22–23.

The godless are lifeless:
withered stalks,
bent by the wind;
such are those who shun Your mercy.
They forfeit seats at Your table,
refusing Your wedding garments;⁵
choosing nakedness over grace.

I won't be counted among them—
not while Your River rushes for my good.

Lead me, Lord,
strength upon strength,⁶
that at the end of my days I may look back
and wonder at the manifold mercy of God.

5. Matt. 22:1–14. 6. Ps. 84:5–7.



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 PSALM 2 

LORD OF NATIONS

Lord,
sometimes I am burdened by the politics of earth:
the serpentine plots of the proud;
the ruthless maneuvering of the underhanded
and double-dealing.

They writhe and seethe,
hungry for gain;
swarming like locusts at the harvest,
darkening the sun;
obscuring the Radiance of Your glory.¹

But then I remember:
You are not threatened by their taunts,
and Your only proper response
is a high and holy laughter;
Your voice thunders from the heavens,
*“Hear me, O great ones,
perched and playacting on your thrones:
there is but one King over all;
if you have eyes to see,
see Him lifted him up.”*²

Yes, Lord, I remember;
I call to mind the words of Your promise,
spoken in ages past to a godly king:
that from his offspring You would send Your Son
in the fullness of time³
to live and die among us,

1. Heb. 1:3. 2. John 3:14–15. 3. Gal. 4:4.

bearing the crucible of His cross,
and to rise,
bringing this world up with Him from the grave.⁴

Are not all nations and peoples Your rightful possession;
the ends of the earth Your just domain?⁵

Those who rule in wickedness
will be humbled before You;⁶
the power-hungry back-broken,
tossed into the street to beg for their dinner.

May all who reign and rule seek wisdom;
the proud be humbled;
the powerful bend their knees before Your throne.
May they know their own poverty,
that they might lay hold of the riches of Your grace.⁷

Indeed, the ground is level at the foot of Your cross,⁸
and all who kneel there,
peasant or king,
find rest for their souls.⁹

As for those who resist;
who cling to power with clenched fist—
they will be crushed beneath the heel.
Blotted out.
Expelled.
Forgotten.

For the rightful King returns for His throne,
and blessed are all who are washed in His blood.¹⁰

4. Rom. 6:4. 5. John 1:9–11. 6. Luke 14:11. 7. Eph. 1:7–10. 8. Gal. 3:26–29.
This phrase comes from the lyrics of a hymn. 9. Matt. 11:29. 10. 1 John 1:7.