



The Songs of Jesus: A Year of Daily Devotions in the Psalms

By Timothy Keller, Kathy Keller



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Renowned pastor and *New York Times* bestselling author Timothy Keller writes the book his readers have been asking for: A year-long daily devotional, beautifully designed with gilt edges and a gold ribbon marker.

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Two decades ago, Tim Keller began reading the entire Book of Psalms every month. *The Songs of Jesus* is based on his accumulated years of study, insight, and inspiration recorded in his prayer journals. Kathy Keller came to reading the psalms as a support during an extended illness. Together they have distilled the meaning of each verse, inviting readers into the vast wisdom of the psalms.

If you have no devotional life yet, this book is a wonderful way to start. If you already spend time in study and prayer, understanding every verse of the psalms will bring you a new level of intimacy with God, unlocking your purpose within God's kingdom.

Look out for Timothy Keller's latest book, *God's Wisdom for Navigating Life*, available from Viking in Fall 2017.



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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for Preaching

- "Superb . . . we should be grateful to Keller for his wisdom, scholarship, and humility."
- -The Gospel Coalition
- "If you want to see 'between the lines' and just 'below the surface' of our cultural moment and societal ethos.
- .. Which is to say, if you are any kind of Christian leader, teacher, writer, blogger, public thinker, politician, artist, media person, campus minister, youth leader, parent, Christian educator, spiritual director, or anyone with influence . . . then this is going to be exceptionally helpful for you."
- -Byron Borger

Praise for Timothy Keller and his books

- "Tim Keller's ministry in New York City is leading a generation of seekers and skeptics toward belief in God. I thank God for him."
- -Billy Graham
- "Unlike most suburban megachurches, much of Redeemer is remarkably traditional. What is not traditional is Dr. Keller's skill in speaking the language of his urbane audience . . . Observing Dr. Keller's professorial pose on stage, it is easy to understand his appeal."
- -The New York Times
- "Fifty years from now, if evangelical Christians are widely known for their love of cities, their commitment to mercy and justice, and their love of their neighbors, Tim Keller will be remembered as a pioneer of the new urban Christians."
- -Christianity Today Magazine

About the Author

Timothy Keller started Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City with his wife, Kathy, and their three sons. Today, Redeemer has more than five thousand regular Sunday attendees. Dr. Keller also founded Redeemer City to City, which has trained leaders to start more than three hundred new churches in nearly fifty cities around the world. He is the author of *Prayer*, *Preaching*, *The Prodigal God*, and *The Reason for God*, among others.

Kathy Keller received her MA in theological studies at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. Kathy and Tim then moved to Virginia, where Tim started at his first church, West Hopewell Presbyterian Church. After nine years, Kathy and her family moved to New York City to start the Redeemer Presbyterian Church. Kathy cowrote *The Meaning of Marriage* with Tim. *The Songs of Jesus* is their second collaboration.

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INTRODUCTION

The Psalms were the divinely inspired hymnbook for the public worship of God in ancient Israel (1 Chronicles 16:8–36). Because psalms were not simply read, but sung, they penetrated the minds and imaginations of the people as only music can do. They so saturated the heart and imagination of the average

person that when Jesus entered Jerusalem it was only natural that the crowd would spontaneously greet him by reciting a line from a psalm (Mark 11:9; Psalm 118:26).

The early Christians sang and prayed the psalms as well (Colossians 3:16; 1 Corinthians 14:26). When Benedict formed his monasteries he directed that the psalms all be sung, read, and prayed at least once a week. Throughout medieval times the psalms served as the most familiar part of the Bible for most Christians. The Psalter was the only part of the Bible a lay Christian was likely to own. At the time of the Reformation, the psalms played a major role in the reform of the church. Martin Luther directed that "the whole Psalter, psalm by psalm, should remain in use." John Calvin prescribed metrical psalms as the main diet of song in worshipping congregations.1 Calvin wrote: "The design of the Holy Spirit [was] . . . to deliver the church a common form of prayer."2

All theologians and leaders of the church have believed that the Psalms should be used and reused in every Christian's daily private approach to God and in public worship. We are not simply to read psalms; we are to be immersed in them so that they profoundly shape how we relate to God. The psalms are the divinely ordained way to learn devotion to our God.

Why? One reason is that it is what Luther called a "mini Bible." It gives an overview of salvation history from creation through the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai, the establishment of the tabernacle and temple, the exile due to unfaithfulness, and it points us forward to the coming messianic redemption and the renewal of all things. It treats the doctrines of revelation (Psalm 19), of God (Psalm 139), and of human nature (Psalm 8) and sin (Psalm 14).

The psalms are more than just an instrument for theological instruction, however. One of the ancient church fathers, Athanasius, wrote, "Whatever your particular need or trouble, from this same book [the psalms] you can select a form of words to fit it, so that you . . . learn the way to remedy your ill."3 Every situation in life is represented in the book of psalms. Psalms anticipate and train you for every possible spiritual, social, and emotional condition—they show you what the dangers are, what you should keep in mind, what your attitude should be, how to talk to God about it, and how to get from God the help you need. "They put their undeviating understanding of the greatness of the Lord alongside our situations, so that we may have a due sense of the correct proportion of things." Every feature and circumstance of life is "transmitted into the Lord's presence, and put into the context of what is true about him." Psalms, then, are not just a matchless primer of teaching but a medicine chest for the heart and the best possible guide for practical living.

In calling psalms "medicine" I am trying to do justice to what makes them somewhat different from other parts of the Bible. They are written to be prayed, recited, and sung—to be *done*, not merely to be read. Theologian Gordon Wenham concludes that using them repeatedly is a "performative act" that "alters one's relationship [with God] in a way mere listening does not."5 We are, in a sense, to put them inside our own prayers, or perhaps to put our prayers inside them, and approach God in that way. In doing this the psalms involve the speaker directly in new attitudes, commitments, promises, and even emotions. When, for example, we do not merely read Psalm 139:23–24—"search me . . . test me . . . see if there is any offensive way in me"—but pray it, we invite God to test our motives and we give active assent to the way of life called for by the Bible.6

The psalms lead us to do what the psalmists do—to commit ourselves to God through pledges and promises, to depend on God through petition and expressions of acceptance, to seek comfort in God through lament and complaint, to find mercy from God through confession and repentance, to gain new wisdom and perspective from God through meditation, remembrance, and reflection.

The psalms also help us see God—God not as we wish or hope him to be but as he actually reveals himself.

The descriptions of God in the Psalter are rich beyond human invention. He is more holy, more wise, more fearsome, more tender and loving than we would ever imagine him to be. The psalms fire our imaginations into new realms yet guide them toward the God who actually exists. This brings a reality to our prayer lives that nothing else can. "Left to ourselves, we will pray to some god who speaks what we like hearing, or to the part of God we manage to understand. But what is critical is that we speak to the God who speaks to us, and to everything that he speaks to us. . . . What is essential in prayer is not that we learn to express ourselves, but that we learn to answer God."7

Most of all the psalms, read in light of the entire Bible, bring us to Jesus. The psalms were Jesus's songbook. The hymn that Jesus sang at the Passover meal (Matthew 26:30; Mark 14:26) would have been the Great Hallel, Psalms 113–118. Indeed, there is every reason to assume that Jesus would have sung all the psalms, constantly, throughout his life, so that he knew them by heart. It is the book of the Bible that he quotes more than any other. But the psalms were not simply sung by Jesus; they also are about him, as we will see throughout this volume.

The psalms are, then, indeed the songs of Jesus.

THE PLAN OF THIS BOOK

This book is a daily devotional that takes the reader through every verse of the book of Psalms in 365 days. In one sense the psalms do not need to be made into a daily devotional—they *are* the divinely inspired devotional book.

Many find modern devotionals to be either too upbeat or too sentimental or too doctrinal or too mystical because they reflect the perspective and experience of just one human author. The psalms, by contrast, give us a range of divinely inspired voices of different temperaments and experiences. No other book, even of the Bible, can compete with it as a basis for daily prayer. The New Testament obviously presents Jesus Christ to us in far more explicit and direct ways, yet no part of the New Testament is actually written to be a course of prayed theology that helps you process every possible personal situation through the truth about God.

So the psalms are already God's devotional book. Nevertheless, most of us need the help of a guide for our first several journeys through the Psalter. Too many of the psalms have complex historical content and can be difficult to understand even after multiple readings. We can't pray a text if we find it utterly confusing.

Each devotional provides you with your daily reading from a psalm. It then gives a brief meditation on the meaning of the psalm and a prayer to help you actually use it in your heart and as a way to approach God. The prayers should be seen as "on-ramps," not as complete prayers. The reader should follow the trajectory of the prayers and keep going, filling each prayer out with personal particulars, as well as always praying in Jesus's name (John 14:13).

We structured this daily devotional so it can be used in three different ways. The simplest way is to read the psalm and the meditation slowly, and then use the prayer to begin praying the psalm yourself. The prayers offer an opportunity to continue praying to God about anything in your heart and anything personal you are facing that day. This could take no more than fifteen minutes.

The second way to use the devotional is to take the time to look up the additional scriptural references that are embedded in the meditation and sometimes in the prayer. The statements in the meditation are understandable without the references, but looking them up and reading them will greatly enhance your grasp of the meaning and may also enrich your time of prayer.

The third way to use the devotional is to get a blank journal to use along with it. Read the psalm portion twice slowly. Then ask three questions and write out your answers:

Adore—What did you learn about God for which you could praise or thank him?

Admit—What did you learn about yourself for which you could repent?

Aspire—What did you learn about life that you could aspire to, ask for, and act on?

Once you have answered these three questions, you have your own meditation on the psalm. Now read the meditation in the book and incorporate its insights into your journal notes. Finally, turn your meditation—already categorized as adoration, confession, and aspiration—into personal prayer, using the provided "on-ramp" prayer as well. This will take you into the deep level of wisdom and insight the psalms can provide. You are ready to start your year of devotions. May God give you "the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better" (Ephesians 1:17).

January 1

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

THE NOURISHING WORD. Psalm 1 is the gateway to the rest of the psalms. The "law" is all Scripture, to "meditate" is to think out its implications for all life, and to "delight" in it means not merely to comply but to love what God commands. Christians have their attitude toward God changed from one of duty to free, loving self-giving because of what Jesus did for us on the cross. So to know how to meditate on and delight in the Bible is the secret to a relationship with God and to life itself. Views contrary to God's Word are no anchor in time of need. God's Word gives us the resilience of a tree with a source of living water that will never dry up.

Prayer: Lord of the Word, don't let me be seduced by the world—either naively going with the crowd or becoming a hardened cynic. Help me meditate on your Word to the point of delight. Give me stability and contentment regardless of the circumstances. How I need that! Amen.

January 2

READ Psalm 2:1–4. **1** Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? **2** The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the LORD and against his anointed, saying, **3** "Let us break their chains and throw off their shackles." **4** The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the LORD scoffs at them.

NO INTIMIDATION. Each day the media highlights new things to fear. The "powers that be" in society tell us that obedience to God shackles us, limiting our freedom. In reality, liberation comes only through serving the one who created us. Those people and forces that appear to rule the world are all under his Lordship, and one day they will know it. God still reigns, and we can take refuge in him from all our fears. So to be

intimidated by the world (Psalm 2) is as spiritually fatal as being overly attracted to it (Psalm 1).

Prayer: Lord of the world, people resent your claims on human lives. I fear to speak of you for fear of ridicule or anger. But you are not intimidated by the world "powers," nor should I be. Help me to know the joy of obedience and the fearlessness that goes with it. Amen.

January 3

READ Psalm 2:5–12. **5** He rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath, saying, **6** "I have installed my king on Zion, my holy mountain." **7** I will proclaim the LORD's decree: He said to me, "You are my son; today I have become your father. **8** Ask me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession. **9** You will break them with a rod of iron; you will dash them to pieces like pottery." **10** Therefore, you kings, be wise; be warned, you rulers of the earth. **11** Serve the LORD with fear and celebrate his rule with trembling. **12** Kiss his son, or he will be angry and your way will lead to your destruction, for his wrath can flare up in a moment. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

REFUGE IN GOD. God's response to human pride and power is to install his "son" on Zion. This points beyond Israel's king to Jesus, God's true Son. One day he will put everything right; but he will do this by going first to Zion—to Jerusalem—to die for our sins. To "kiss his son" is to rest in and live for him. If we do this, we have assurance that no matter what happens to us, ultimately everything will be all right. If we don't live for him, we end up fighting God himself. So "there is no refuge from him—only *in* him."8

Prayer: Lord, your answer to the chaos and strife of the world is your Son, Jesus Christ. He will eventually break brokenness, kill death, destroy destruction, and swallow every sorrow. Teach me how to take refuge in you—in your forgiveness through Jesus, in your wise will, and in my assured, glorious future. Amen.

January 4

READ Psalm 3. 1 LORD, how many are my foes! How many rise up against me! 2 Many are saying of me, "God will not deliver him." 3 But you, LORD, are a shield around me, my glory, the One who lifts my head high. 4 I call out to the LORD, and he answers me from his holy mountain. 5 I lie down and sleep; I wake again, because the LORD sustains me. 6 I will not fear though tens of thousands assail me on every side. 7 Arise, LORD! Deliver me, my God! Strike all my enemies on the jaw; break the teeth of the wicked. 8 From the LORD comes deliverance. May your blessing be on your people.

PEACE AMID DANGER. David's son Absalom was trying to kill him. The seeds of that family dysfunction are David's own fault. He had wanted Absalom's love so much he never corrected him, even when Absalom murdered one of his brothers. Now David is fleeing to save his own life. In this prayer he realizes that neither a son's love nor popular acclaim can serve as a person's worth or security. David relocates his glory and hope to God and finds peace despite danger. God is the only one who sustains you, whether an army is pursuing you or you are at home in your own bed. God sustains every breath you take.

Prayer: Lord and Savior, I am facing so many troubles, some of my own making. But I can hold my head up because I am your child and servant. So be my shield—protect me. And be my glory—give me confidence that you are with me and will bring me through this. Help me! Amen.

January 5

READ Psalm 4. 1 Answer me when I call to you, my righteous God. Give me relief from my distress; have mercy on me and hear my prayer. 2 How long will you people turn my glory into shame? How long will you love delusions and seek false gods? 3 Know that the LORD has set apart his faithful servant for himself; the LORD hears when I call to him. 4 Tremble and do not sin; when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent. 5 Offer the sacrifices of the righteous and trust in the LORD. 6 Many, LORD, are asking, "Who will bring us prosperity?" Let the light of your face shine on us. 7 Fill my heart with joy when their grain and new wine abound. 8 In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, LORD, make me dwell in safety.

JOY APART FROM CIRCUMSTANCES. How can we have peaceful sleep at night (verse 8) and joy—even when others are prospering and we are not (verse 7)? Consider whether you have a divided heart—making success or relationships into idols—and repent (verse 2). Consider whether you have a bitter heart—and forgive (verse 4). Finally, in prayer, seek God's face, a sense of his presence and his love on your heart (verse 6). Then we can know we are safe in God, come what may.

Prayer: Lord, other "gods" compete with you for the allegiance of my heart. I nurse resentment toward people who have wronged me, and sometimes toward you. It is these things that keep me from knowing the joy of your presence and the peace of your protection. Help me remove them and fill my heart with your joy. Amen.

January 6

READ Psalm 5:1–6. **1** Listen to my words, LORD, consider my lament. **2** Hear my cry for help, my King and my God, for to you I pray. **3** In the morning, LORD, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait expectantly. **4** For you are not a God who is pleased with wickedness; with you, evil people are not welcome. **5** The arrogant cannot stand in your presence. You hate all who do wrong; **6** you destroy those who tell lies. The bloodthirsty and deceitful you, LORD, detest.

POURING OUT OUR HEART. Many of the psalms begin with desperate "laments"—cries for help from deep within. This is uncensored prayer, straight from the heart. Even when we have no words to express our anguish, we can lay our requests before God. He expects us to come to him for refuge from our grief, fear, and pain and not to dull those emotions with amusements and distractions that promise, but can never deliver, blessing. We are to have confidence that he is the God who told Moses that he would faithfully commit himself in love to us, in grace, despite our sins and flaws (Exodus 6:7).

Prayer: All-knowing Lord, you see what is in my heart. All-powerful Lord, I don't have the power to accomplish what needs to be done, so I spread out my requests before you. All-wise Lord, I know you hear and will act—but I know also I must wait on your wise timing, and so I will. Amen.

January 7

READ Psalm 5:7–12. **7** But I, by your great love, can come into your house; in reverence I bow down toward your holy temple. **8** Lead me, LORD, in your righteousness because of my enemies—make your way straight before me. **9** Not a word from their mouth can be trusted; their heart is filled with malice. Their throat is an open grave; with their tongues they tell lies. **10** Declare them guilty, O God! Let their intrigues be their

downfall. Banish them for their many sins, for they have rebelled against you. 11 But let all who take refuge in you be glad; let them ever sing for joy. Spread your protection over them, that those who love your name may rejoice in you. 12 Surely, LORD, you bless the righteous; you surround them with your favor as with a shield.

PRAYING FOR PROTECTION. David's psalms often speak of enemies. Ancient kings were always in danger of people trying to kill them. We may have fewer enemies intent on physical violence, but there are many forces in the world that can ruin us economically, emotionally, physically, and spiritually. We must do what David did. He asks God to spread his protection over him. He is sure God will do this because he looks toward his temple, the place where sins are atoned for. Christians do the same when they remember the One who claimed to be the final temple (John 2:20–21), the ultimate sacrifice, and the conclusive proof of God's great love for us.

Prayer: Righteous Lord, I ask for protection from all the hostile forces around me. But when I get indignant about evil in others, I remember my own sin, and that I can come near you only by your grace. How I need to hate wrongdoing and yet not become angry and begin to feel superior to others! Keep me safe, but keep me humbled. Amen.

January 8

READ Psalm 6. 1 LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath. 2 Have mercy on me, LORD, for I am faint; heal me, LORD, for my bones are in agony. 3 My soul is in deep anguish. How long, LORD, how long? 4 Turn, LORD, and deliver me; save me because of your unfailing love. 5 Among the dead no one proclaims your name. Who praises you from the grave? 6 I am worn out from my groaning. All night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears. 7 My eyes grow weak with sorrow; they fail because of all my foes. 8 Away from me, all you who do evil, for the LORD has heard my weeping. 9 The LORD has heard my cry for mercy; the LORD accepts my prayer. 10 All my enemies will be overwhelmed with shame and anguish; they will turn back and suddenly be put to shame.

WAITING IS HARD. "How long, O Lord, how long?" is the cry of someone who has walked with more pain and sickness than he thought he could ever bear. God hears the prayers of the faltering because of his "unfailing love" (the Hebrew *chesedh*, the steadfast love of a covenant God who cares for us not because we are perfect but because he is) (verse 4). Though David scarcely has the heart to pray, his tears are not in vain. He gets an "answering touch" (verses 8–9)—an assurance that God is listening even though he hasn't done anything about the circumstances—yet (verse 10). God walks with us, and helps us to "run with perseverance the race" (Hebrews 12:1).

Prayer: "Thy promise is my only plea—with this I venture nigh. Thou callest burdened souls to Thee, and such, O Lord, am I."9 I know that your love is unfailing even if I don't feel it. But I ask that in your grace you touch me and give me a sense of your presence at my side. Amen.

January 9

READ Psalm 7:1–5. **1** LORD my God, I take refuge in you; save and deliver me from all who pursue me, **2** or they will tear me apart like a lion and rip me to pieces with no one to rescue me. **3** LORD my God, if I have done this and there is guilt on my hands— **4** if I have repaid my ally with evil or without cause have robbed my foe— **5** then let my enemy pursue and overtake me; let him trample my life to the ground and

make me sleep in the dust.

SMEAR CAMPAIGN. How do we deal with gossip and slander and the loss of our reputation? David shows us straightaway. He doesn't *say*, "I will take refuge in God," but rather *shows* that he already has, that he is already safe. How can he feel that way before he knows whether the smear campaign will be thwarted? The answer: if we trust in God's wisdom and will, then we have peace regardless of the immediate outcome. It is only God's opinion of us that counts, and that will prevail.

Prayer: Lord, some criticisms are terribly unfair. My deepest comfort is knowing that you see all things and will in the end set all things right. So I will not desperately defend myself or strike out at my accusers and insinuators. You know the truth, and that suffices for me. I leave this all in your hands. Amen.

January 10

READ Psalm 7:6–11. **6** Arise, LORD, in your anger; rise up against the rage of my enemies. Awake, my God; decree justice. **7** Let the assembled peoples gather around you, while you sit enthroned over them on high. **8** Let the LORD judge the peoples. Vindicate me, LORD, according to my righteousness, according to my integrity, O Most High. **9** Bring to an end the violence of the wicked and make the righteous secure—you, the righteous God who probes minds and hearts. **10** My shield is God Most High, who saves the upright in heart. **11** God is a righteous judge, a God who displays his wrath every day.

GOD ON HIGH. David has not done the things of which he is accused (verse 8). He wants God to take his throne on high (verse 7) and right all wrongs. He rightly leaves retribution to God, who alone has the wisdom to know what people deserve as well as the power and right to give it to them. So should we. But how can we be sure that *we* will survive Judgment Day? Christians know that before the Lord is lifted up on a throne to judge, first he will be lifted up on a cross to atone for sin (John 12:32). So on the final day a joy-filled, redeemed people will assemble at his feet (verse 7).

Prayer: Righteous Lord, I have many who *falsely* accuse me. Defend me from them! But I also know my sin, and my heart *rightly* accuses me. I rest in Jesus's atoning death for me. "*Be Thou my Shield and hiding Place, that, sheltered by Thy side, I may my fierce accuser face, and tell him Thou hast died!"* 10 Amen.

January 11

READ Psalm 7:12–17. **12** If he does not relent, he will sharpen his sword; he will bend and string his bow. **13** He has prepared his deadly weapons; he makes ready his flaming arrows. **14** Whoever is pregnant with evil conceives trouble and gives birth to disillusionment. **15** Whoever digs a hole and scoops it out falls into the pit they have made. **16** The trouble they cause recoils on them; their violence comes down on their own heads. **17** I will give thanks to the LORD because of his righteousness; I will sing the praises of the name of the LORD Most High.

THE SELF-DEFEAT OF EVIL. Because we live in a broken world, much injustice will go unpunished until the final day of judgment. However, most of the time, God's justice works itself out within the fabric of history. Evil carries within it the seeds of its own destruction. Not only is it a bore—leading to dissatisfaction and emptiness (verse 14)—but it recoils on itself. You fall into the pit you have dug for others. Haters are hated, deceivers are deceived, gossips are gossiped about. Remember this until you are not intimidated, discouraged, or tempted by the wrongdoing you see around you.

Prayer: Lord, I admit that some of my resentment of those who wrong me is tinged with envy. They live as they choose, and they seem happier than I am. But that is an illusion. Evil is like cancer cells—they grow, but only toward collapse and destruction. Help me see that clearly, so I can forgive them and not be tempted by them. Amen.

January 12

READ Psalm 8. 1 LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory in the heavens. 2 Through the praise of children and infants you have established a stronghold against your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger. 3 When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, 4 what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them? 5 You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honor. 6 You made them rulers over the works of your hands; you put everything under their feet: 7 all flocks and herds, and the animals of the wild, 8 the birds in the sky, and the fish in the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas. 9 LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

WONDERFUL CARE. The universe reveals God's glory. Aren't humans just specks of dust in this vastness? Physically, yes; yet we fill the mind of God (verse 4). The astonishment of the psalmist should be ours: Why should God care about us? Because he has made us in his image and given us the world he created to care for as his agents. Living with care for the land, sea, and air and all who live there, and doing justice for every human being stamped with his image, brings God glory. As a human race we are not doing this very well! But Jesus has come, and eventually the world will be under *his* feet (verse 6; Hebrews 2:5–9) and then everything will be made right.

Prayer: Majestic God, how is it possible that we *fill* your mind? You love and care for us so much you were willing to become a weak infant and vulnerable child, all in order to save us. Now help me, in all my daily interactions, to treat every person I meet as a being infinitely precious in your sight. Amen.

January 13

READ Psalm 9:1–12. **1** I will give thanks to you, LORD, with all my heart; I will tell of all your wonderful deeds. **2** I will be glad and rejoice in you; I will sing the praises of your name, O Most High. **3** My enemies turn back; they stumble and perish before you. **4** For you have upheld my right and my cause, sitting enthroned as the righteous judge. **5** You have rebuked the nations and destroyed the wicked; you have blotted out their name for ever and ever. **6** Endless ruin has overtaken my enemies, you have uprooted their cities; even the memory of them has perished. **7** The LORD reigns forever; he has established his throne for judgment. **8** He rules the world in righteousness and judges the peoples with equity. **9** The LORD is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble. **10** Those who know your name trust in you, for you, LORD, have never forsaken those who seek you. **11** Sing the praises of the LORD, enthroned in Zion; proclaim among the nations what he has done. **12** For he who avenges blood remembers; he does not ignore the cries of the afflicted.

THANKS. This psalm helps us toward the spiritual health of a thankful heart. We must discern God's "wonderful deeds" in our lives, a phrase that can refer to dramatic miracles like the parting of the Red Sea. However, we must also learn to see the more subtle ways God comforts us just when we were ready to give up, or brings the right friend or book or line of thinking into our lives just when we needed it. Recognize and tell of God's daily, wonderful deeds, and you will have a note of grateful joy as the background music to

your life.

Prayer: O Lord, you never forsake the troubled and the afflicted. When I think of your innumerable mercies to me, small and large, I can only cry. . . . What thanks I owe you, and what love! Help me to see the ways you support and guide me every day, so that I will always find new reasons to thank you. Amen.

January 14

READ Psalm 9:13–20. **13** LORD, see how my enemies persecute me! Have mercy and lift me up from the gates of death, **14** that I may declare your praises in the gates of Daughter Zion, and there rejoice in your salvation. **15** The nations have fallen into the pit they have dug; their feet are caught in the net they have hidden. **16** The LORD is known by his acts of justice; the wicked are ensnared by the work of their hands. **17** The wicked go down to the realm of the dead, all the nations that forget God. **18** But God will never forget the needy; the hope of the afflicted will never perish. **19** Arise, LORD, do not let mortals triumph; let the nations be judged in your presence. **20** Strike them with terror, LORD; let the nations know they are only mortal.

NEVER FORGET. This psalm moves suddenly from thanksgiving to a cry for help amid suffering. Life is like that. But David grabs hold of a truth that keeps him from sinking. The core sin is to forget that God is God and that we are not. And this is justice—those who forget God will be forgotten, but those who remember God will be remembered forever (Isaiah 56:5). Christians know of one who remembered God yet was completely forsaken (Matthew 27:46). But because Jesus died *in our place*, we can be even surer than David that God will always be there for us.

Prayer: Lord, so many of my problems stem from not remembering you. I forget your wisdom and so I worry. I forget your grace and so I get complacent. I forget your mercy and so I get resentful of others. Help me remember who you are every moment of the day. Amen.

January 15

READ Psalm 10:1–11. **1** Why, LORD, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? **2** In his arrogance the wicked man hunts down the weak, who are caught in the schemes he devises. **3** He boasts about the cravings of his heart; he blesses the greedy and reviles the LORD. **4** In his pride the wicked man does not seek him; in all his thoughts there is no room for God. **5** His ways are always prosperous; your laws are rejected by him; he sneers at all his enemies. **6** He says to himself, "Nothing will ever shake me." He swears, "No one will ever do me harm." **7** His mouth is full of lies and threats; trouble and evil are under his tongue. **8** He lies in wait near the villages; from ambush he murders the innocent. His eyes watch in secret for his victims; **9** like a lion in cover he lies in wait. He lies in wait to catch the helpless; he catches the helpless and drags them off in his net. **10** His victims are crushed, they collapse; they fall under his strength. **11** He says to himself, "God will never notice; he covers his face and never sees."

PAINFUL REALITY. Augustine taught there were two "cities" or ways to live in society—one based on self-giving and one on self-serving. To worship the desires of the heart (verse 3) leads to habits of self-expression and self-assertion rather than sacrificial love. It is this way of life that appears to be ascendant in the world, with a God who seems to be far away and doing nothing about it (verse 1). The psalm describes this situation in painful detail, as a way of keeping us from even subtly going along with this manner of living. Like the psalmist, we need to resist it in prayer and in our daily life.

Prayer: Lord, keep me from being either naive about human evil, self-righteous about it, or cynical before it. Don't let me ever get used to injustice or, worse, become complicit in it. That takes constant vigilance and reflection about how I am living. Keep me loving what you love and hating what you hate. Amen.

January 16

READ Psalm 10:12–18. **12** Arise, LORD! Lift up your hand, O God. Do not forget the helpless. **13** Why does the wicked man revile God? Why does he say to himself, "He won't call me to account"? **14** But you, God, see the trouble of the afflicted; you consider their grief and take it in hand. The victims commit themselves to you; you are the helper of the fatherless. **15** Break the arm of the wicked man; call the evildoer to account for his wickedness that would not otherwise be found out. **16** The LORD is King for ever and ever; the nations will perish from his land. **17** You, LORD, hear the desire of the afflicted; you encourage them, and you listen to their cry, **18** defending the fatherless and the oppressed, so that mere earthly mortals will never again strike terror.

ENCOURAGEMENT. This second half of the psalm shows us a man who never gets the "why?" questions answered (verse 13) yet who trusts God completely. While the day of justice may be still in the future, the promise of encouragement is in the present, if we look to him. How can we trust him now if we still see oppression reigning? Christians know he so loves the helpless (verse 12), grief-stricken (verse 14), and oppressed (verse 18) that he literally became one of them and "by oppression and judgment he was taken away" (Isaiah 53:3–8). So commit yourself to him.

Prayer: Lord, the world is filled with so many tragedies and injustices! I wish I knew the "why" behind so many things. But despite appearances and what I see from my extremely limited vantage point, you have never wronged anyone. Help me trust your wisdom and give my heart the encouragement and strength that only you can give. Amen.

January 17

READ Psalm 11. 1 In the LORD I take refuge. How then can you say to me: "Flee like a bird to your mountain. 2 For look, the wicked bend their bows; they set their arrows against the strings to shoot from the shadows at the upright in heart. 3 When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?" 4 The LORD is in his holy temple; the LORD is on his heavenly throne. He observes everyone on earth; his eyes examine them. 5 The LORD examines the righteous, but the wicked, those who love violence, he hates with a passion. 6 On the wicked he will rain fiery coals and burning sulfur; a scorching wind will be their lot. 7 For the LORD is righteous, he loves justice; the upright will see his face.

DON'T DESPAIR. When life crumbles, the desire to run away and hide in despair is strong. David counters this impulse with three insights: theological—God is still on his throne and will execute justice in his wise time (verse 4); practical—crises are really tests, opportunities to evaluate what is true and solid and what is flimsy and should be discarded (verses 4–5); and spiritual—what we really need is the knowledge of God's presence and *face* (verse 7). Only love makes you interested in gazing on someone's face. Pray until God and his love become more real to you. Then you won't run scared.

Prayer: Lord, people are saying, "It's over; just give up." But I won't panic—or should I say, "Lord, help me to not panic"? I know you are on your throne—but my heart doesn't feel that—so speak to my heart. Let me love you enough not to be scared. Amen.

January 18

READ Psalm 12. 1 Help, LORD, for no one is faithful anymore; those who are loyal have vanished from the human race. 2 Everyone lies to their neighbor; they flatter with their lips but harbor deception in their hearts. 3 May the LORD silence all flattering lips and every boastful tongue—4 those who say, "By our tongues we will prevail; our own lips will defend us—who is lord over us?" 5 "Because the poor are plundered and the needy groan, I will now arise," says the LORD. "I will protect them from those who malign them." 6 And the words of the LORD are flawless, like silver purified in a crucible, like gold refined seven times. 7 You, LORD, will keep the needy safe and will protect us forever from the wicked, 8 who freely strut about when what is vile is honored by the human race.

THE POWER OF WORDS. Perhaps it has never been truer than now that "what is vile is honored by the human race." Christians need God's protection from lies, slander, and deception, because words have enormous power not only to distort and wound but also to overthrow a whole culture (verses 3–5, 7–8; cf. James 3:1–11). The great danger is to respond in kind. Instead we must model our words on God's—true and well crafted (verse 6). Our job is to trust in God's protection and to copy the actions of our Master and Savior, Jesus, who when he was reviled did not revile. We give glory to God when we suffer without hatred and retaliation.

Prayer: Lord, I am surrounded by people whose words are either fawning and flattering or malicious and stinging. Don't let me imitate them. Make my words honest and true, economical and few, wise and well chosen, calm and kind. Give me so much love and grace that this kind of conversation comes naturally to me. Amen.

January 19

READ Psalm 13. **1** How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? **2** How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me? **3** Look on me and answer, LORD my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death, **4** and my enemy will say, "I have overcome him," and my foes will rejoice when I fall. **5** But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. **6** I will sing the LORD's praise, for he has been good to me.

HONESTY. David is in agony and can't feel the presence of God. He cries out that God has ignored his pain and his sorrow. It is almost a howl, and the fact that it is included in the Bible tells us that God wants to hear our genuine feelings, even if they are anger at him. David never stops praying, however, and that is the key. As long as we howl toward God and remember his salvation by grace (verse 5), we will end at a place of peace. If Christians do that by hearing Jesus praying verses 1–4 on the cross, losing the Father's face as he paid for our sins, we will be able to pray verses 5–6 indeed.

Prayer: "Tempest-tossed soul, be still; my promised grace receive"; Tis Jesus speaks—I must, I will, I can, I do believe. "11 Lord, this reminds me that believing the promise of your presence in my suffering takes time, and grows slowly, through stages in prayer. So I will pray until my heart rejoices in you. Amen.

January 20

READ Psalm 14. 1 The fool says in his heart, "There is no God." They are corrupt, their deeds are vile; there

is no one who does good. 2 The LORD looks down from heaven on all mankind to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God. 3 All have turned away, all have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one. 4 Do all these evildoers know nothing? They devour my people as though eating bread; they never call on the LORD. 5 But there they are, overwhelmed with dread, for God is present in the company of the righteous. 6 You evildoers frustrate the plans of the poor, but the LORD is their refuge. 7 Oh, that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion! When the LORD restores his people, let Jacob rejoice and Israel be glad!

FOOLISHNESS. In the Bible foolishness means a destructive self-centeredness. Fools cannot bear to have anyone over them, and so they ignore God or deny he exists. Some of this rebellion exists in every heart. Every sin is a kind of practical atheism—it is acting as if God were not there. That also means that belief in God must be a gift. This psalm is famously quoted in Romans 3:11: "There is no one who seeks God." Left to ourselves, we would never want to find God, much less know him. So take heart . . . If you want God, it is because he wants you to find him.

Prayer: Lord, I often struggle with doubts about you, and this psalm makes me realize they don't all come from my intellect and mind—many come from my heart. Part of me doesn't *want* there to be a God I have to obey. Increase my faith, through your Word and Spirit, and through believing friends, "the company of the righteous." Amen.

January 21

READ Psalm 15. 1 LORD, who may dwell in your sacred tent? Who may live on your holy mountain? 2 The one whose walk is blameless, who does what is righteous, who speaks the truth from their heart; 3 whose tongue utters no slander, who does no wrong to a neighbor, and casts no slur on others; 4 who despises a vile person but honors those who fear the LORD; who keeps an oath even when it hurts, and does not change their mind; 5 who lends money to the poor without interest; who does not accept a bribe against the innocent. Whoever does these things will never be shaken.

INTEGRITY. Who gets to draw near to God? Those who speak true words (verse 2), but in love (verse 3) and generosity (verse 5). Those who are transparent, honest, and faithful to their word, not always changing their minds (verses 4 and 5). If we deceive, vilify, and flatter, if we make empty promises and overblown claims, we cannot expect God's presence in our lives. This standard not only challenges us but also reminds us we can go to God only through his grace. No one but Jesus ever lived with perfect integrity (Hebrews 4:15), but because he is our Savior, we can go in to God (Hebrews 4:16).

Prayer: Lord, the sins of my tongue are so many! Forgive me for talking too much (because of pride), for talking too little (because of fear), for not telling the truth (because of pride and fear), for words that are harsh and cutting, for hurting others' reputations through gossip. Purify my words with your Word. Amen.

January 22

READ Psalm 16:1–6. **1** Keep me safe, my God, for in you I take refuge. **2** I say to the LORD, "You are my Lord; apart from you I have no good thing." **3** I say of the holy people who are in the land, "They are the noble ones in whom is all my delight." **4** Those who run after other gods will suffer more and more. I will not pour out libations of blood to such gods or take up their names on my lips. **5** LORD, you alone are my portion and my cup; you make my lot secure. **6** The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;

surely I have a delightful inheritance.

IDOLS THAT DESERT. We may not believe in literal divine god-beings of beauty, wealth, pleasure, or fertility. But we must all live for something, and if we live for and love any thing more than God himself, we are trapped. They become things we *have* to have, so we "run," exhausted, after them. But this leads to increasing suffering (verse 4), for life inevitably takes them from us. Instead we must make God our portion (our real wealth), our cup (our real pleasure), our ultimate good.

Prayer: Lord, I want the gifts of your hand more than the glory of your face. I can root my happiness in amusements, music, food, or nice weather. But let suffering enter the picture, and they show themselves as the tawdry baubles that they are. Without your constant presence and favor, no thing is a "good thing." So I receive them with thanks, but I rest my heart and hope in you. Amen.

January 23

READ Psalm 16:7–11. **7** I will praise the LORD, who counsels me; even at night my heart instructs me. **8** I keep my eyes always on the LORD. With him at my right hand, I will not be shaken. **9** Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure, **10** because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, nor will you let your faithful one see decay. **11** You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.

THE BEST IS YET TO COME. If God is our greatest good, we get what can't be lost and will only increase—infinitely. The Lord is at our right hand. To be at someone's right hand is to be their advocate in court or support in battle or companion for a journey. In Christ this is all literally true (Acts 2:24–36). Because he died and rose for us, he is our representative in heaven (so we are completely forgiven) and companion on earth (so we are intimately loved). And someday we will not just sense him at our side but see him face to face. In our resurrected bodies that will be endless, unimaginable pleasure (verses 9–11). Now we have nothing to fear.

Prayer: Lord, as I lay down in sleep last night and rose this morning only by your grace, so keep me in a joyful, lively remembrance that whatever happens, I will someday know my final rising—the resurrection—because Jesus Christ lay down in death for me and rose for my justification. Amen.

January 24

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