



There's a Psalm for That: How the Psalms Speak in Daily Life

ROLF JACOBSON

[The Psalter] might well be called a little Bible. In it is comprehended most beautifully and briefly everything that is in the entire Bible. It is really a fine enchiridion or handbook. In fact, I have a notion that the Holy Spirit wanted to take the trouble himself to compile a short Bible and book of examples of all Christendom or all saints, so that anyone who could not read the whole Bible would have anyway almost an entire summary of it, comprised in one little book.

Martin Luther¹

A friend of mine, Pastor Kris Capel, would often advise people who were struggling with one burden or another, “Open the book of Psalms and read until you find something that works for you.” Many people would do so—and indeed find something that worked for them. No matter what life throws at us, there is often a psalm—or even just a psalm verse—that works for the situation. It was for

¹ Martin Luther, *Preface to the Psalter* (1545), in *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut Lehmann, and Christopher Boyd Brown, 75 vols. (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress and Concordia, 1955–) 35:254.

Somewhere in those 150 psalms, there is one that speaks to the situation in which you find yourself at any given time. It might be to express the hurt of the world as it is, it might be to express hope for the world as God wants it to be, or it might be to give utterance to one's thanks and praise to the God of constancy and love.

this reason that Luther described the Psalter as a “book of examples” of the life of faith. Luther also wrote, “In the other books we are taught by both precept and example what we ought to do. This book not only teaches *but also gives the means and method by which we may keep the precept and follow the example.*”² I have often said that the Psalter is what faith sounds like “out loud.” It is the playlist of the life of faith. It often seems that no matter what life throws at us—things wondrous, terrifying, puzzling, mysterious, or frustrating—*there's a psalm for that.*

Most readers will already be aware of how the Psalter provides helpful prayers, hymns, and poems for the more general life situations—the highs and the lows. In this essay, I plan to explore more specific situations in life for which the psalms offer help. But before going there, here is a brief review of the more common life situations into which the psalms speak.

“Help me, help me, help me!”—Psalms for life's hardest moments

- Psalm 22: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”
- Psalm 69: “Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck.”
- Psalm 130: “Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice!”

“You are here, you are here, you are here!”—Psalms for trusting God in any circumstance

- Psalm 23: “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me.”
- Psalm 27: “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?”
- Psalm 46: “Be still and know that I am God.”

“Praise you, praise you, praise you!”—Psalms for praise and celebration

- Psalm 100: “Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth!”
- Psalm 118: “O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever!”
- Psalm 150: “Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!”

“I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry!”—Psalms of repentance and forgiveness

- Psalm 51: “Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.”
- Psalm 32: “I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,’ and you forgave the guilt of my sin.”

“Thank you, thank you, thank you!”—Psalms for thanksgiving after experiencing grace

- Psalm 30: “You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy.”

² LW 14:286. Emphasis added.

- Psalm 118: “I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation.”

In the remainder of this essay, I am going to explore some other life situations into which the psalms are able to speak. These life moments include being falsely accused, suffering from a broken heart, being betrayed by a friend, traveling life’s journeys, and grieving the death of a loved one.

“I’m not perfect, but I didn’t do that!”—Psalms for when one is falsely accused

At one time or another in life, most of us will probably be accused of something we didn’t do. And when you are falsely accused, there is a psalm for that: the psalm of innocence.

False accusations can have tremendously serious consequences. As a pastor, I’ve walked with people who have been falsely accused—and it isn’t easy for them. I’ve seen it happen in marriage and divorce, where a spouse has made false accusations of abuse or infidelity or chemical dependency or other things. Such allegations may put a person’s parenting rights in danger, sully their public reputation, have weighty financial consequences, and potentially have other repercussions. And aside from such ramifications, false accusations simply hurt.

I’ve also seen false accusations in work situations, where a colleague or customer has made false claims against a person. In the work environment, a colleague might seek to pawn off their own mistake (or even crime) on a coworker. A colleague might go to human resources or to the boss and lie about someone. A customer or contractor might lie about any number of things. A former or current parishioner might make a false allegations against a pastor. I’ve had friends lose their jobs and even their careers over false accusations that were even proven in secular court to have been false. In those situations, the legal vindication is a great relief, but often the career or the job was never restored.

When one is falsely accused, there is a psalm for that. There is actually a genre of psalm—the psalm of innocence—in which the pray-er petitions God and begs for exoneration regarding a false accusation.

And of course, we have all seen false accusations in the legal system—over both small matters and great. As an example of a small matter, I’ve seen a person who actually caused a traffic accident blatantly lie and blame it on someone else. As an example of great matters, I would point to Centurion ministry in Princeton, New Jersey. Centurion, which was started by Jim McCloskey, seeks to exonerate innocent people who have been falsely accused and convicted of capital crimes. Centurion has helped establish the innocence of many people who had been false convicted (and it has also proven that some of its clients were actually guilty of murder). In a lecture in 1999 at Princeton Seminary, I heard McCloskey say that

many people who are falsely incarcerated have been convicted based on the supposed eyewitness testimony of the actual criminal.

When one is falsely accused, there is a psalm for that. There is actually a genre of psalm—the psalm of innocence—in which the pray-er petitions God and begs for exoneration regarding a false accusation. Here are two verses for situations of false accusation—the first is quite straightforward; the second is more emotional, angrier.

Psalm 17: Hear a just cause, O Lord; attend to my cry;
give ear to my prayer from lips free of deceit.
From you let my vindication come;
let your eyes see the right. (vv. 1–2)

Psalm 71: O God, do not be far from me;
O my God, make haste to help me
Let my accusers be put to shame and consumed;
let those who seek to hurt me be covered with scorn and disgrace.
(vv. 12–13)

I've offered the opening prayer of Psalm 17 to those being falsely accused—and I've prayed these words myself when I've been falsely accused. It is really quite a simple plea: "Hear a just cause." The Hebrew translated as "just cause" here is simply a single Hebrew word: *tsedeq*/צדק. It could be just simply rendered: "Hear, O Lord, a just thing." The prayer offered in Psalm 71 is more aggressive. This is a prayer when the false witness borders on true evil and the stakes are extreme—when career, freedom, family, or even life itself is at risk. Thus, the prayer is extreme: "Let my accusers be put to shame and consumed; let those who seek to hurt me be covered with scorn and disgrace." Another matter is important: *The psalmists are not claiming to be perfect or free from sin when they pray from "lips free of deceit."* Rather, they are saying, "In this matter I am innocent." To paraphrase, they are simply saying to God, "Right now I am speaking the truth: I did not do what I've been accused of! Nobody believes me, so please help!" And then, in response to the damage the false witness is seeking to cause, the psalmist prays more antagonistically, "Let those who are lying about me be hoisted on their own petard. Let them suffer the consequences that they intend for me! They set a bear trap for me, but let its iron jaws snap shut on their own legs."

Theologically, the assumption of the psalm of innocence is that God cares about justice—including justice for the falsely accused. God hears the prayer of those who are falsely accused. God knows the truth of their innocence. And God cares. When every human system seems unfair, corrupt, and hopeless, the innocent can throw themselves on the mercy and justice of God. The world is still in bondage to sin, and miscarriages of justice still happen every day. The falsely incarcerated whom Centurion had helped to exonerate tragically spent as many as twenty-seven years in prison. And McCloskey said in my hearing that he knew of at least two

persons who were innocent who had been executed by the state. Praying a psalm of innocence such as Psalm 17 does not guarantee that human justice systems or employment personnel systems will be just. But praying a psalm of innocence does invite God into the process, implicating the Holy Spirit in the injustice. The prayer says to God: *My problem is now your problem, because I belong to you.* And for all who suffer from false witness, it can be spiritually emancipating to know that God will be there for them. It is also worth noting that when Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was on trial, his accusers bore false witness against him too.

“I’m devastated”—A psalm for broken hearts

My great teacher Jim Limburg told a story about when he was teaching at the undergraduate level.

Once a college student came to see me. He and his girlfriend had split. They seemed the perfect match. They worked side by side on the annual staff. They walked together to class. And then she just told him she didn’t want to see him anymore.

And he stumbled into my office. His heart was achy and breaky. And we talked . . . and I suggested he read through some psalms. A week later, he stopped by and showed me his Bible. He had found this verse, “A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” [Psalm 51:17]. And somehow, it helped him.³

Broken-hearted? It turns out that there’s a psalm for that:

Psalm 51: “A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.” (v. 17b)

The original psalm was, of course, musing about a “contrite heart” and the process of repenting and seeking forgiveness. But the young man nevertheless found hope in the promise that God does not despise a broken heart. He felt despised—when a spouse or lover dumps you, you are only human if your self-esteem suffers. You may feel like the world despises you, but the psalmist sings this beautiful promise: “God does not despise the brokenhearted.” To borrow from but bend Shakespeare: “When in disgrace with fortune and human eyes and I alone bemoan and bewep my outcast state . . . I can turn to God.” Because the Lord will not despise a broken heart. In Jim Limburg’s story, the girlfriend did not come back. But there was hope and consolation in the Lord, who does not despise a broken heart. That is the promise and consolation the psalm offers to so many who are brokenhearted. In the Lord, there is steadfast love, mercy, and consolation.

³ Jim Limburg, “Achy, Breaky Heart,” *The Rose* 2, no. 1 (February 1995): 14. Based on a sermon preached by Limburg, November 12, 1994, Luther Seminary Chapel.

“My best friend stabbed me in the back!”—Psalms for when one is betrayed

I once heard the great blues guitarist B. B. King say that you know you have the blues when even your friends and families turn on you. King famously sang, “Nobody loves me but my mamma, and she could be jivin’ too.” One of the most painful experiences in life can be when a very close friend betrays you. And there’s a psalm for that.

As a pastor, I’ve seen betrayal and disloyalty. And I’ve experienced it to some degree—although not to the degree that I’ve seen others suffer. I’ve seen families split apart over the distribution of their parents’ estate, over business, and over politics. I’ve seen a man in business with his best friend suddenly realize that the friend had been embezzling from the business for years. And I’ve seen the same when a brother stole from his sister. I’ve seen a woman ostracized from her circle of friends because she married a man some of the friends didn’t care for. I’ve seen a woman have an affair with her husband’s best friend. Disloyalty and betrayal from a friend hurts. It hurts like a 30-mile-per hour wind in your face on a 20-below-zero January day.

Sometimes we experience outright betrayal. Other times someone chooses not to back us when they had promised to do so, or they don’t follow through on a commitment they made. Still other times, a friend simply “ghosts” us—stops communicating and even blocks us. No matter the specifics; betrayal hurts. And there’s a psalm for that.

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Psalm 41: Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted,
who ate of my bread, has lifted his heel against me. (v. 9)

Psalm 55: It is not enemies who taunt me—
I could bear that;
it is not adversaries who deal insolently with me—
I could hide from them.
But it is you, my equal,
my companion, my familiar friend,
with whom I kept pleasant company;
we walked in the house of God with the throng. (vv. 12–14)

The psalmist had been in the youth group at church and made a dear friend there. A friend “with whom I kept pleasant company.” They went on mission trips together, prayed together, worshipped the Lord, studied the Word, and talked deep

into the night. And then . . . betrayal. “It is not enemies who taunt me,” the psalmist says, “but it is you, my equal, my companion, my peace-friend.” (The word translated “familiar” is simply *shalom*.) They had broken bread together—which is one of the most intimate of spiritual practices—just ask Jesus about being betrayed after breaking bread with a friend! But the psalmist received the back of the hand. The two ran into each other at their favorite restaurant, but now the friend refused to share a table.

I am reminded of a story about Abraham Lincoln. When soldiers deserted in the Civil War, the penalty was death. The soldiers could appeal to Lincoln for a pardon. Lincoln sought to pardon as many of such soldiers as he could. Most appeals came with letters from “friends”—commanders, pastors, politicians who supported the appeal. One day, an appeal came with no supporting letters. Lincoln said, “Has this man no friends? Then I will be his friend.” And he pardoned him. Psalm 25:14 says, “The friendship of the Lord is for those who fear him.” And Jesus said to his disciples, “I have called you friends” (John 15:15). For that reason, the favorite hymn teaches us to sing, “What a friend we have in Jesus.” And the hymn counsels, “When your friends despise, forsake you, take it to the Lord in prayer.” And to find the words for such a prayer, there’s a psalm for that.

“I’m on my way”—Psalms for life’s journeys or for the journey of life

I once asked a few friends, “What is your favorite psalm?” The first two people I asked gave the same response: Psalm 121. Why? “Because we pray it in the car when our family departs on a long trip,” said one. The other said, “Because it speaks to the journey of life.”

When my kids were young, they loved to jam out to and shout-sing the Tom Cochrane song “Life Is a Highway” when we were in the car. But Cochrane’s song has a long list of forebears in American music that portray life—and the life of faith in particular—as a journey. There are too many “life as journey” songs to name, but my favorite is “Life Is Like a Mountain Railroad.” When I was a child, we often played the board game “Life,” in which you drove your car through the stages of life and filled it with family. The metaphor of life as a journey speaks deeply to us.

My friends like to tease me about the word *journey*, because I hate the tired, lazy metaphor of Lent as a journey. (Lent isn’t a journey; it is a season, a time, a discipline.) But I love the metaphor of the life of faith as a journey. Jim Limburg wrote, “Life is not a circle, with possessions at the outer boundaries, then friends, then family, and in the center ‘just Molly and me and baby makes three,’ as the old song had it. No, the Bible views our life as a journey. . . . The call of Jesus was not ‘Gather around me,’ but rather, ‘Follow me.’”⁴

There are many journeys in life, and life itself is a journey. As we travel both life’s journeys and the journey of life, there are dangers. There are temptations. There are dead ends, storms, obstacles, and traps. But God provides and

⁴ Jim Limburg, *Psalms for Sojourners* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 71.

protects. Whether we are going over the river and through the woods to Grandmother's house or to the pearly gates, there is a psalm for that. Here is just a piece of Psalm 121:

The Lord is your keeper;
the Lord is your shade at your right hand.
The sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.
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 on and forevermore. (vv. 5–8)

The metaphor for God here is of a “keeper” (Hebrew: *shômēr*/שׁוֹמֵר). The word can mean a city guard, a shepherd, a gatekeeper, an office-holder, and the like. But essentially, it means “protector.” The psalm promises that the Lord is our protector on life's journeys and on the journey of life. It promises that God will “keep [protect] you from all evil; he will keep [protect] your life.” Does that mean that nothing bad ever happens to God's people or that we can escape death? No. Does God literally protect us from all evil? No. The psalm is poetry and prayer, not doctrine. But its promise is essentially true. God is our protector on the journey.

In Psalm 121, the meaning of *shômēr*/שׁוֹמֵר is extended by the metaphor of God as an umbrella or shade tree that protects from the harsh rays of the summer sun. As I type this article, I am looking out the window and watching my neighbor on his patio. The sun is climbing the sky, and he is slowly edging his chair closer and closer to his house, where only a few feet of shade remain. What he needs is a patio umbrella so that “the sun shall not strike him by day.” I think I'll head over to the hardware store and buy him an umbrella.⁵ Because God is like that for us.

“My beloved is gone”—Psalms for when death comes knocking

My beloved father-in-law used to say, “Nobody gets out alive.” And then one day he was gone, dead too soon because of cancer. And not too long after that, my beloved mother died. And I found myself singing the words of a favorite song: “I went back home, my home was dreary, for my mother she was gone.” Death is one of the great constants in life. *But the people who belong to the triune God are not to regard death as just another stage in the circle of life.* Death is, as St. Paul wrote, “the last enemy” (1 Cor 15:26). We are to fight against death, knowing that Christ has fought against death on our behalf. In the end, death itself will be defeated. It is even more proper to say that Christ has already defeated death—its sting is lost. It is like a rattlesnake that can bite but has no venom. Death is like poison that no longer has any power. The future of God's beloved creation has already been

⁵ In case anyone cares, the hardware stores in town were all sold out of patio umbrellas. I guess everyone needs protection from the sun sometimes.

determined by the resurrection of Christ. We are simply in the long end game, awaiting the new creation.

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The future of God's beloved creation has already been
determined by the resurrection of Christ. We are simply in
the long end game, awaiting the new creation.*

But as mortal beings, we are know of Christ's victory, but we have not yet been fully clothed in immortality (as Paul poetically describes our future).⁶ So when death knocks on our door, the grief and loss remain inordinately painful. And when death knocks, there's a psalm for that.

Psalm 116: Precious in the sight of the Lord
is the death of his faithful ones. (v. 15)
Psalm 90: The days of our life are seventy years,
or perhaps eighty, if we are strong.
Even then their span is only toil and trouble;
They are gone, and we fly away. . . .
So teach us to count our days
that we may gain a wise heart. (vv. 10–12)

Psalm 116:15 is a favorite verse in the Dutch Christian tradition, for times of death. When a loved one dies, this verse is often spoken or read. My friend, Pastor Hans Wiersma, shared this recollection with me:

My opa on my mom's side died 5 years before I was born. I know him mainly from stories my mom told AND from 2 photos. The first was a coat-and-tie portrait of him looking serious, wise. The second is his death photo—an old Dutch? custom of recording your loved one's earthly image at the start of their heavenly rest. On the back of the photo it gives the date of opa's death, followed by (simply) "Ps. 116.15."⁷

Psalm 116:15 reads, "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his faithful ones." At first blush, the statement may seem odd. How can the death of the faithful be precious to God? It isn't their death that is precious, however. It is the faithful themselves who are precious to God—even when they are dying. God does not use God's people. And even more importantly, God does not dispose of or discard God's people when they are old or dying. God's people remain precious to God even unto death and beyond! In 2020, my mother had a stroke and then lingered for six months until she died. In her last hours, she was immobile and

⁶ Throughout this section, I allude to 1 Corinthians 15:53–57.

⁷ Personal correspondence, July 1, 2023. Used with permission.

unresponsive. Psalm 116 would have us know that Mom was no less precious to God in her last moments than she had been when she was the vibrant and loving mother of four small children fifty years before.

Psalm 90 meditates on the shortness of life. The KJV translation of verse 10 reads, “The days of our years are threescore years and ten, and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years . . .” Abraham Lincoln once addressed a cloud of witnesses who had gathered to dedicate a cemetery for young men slain in battle. The men had died when they were far too young, well before the assigned threescore and ten or fourscore years. In an allusion to Psalm 90, Lincoln began, “Four-score and seven years ago . . .” The psalm then prays, “So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart” (v. 12). The psalm becomes a prayer asking for divine guidance to live our mortal lives in light of eternity. We cannot do it ourselves—we need grace and help to do so. And the psalm gives us words equal to the task.

But there is another psalm about death to mention here. It is a psalm for when death is not only an enemy, but a thief—one who steals a life from us too early; for when grief’s weight is so heavy that just getting out of bed in the morning seems impossible.

Psalm 44: For we sink down to the dust;
our bodies cling to the ground.
Rise up, come to our help.
Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love. (vv. 25–26)

Death leaves a hole in our lives. When we love someone and they love us, something grows in us. There is a bond, a relationship, a reality. And then, when our beloved dies, that thing that has grown is gone. There is a hole in our lives. The hole is the product of both the love we had for the beloved and then the (often sudden) death of the beloved. Death rips the thing that love had grown out of us and leaves a hole. At such times, sometimes what we need is a raw word of pain: “We sink down to the dust.” That is, “We die!” So, “Rise up, come to our help. Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love!”

The prominent Lutheran leader Alvin Rogness described his own experience with death and grief using similar language. His son Paul was killed suddenly when he was a young man and had just returned from Europe. Rogness described Paul’s death in many ways, including the image of a tree being cut down in a forest. The tree is gone, and it leaves a hole in the forest.

Out of his own grief and faith, Rogness ministered to many others who would later lose a child. One of those was Pastor Paul Roe, who was a mentor of mine. Paul’s daughter Gayle died suddenly at age thirty-four from a cerebral aneurysm. Rogness’s pastoral wisdom and faithful witness meant a great deal to Paul when Gayle died. About the hole Gayle’s death left in his heart, Paul said to me, “You never get over it. And you don’t want to.” As a pastor, I’ve preached at funerals for stillborn children, twenty-six-year-olds who were killed in work accidents, and

great-grandmothers who had lived a century. The grief is always there. *You never get over it. And you never want to.*

At the end of his long sermon about the cloud of witnesses, the author of Hebrews suddenly realized that he had gone on too long: “I could go on and on, but I’ve run out of time. There are so many more—Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, the prophets . . .” (11:32, MSG). And so have I. There are so many more life situations to explore and so many psalms appropriate to those moments. This essay is in no way exhaustive. Well, maybe you are exhausted by this essay, but the topic is far from fully explored. I will simply say that for many, many life situations, there’s a psalm for that.

In closing, I want to return to Psalm 90 and the most difficult issue we all face: death. There is a line in there that I skipped over. It says that when the days of our life are over, “we fly away” (v. 10). Alfred Brumley borrowed those words for a victory song that so many passionately sing in the face of death: “I’ll Fly Away.” At a recent funeral for a man who was killed far too young, we sang that song. We sang it loudly, with tears welling in our eyes and hope blooming in our hearts. The tears welled because of the hole in our hearts. The hope bloomed because of Jesus Christ. Specifically, because in his death and resurrection, Christ has defeated death and opened the way to everlasting life. And so we sing: “I’ll fly away, O glory, I’ll fly away. When I die, hallelujah, by and by, I’ll fly away.” ⊕

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