



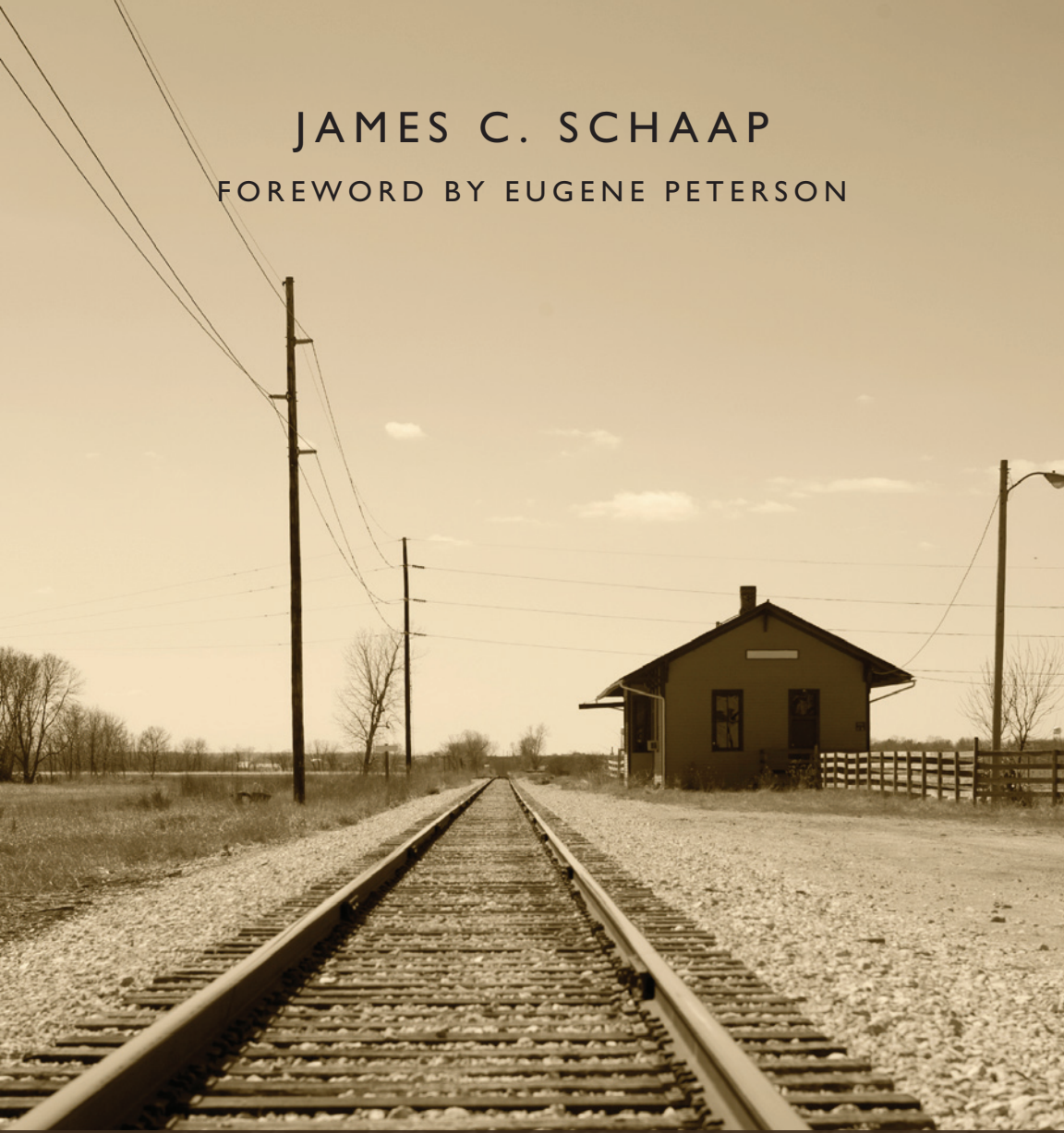
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JAMES C. SCHAAP

FOREWORD BY EUGENE PETERSON

# Sixty at Sixty

a boomer reflects on the psalms

JAMES CALVIN SCHAAP

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Grand Rapids, Michigan

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*to Pastor Herm*

*It's true I don't see him everywhere these days  
but still, well, like this morning,  
I was weeding the perennials,  
dew-wet in morning glory light,  
the wren singing his perky little heart out,  
and suddenly, there was God again,  
like a rabbit popping out of a strawberry patch,  
God, just for a moment, taking my breath away.*

*—David Schelhaas*

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## FOREWORD

Jim Schaap pauses on the cusp of sixty years of living, steps aside, and lets sixty fragments of old prayers often prayed, psalm phrases all, form six decades of people and experiences, conversations and observations, into a coherent story of faith. Sixty affords a good vantage point for remembering, gathering, and praying. Jim Schaap takes full advantage of sixty as he embeds sharply remembered shards of his life in a weathered mosaic of prayer, a mosaic bordered by the vast prairie landscape that is his workplace and home.

Psalm prayers have been doing this for those who pray them for three thousand years. The one hundred and fifty psalms at the center of our Bibles provide a personal center for praying everything that God reveals and everything that we experience in that revelation. They have been used this way for generation after generation of God's people, and there is no end to it. There seems to be nothing that men and women can experience that can't be prayed, and in the praying come to a deeper meaning than our emotions or circumstances or thinking can make of it.

The daily experience of living more often than not feels haphazard. It is one thing after another without apparent cause or consequence. We attempt to impose some order on life with a long-term plan or monthly calendar or daily schedule, but such devices are notoriously lax in keeping to the letter what is set down. Interruptions proliferate, accidents happen, appointments are missed, memories fail, anticipations fizzle. Storytellers train our imaginations in recognizing the possibilities of order in the seeming chaos, noticing relationships between people when they are not paying attention to one another, detecting the invisible connections that eventually accumulate into a plot.

Prayer is the deliberate, but also not infrequently spontaneous, attention we give to being open and responsive to the presence and actions of God in the making of our stories.

When the pray-er and the storyteller are the same person, as they are in these pages, we have a trustworthy companion as we make our way home along dangerously trafficked American roads.



American culture is not congenial to anything that cannot be measured or weighed, bought or sold. But the widespread consequence of this dismissal of the invisible is not happy. Boredom is epidemic; stress is lethal. Reared in such a world we have a difficult time realizing that we have any meaning or worth apart from the salaries or labels that others give us for what they see us do. So we are lonely because we so seldom have anyone pay attention to who we are as over against what we have done or pay for. False guilt seeps into our soul as we fail to meet the expectations of competence and self-reliance assumed to be normative in a “thingified” society. *Sixty at Sixty* is a timely antidote.

You don't have to be sixty. A pause at any age—thirty-two or forty-seven or seventy-five (my age)—in the storytelling and praying company of Jim Schaap is enough to recover a fading memory, revive sagging hope, or simply sink more attentively into what is going on with the people around us this day, and with what is going on with God, who is always with us.

Eugene H. Peterson  
Professor Emeritus of Spiritual Theology  
Regent College, Vancouver

# 1 HE KNOWS

*“For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous.”  
—Psalm 1:6*

I know one question and answer from the catechism I was raised with (I know more than one actually, but don't press me), and that is the very first — “What is your only comfort in life and death?” The answer begins this way: “That I am not my own, but belong . . .”

One of the reasons this particular Q&A sticks to my otherwise Teflon memory is its tone and texture, its emotional color: the word of the moment here is *comfort*. What is your only *comfort*? What makes you feel good? What settles your nerves, helps you sleep, gets you over the blues?

The answer is, I am not my own. I belong to God.

Psalm 1's final verse begins with a phrase you can pull up to your chin on a cold winter night: “The LORD watches over the way of the righteous.” But just for a moment, I'd rather consider the King James, which says, “He knows the way of the righteous.”

God knows. God understands. It's no mystery to him. For the Lord God Almighty, right and wrong and good and ill is all part of a day's work. He knows. It's that simple, really. And that's immensely comforting.

Perhaps because life isn't. It may sound pessimistic, but when you add up the whole works, life amounts to nothing more or less than a sidewalk eighty years long, maybe, that leads to the grave. Not comforting!

My father died three years ago. I have the plaque he got after twenty-some faithful years at the bank where he worked. His employers ordered it from a place that turns out trophies for longest putt at company golf tournaments. On its own, that plaque is worth

nothing. But it's on the bookshelf here in the basement because I just can't throw it away, even though the investment it represents is just gone.

Last week in church, a man stood up and asked for prayers for a woman in Chicago, half a continent away. She's dying of inoperable cancer, and her diagnosis is grim: she'll be gone in six months. I could have wept, honestly, even though I haven't seen the woman for years. I barely know her. As I grow older I am more affected by such stories. When I was young and the trajectory of my life seemingly had no end, I was nowhere near as affected by other people's miseries as I am today. Today other people's sadness weighs heavily.

Psalm 1 begins with a word that's hard to define—*blessed*—and it ends with a pretty strong hint at what “blessedness” means. In the tribulations that are ours—occasioned by sinners (like me) and by sin itself—we'll want to remember that God knows. God gets it. The Bible tells me so.

And it's not just a sweet idea. Be assured of it, says David, the shepherd poet. God knows the way of the righteous. God understands. His boy was once one of us, after all.

To be *blessed* is to know, in life and in death, in sickness and in health, that God knows—and loves—even us. That's blessed assurance.



*Lord, “when sorrows come, they come not as spies, but in battalions.” Sometimes these days, those sorrows and miseries seem greater and more frequent, and I feel so much less resilient. Hold me in your promises. I'm blessed to know that whatever I face—and whatever my neighbor faces—you know. Thanks for knowing. Amen.*