

KEVIN ADAMS



FINDING YOUR **STORY**  
IN THE PSALMS



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IN THE PSALMS

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Grand Rapids, Michigan

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To Gerry Ann:

*What shall I return to the LORD for all his goodness to me?*

—*Psalm 116:12*

To Luke, Rachel, and JJ:

*Take delight in the LORD,  
and he will give you the desires of your heart.*

—*Psalm 37:4*

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# PREFACE

It is one thing to visit a city as a tourist—to see its neighborhoods through a train window, to gaze at its skyline from a nearby hillside, to buy souvenirs from its well-stocked gift shops. It is quite another to engage a beautiful city as a pilgrim—to wander its alleys, to listen to the voices of the people in its shops, to feel its pulse and smell its aromas. For a tourist it's a stop; for a pilgrim it's a destination the heart has longed for.

Often those who read the book of Psalms do so as tourists. Like sightseers, they drop in and look around for an especially pleasing image or a well-known phrase, and then leave, inspired for a time but essentially unchanged. This book invites us to enter the book of Psalms as pilgrims—to linger over these ancient poems, to taste their zesty images, to pay attention to their sharp edges and odd angles that challenge us and promise to transform us. Reading this book you will find yourself underlining an especially poignant verse here or jotting notes in the margin there, as the psalms come alive through the stories of those who have used and abused them through the centuries.

The book of Psalms is so vast and so intense that our encounter with it can often leave us overwhelmed, like a pilgrim who arrives at a bus station in a new city with a hundred neighborhoods to explore. Like a wise guide who knows the unique corners of the city, Kevin Adams shepherds us to eleven very different psalms and invites us to dwell with them, to absorb their messages, their metaphors, their convictions about God and the world. These eleven psalms then become places that begin to feel like

home, preparing us for future explorations that reach into each of the Psalter's many neighborhoods.

One of the main differences between tourists and pilgrims is that pilgrims engage in their journey out of a passion for discovery rather than the hope of an interesting diversion or a nice vacation. Pilgrims travel hard, fully engaged in the moment, expecting that the process will profoundly change them. Ambrose, a fourth-century preacher, once called the psalms a "gymnasium of the soul"—a vast spiritual fitness center. The comparison prevents us from thinking that we should engage the psalms with anything less than deep breaths and flexed muscles, but it also promises exhilaration, the "runner's high" that comes with a surprising discovery or a profound engagement with the God these poems praise and ponder.

In the end, it is not our hard work that breaks open the spiritual blessings of the psalms, but the power of the Spirit who inspired them. These deeply human, emotionally honest cries of praise and pain come ultimately from God's Spirit, not from us. The Spirit who inspired the psalms and providentially guided their compilation now warmly calls us to study them, pray them, and meet God in them. In the biblical psalms, with this book as fitness coach and pilgrimage guide, you will find yourself in that strange and wonderful place where the living God meets face to face with real people at life's raw edges, the very place where the Spirit shapes us in grace and truth.

It is particularly gratifying to commend this book in light of its connections to a Worship Renewal Grant awarded by the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship to Granite Springs Church in 2008 for a program led by Kevin Adams. This grants program is designed to help



congregations transform practices of public worship so that they invite worshipers to engage the Christian faith not as tourists but as pilgrims, and that they participate in worship as if they were in a spiritual gymnasium rather than an amusement park or museum. We are especially interested in ways that worship practices can be more deeply connected with the life of a congregation all through the week. As you read this book, you'll encounter not only references to pop culture icons and historical figures but also to a number of poignant moments in the life of Granite Springs Church. Experiences of illumination and grace are altogether possible in very ordinary places. This is a splendid book, one that will open your eyes to the ways God is already at work in your own life and context—and to the ways God will work more deeply in your future.

John Witvliet

Calvin Institute of Christian Worship

Calvin College and Calvin Theological Seminary



# INTRODUCTION

## A Very Special Grace

*“Among all the books the Psalter certainly has a very special grace. . . . within it are represented and portrayed in all their great variety the movements of the human soul. . . . You find depicted in it all the movements of your soul, all its changes, its up and downs, its failures and recoveries.”<sup>1</sup>*

—Athanasius

*“When read only occasionally, these prayers are too overwhelming in design and power and tend to turn us back to more palatable fare. But whoever has begun to pray the Psalter seriously and regularly will soon give a vacation to other little devotional prayers and say: “Ah, there is not the juice, the strength, the passion, the fire which I find in the Psalter. It tastes too cold and too hard.””<sup>2</sup>*

—Martin Luther

Natan Sharansky refused to leave. Dropping to the ground, he lay on the snowy airport tarmac, insisting he wouldn't budge until his KGB escorts returned his most prized possession. For ten years he had been their prisoner. For more than a year his captors had held him in Moscow's Lefortovo penitentiary, often in the solitary confinement of his special torture cell. Later they upgraded his detention, transferring him to a notorious prison camp in the Siberian gulag. Now he was on his way to freedom. Authorities had given him clean clothes, a long blue overcoat, even a scarf and typical Russian hat. They were trying to lead him away from prison. "You have everything you are permitted to have," they said. But Sharansky was resolute, remaining in the snow.

His wife, Avital, had emigrated to Israel the day after their wedding. The couple had hoped to be together in a few months. It would take twelve years.

Soon after Avital's departure, Soviet officials convicted Sharansky of spying for the United States and sentenced him to thirteen years of hard labor. During his imprisonment Avital relentlessly campaigned for his release. Sharansky spent hundreds of days on hunger strikes and in punishment cells. Finally high-ranking political powerbrokers worked an elaborate international deal on his behalf that included his exchange for Soviet spies captured in the West.

On the verge of freedom, Sharansky stubbornly refused to board the airplane until his captors returned his treasure—a Hebrew book of psalms. It was the only piece of property he took with him to freedom.

Sharansky's act seems beyond belief. Why would anyone risk remaining in a Gulag prison over a book of psalms?

The book was a gift Avital had managed to send with the help of a tourist, just before Natan's arrest. At that time he was neck-deep in his struggle for freedom and dodging agents of the KGB. Every day had new demands. "I had no time for . . . reading psalm books, so I put it aside."

Only when he was locked away in prison, having learned that his father had died and feeling exasperated that he couldn't support his grieving mother, did Sharansky begin reading the book. It was difficult at first. His Hebrew was limited. He couldn't even find the end of a sentence. But slowly he started to understand a word, a phrase. "I remember the first psalm which I suddenly understood, the phrase . . . was 'and when I go through the valley of death, I'll fear no evil, because you are with me.' It was such a powerful feeling, as if King David himself, together with my wife, together with my friends, came to prison to save me from this, and to support me."<sup>3</sup>

That's a feeling Billy Collins could understand too. Collins's poems can make you laugh out loud as though you're at a Saturday night comedy club or reading the Sunday funnies. In 2001, as poet laureate of the United States, Collins worked tirelessly to show ordinary citizens that poetry is not merely an "endangered species in the protected cage of university English departments." He urged teachers to read poems to their high school students without assigning related homework or discussing them into oblivion. It was, he said, a way to help adolescents recover the natural pleasures of poetry after years of having teachers beat it out of them. Collins wanted to bring poetry back into the hearts and minds of ordinary people.

Days after the destruction of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, the new poet laureate was asked

what role poetry could play in a time of crisis. Collins answered that for him poetry was “a private art and needed a private focus.” But in a public radio interview on September 11 itself, Collins “suggested that almost any page of any book of poetry would be ‘speaking for life . . . against what happened today.’ Or, he said, read the Psalms.”<sup>4</sup>

What Collins suggested actually did happen. In the days following 9/11, major media outlets quoted poetry more often than at any other time since the nineteenth century. And the nation heard the psalms.

Sung by Muslims and Jews, by Protestants and Catholics, by Bob Marley and Johann Sebastian Bach, the psalms express the faith of a thousand generations. Every day this ancient prayer book is used by Jewish feminists in New York’s Greenwich Village and fourth generation Dakota ranchers driving F-150s. George Herbert, a sixteenth-century British court poet, and Kanye West, a rapper from the gritty streets of Chicago, are just two of the many people who have reworked psalms over the ages to express their deepest hopes and fears. Over the years, psalms have been prayed with equal vigor by a monk chanting in a chilly medieval German cloister (Martin Luther), an orphaned teen in Communist Poland (Karl Wojtyla, who would become Pope John Paul II), and a Pakistani pastor in a half-built church who struggles to give his congregation a voice in a culture dominated by Islam.

In an interview, political analyst David Gergen asked Peter Gomes, minister of the Memorial Church at Harvard University, where people who are unfamiliar with the Bible but curious to learn its message should begin reading. Gomes answered without hesitation,

My advice has always been start with an accessible book, and I suggest you start with the psalms. Now people will say, “Oh, but the psalms are so pretty and musical; shouldn’t I take something stronger?” If you read the psalms, read them all, and read them at a pretty intense clip—don’t spend all year doing it, do it over the course of a couple of weeks—you will find in those 150 psalms such an acute range of human experience you’ll think it has been written by your therapist.<sup>5</sup>

In a real sense, psalms *are* simple. They are the “Twinkle, twinkle little star” of biblical teaching, conjuring a child’s world of complete trust. Generations of monks have begun their chants with, “O Lord, come to my assistance” (Psalm 70:1). Following Jesus’ lead, countless believers have echoed Psalm 31:6 with their dying breath: “Into your hands I commit my spirit.” Some psalms, like Psalm 23, offer familiar words of calm during our most troubled times.

But like anything sturdy enough to capture people’s deepest feelings for three millennia, the psalms are also complex. They carry the weight of human longing and unspoken creaturely passions. Many overstep our sense of spiritual propriety. Wild with emotion, they voice deep anguish, shout delight, and blubber gut-wrenching personal tragedy. Within a single psalm, Psalm 139, the psalmist beseeches with heartfelt piety, whispers gratitude, offers insightful psychological introspection, bellows a vindictive harangue against enemies, and ends with a touching prayer. Whatever our continent or generation or mood or level of faith, psalms promise to stir and nourish our soul.

This is a book about psalms. But it's also a book about prayer, a certain kind of prayer. Psalms are wonderful and terrible, attractive and repulsive. They are at once familiar and foreign, alien and allies, a comfort and a mystery. We love them and we hate them. Often we frame our prayers with sterile devotion and our devotion ends without truly expressing our hearts, without gaining audience with the Almighty. Feeling the bankruptcy of our own prayer, we cash in our chips and walk away empty, convinced that faith doesn't work.

Pop artist Jewel, a young woman whose albums have sold millions, expressed this in an interview several years ago with *Rolling Stone*. She said, "I'm just a person who is honestly trying to live my life and asking, 'How do you be spiritual and live in the world without going to a monastery?'"<sup>6</sup>

For generations people have answered that question by praying the psalms. Bridging culture gaps and generational canyons, the psalms connect us with those who long ago experienced our sorrow, suffered our betrayal, bawled our complaint, bore our illness. Capturing our experiences in just the right words and images, the psalms assure us that we are not alone. In the psalms, said C. S. Lewis, "no historical readjustments are . . . required, we are in the world we know."<sup>7</sup>

To help you enter the psalms' special brand of earthy, bone-rattling, candid prayer, this book is filled with stories. Each story is an invitation to see the psalms fresh again—or for the very first time—through the messy and muddled lives of famous and ordinary people, infamous and godly men and women who've loved and prayed them. You're invited to follow their lead and bring these well-tested



prayers into your daily experience, to use the psalms as scaffolding for your own life—a trek that promises to be as unsettling as it is comforting.

Hearing the psalms through people’s stories, you will find that the family of faith is bigger than you imagine. There’s *room*, far more than most of us dream. In the particular faith and doubt, the particular trust and chaos of these particular people, you will find yourself. Faithful or faithless, you’ll discover in the psalms words to pray (and whine and murmur) your own questions and convictions. Through these stories you’ll find that the psalms are already yours. You’ll find that you’ve already been praying their sort of unique sordid mess—even if you didn’t know yet that you were praying. You’ll find not only words you long to pray and words you already pray, but a bigger and wider community than you’ve ever imagined.

Our congregation of both spiritual novices and veterans spent an entire year in the Psalter. Along with inviting people to listen to sermons and study the psalms, we encouraged them to create their own “psalm experiments.” One young mom, whose husband was away on a nine-month assignment in the United Arab Emirates, began reading psalms to her young children each evening. The psalms’ images so captured them that when they missed a night of reading they insisted on reading two the next night. She also began a second experiment—reading the psalms by herself. “At first they stretched me,” she remembers, but soon after starting she wanted to quit. Gradually she found herself struck by the psalmists’ honesty. Lacking any sense of restraint, they told God he wasn’t “doing his job right.” Such honest critique, she said, felt “foreign” and “hard to read” but also “freeing.”

Christian monk and scholar Jerome (340-420) so believed in the nourishing power of the psalms that he advised mothers to learn Hebrew and teach it to their children so that they could sing the psalms in the original language. Such advice might appear overzealous to today's overworked parents. But generations later this young California mother understood Jerome's intent. In her crammed daily routine the psalms became prized companions, words that invited her into a larger family she barely knew she had.

With this book I invite you to discover your own story in the honest and earthy world of the psalms. To experience them not through the kind of exegesis that places each Hebrew word under a microscope, but by hearing stories of unlikely prayers and odd pray-ers. The psalms are like an atrium in the house of faith. Their words throw open the corridors of belief, bidding us to bring our faith and doubt inside its community. They encourage us to get to know a God who might be quite unlike the God we now worship or reject. In the psalms God is wilder, more unpredictable, more passionate than we imagine. "God behaves in the Psalms in ways he is not allowed to behave in systematic theology," said Benedictine Sebastian Moore. And so do his followers.

# 01

## OLD FAITHFUL

PSALM 23

*“I have read many intelligent and good books in my life. But I did not find anything in them that would have made my heart so quiet and glad, like the four words from that 23rd Psalm “you are with me.”<sup>1</sup>*

—Immanuel Kant

*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.*

*He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.*

*He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.*

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.*

*Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:  
thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.*

*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:  
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*

—Psalm 23, King James Version

From the outside, life in our fast-growing suburb looks easy. New homes dot rolling hills; excellent schools prepare students for good colleges; ample parks provide soccer moms and dads and their offspring with the latest in designer playground equipment. It's a place of low crime and high economic opportunity—not a place you'd expect to hear a psalm.

But one beautiful April day six hundred people overflowed our church. Most were high school students dressed in black, a stark departure from their typical array of message-bearing T-shirts, spaghetti strap tops, and flip-flops. Many looked lost, like startled deer on a mall parking lot. Church in general, and grief in particular—especially grief for a peer—felt foreign in a way French class never did. Jesse had been a high school junior, one of them. He'd played football and basketball with some, studied math with others, and skipped class with a select few to buy Nikes. Many of these kids had known him since grade school.

The football coach paraded in with his players, a few wearing jerseys. Cheerleaders followed. The state runner-up basketball team, conspicuous by their height, shuffled into a middle row. Jesse's girlfriend, amazingly composed, sat near the front surrounded by family. The building was bursting with adolescents, some leaning against the sanctuary walls. Latecomers watched from an overflow room.

What do you say to high school juniors who have no language for grief? How do you speak to suburbanites enduring their first case of spiritual vertigo, a spinning and disorienting sense that life doesn't always follow their well-managed plans? Where do you find comfort for the grandparents who'd raised Jesse?

Jesse had battled cancer heroically for three years. He'd been baptized in this building only three weeks earlier. Silence fell as his casket was wheeled to the front. This was no moment for religious virtuosos. Nor was it time for a hip band to blast an epic praise song. Time-tested hymns like "Amazing Grace" would be as unfamiliar to those teens as great-grandpa's Studebaker. Several of Jesse's friends shared funny stories. A video montage brought tears. The youth pastor who had visited Jesse every day of his last month of life gave a moving eulogy. But our words alone were not enough. So we began with the psalmist's ancient words that will long outlast us: "The LORD is my shepherd . . . ."

Four months after Jesse's funeral, a chic California senior and her husband of forty years made an appointment with me. We had never met before. They told me they were "not religious." They had formerly been members of a Presbyterian church in the Bay Area but just hadn't gotten a new church after they moved to our town seven years ago. Now they needed to ask me a question: Would I perform her memorial service? ("We don't want it to be a *funeral*," they said.) Decades earlier, cancer had attacked the woman's breasts, and now it was invading her bones.

They began this brave conversation by saying they wanted this service to be a gift to their grown children—two beautiful daughters. "I don't want them to have to think about such arrangements when they're grieving," she said. The couple shared memories. Their love still sparkled forty years after their first meeting in a San Francisco pub. But barely beneath the surface of our conversation about music choices (The Beatles' "Hey Jude" and "Time to Say

Goodbye”—in Italian and English), ambiance (California casual), and care for her body (cremation), the sober reality of death was closing in. It might be a week, or maybe a month. Several times our conversation became too painful and tears rolled down their sun-weathered faces. These were gentle tears. They had cried before and they would cry again.

I found myself liking this couple, so full of good humor and obvious love for life and for each other, so determined to turn a memorial into a celebration. They didn't want anything formal or stuffy. I've been a pastor in California for more than eighteen years. Most people in our town don't even come to church for weddings or burials—instead they have a picnic in a park. Almost all of the memorial services I've performed are for people who don't attend church much. Still, I was struck by the lack of spiritual content as we made plans for this woman's service. Recordings would be played. Friends would tell stories. Photos would line the lobby. Why did they want me, a pastor, to conduct the service? So I asked gently, "Is there any Bible passage that has been a favorite of yours over the years?" There was silence. I was about to shift subjects when the woman said, "What's that one about 'green pastures'?"

"Do you mean 'The LORD is my shepherd . . .?'"

"Yes," she said. "That's the one. I've always liked it. Let's include that one."

---

Once again, ancient words will be spoken. To high school students staggering under their first grief-induced vertigo, to aging friends celebrating a peer who lived through San Francisco's "flower power" days. How many

funerals include Psalm 23? Every single one I've led. It's a familiar pattern that's been repeated for hundreds of years.

Late in his life, Gilbert Greene remembered a trip he once took with Abraham Lincoln. At the time, Lincoln was a young lawyer in Springfield, Illinois. Greene was Lincoln's friend employed as a printer. Occasionally he rode into the country with Lincoln to serve as a witness for an oral will. On this occasion a dying woman dictated her will to the gangly lawyer.

After she was done, she told them how relieved she was to join her family members in heaven. She asked Lincoln to read to her from the family Bible. Instead he began to recite from memory the words of Psalm 23, especially emphasizing the words *though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me. Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me. . . .*

Greene recalled that Lincoln went on to quote John 14 from memory: *In my father's house are many mansions. . . .* Lincoln finished by reciting several hymns, closing with "Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me." The woman died while they were still together. Riding back that night, Greene told Lincoln how surprised he was to see him function so perfectly as both lawyer and pastor. Lincoln replied, "God and eternity and heaven are very near to me today."<sup>2</sup>

Over time words shift in meaning and emphasis. Teens cast aside the slang of their parents and even of their elder siblings. A fully loaded car is "hot" and then "cool." Something especially good becomes "bad." Then "sick." "Wicked" becomes the ultimate compliment. In a world of ever-changing vocabulary, today's Shakespeare readers are required to learn another version of English. And for most adolescents, singing along with the radio commercials



of Grandpa's growing-up days would be a cross-cultural experience.

Few eighteenth-century novels or nineteenth-century sermons use language that is still compelling or meaningful to today's readers. So why does Psalm 23 still work so well? Why does its meaning stretch undiminished across seven continents and three millennia? Augustine chose it as the hymn of martyrs. Oliver Cromwell died with its words on his lips. The Order of the Odd Fellows began using it in their revised initiation ritual in 1880. Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver recited it during a moment of conversion in a Paris hotel room. Central American children hoping to reunite with their mothers working in the United States recite it while riding the "death train" through Mexico toward the United States.

Maybe Psalm 23 crosses generations and continents because its metaphors and images transcend time and place. Despite its ancient Near Eastern origin, and despite the fact that few people actually know a shepherd themselves, the metaphor of God as shepherd is easily understood. It nourishes trust in any context in any language on any continent.

George Herbert was raised as a gentleman in the English court a continent and two millennia away from David's original setting. Herbert's father died when George was only three years old; his mother raised him and his nine siblings as Anglicans. Described as a man of saintly piety, George also had the unmistakable grace of the upper class. When he was barely out of college, he was elected public orator at Cambridge, representing the university at public events. Soon afterward he served two years in Parliament. Later he took holy orders in the Church of England and

spent the rest of his life as rector in Bemerton, where he preached, helped rebuild the church building from his own funds, and wrote poetry.

Herbert's poems have been described as agile, precise, and ingenious. They also resound with a deep, unaffected spiritual devotion. His poem "The Twenty-third Psalm" is among the most famous works in the English language. Portraying the psalmist as a seventeenth-century country parson, Herbert sets himself as coauthor with David.

The God of love my shepherd is,  
And he that doth me feed;  
While he is mine and I am his,  
What can I want or need?

He leads me to the tender grass,  
Where I both feed and rest;  
Then to the streams that gently pass:  
In both I have the best.

Or if I stray, he doth convert  
And bring my mind in frame;  
And all this not for my desert,  
But for his holy name.

Yea, in death's shady black abode  
Well may I walk, not fear;  
For thou art with me, and thy rod  
To guard, thy staff to bear.

Nay, thou dost make me sit and dine,  
Even in my enemies' sight:  
My head with oil, my cup with wine  
runs over day and night.

Surely thy sweet and wondrous love  
Shall measure all my days;  
And as it never shall remove,  
So neither shall my praise.

The psalm works—whether set in a picturesque seventeenth-century English countryside, in the rap-filled streets of urban Chicago, or even in a public school in Lynnfield, Massachusetts, during the fifties and sixties. One man recalls how the official school prayer was intoned with familiar consistency, like the feel of school paste or the smell of floor wax or the sight of a fifth-grade teacher's khaki pants. Every day the same voice crackled over the loudspeaker, leading every pupil in every class in a recitation of the twenty-third psalm. He remembers that his fellow Roman Catholic kids felt insecure at first since the prayer was spoken in the King James Version, a translation not favored in the Catholic mass. But as in the case of recess lines, multiplication tables, and the pledge of allegiance, repetition worked its magic and the psalm became their own.<sup>3</sup>

Anyone who has experienced the comfort of Psalm 23 can understand why a public school might decide to include it as part of the standard curriculum for every child. Educators of that era assumed that each young American citizen would have a need to say something religious at some point in his or her life. This psalm, with its proven ability to comfort a variety of people, was just the thing. It could be read almost anywhere with universal acceptance—at a Democratic or Republican political convention, at a gathering of used-car dealers or ministers, a group of MTV rappers or church-going seniors. Unlike

almost any other text, Psalm 23 speaks comfort in a way that transcends highly charged religious or irreligious boundaries. Bible-belt Southerners and East Coast agnostics, Buddhists and Hindus, Catholics and Protestants, and citizens of various religions participating in a Memorial Day parade have affirmed its inclusion. Even among the most cynical or irreligious, it works.

William Holladay offers multiple reasons for why Psalm 23 became a national treasure: It is short, easily memorized, and undemanding. It never mentions sin. It does not advocate joining a particular religious community. And it can be used in public contexts without offending anyone. Thus it is the ideal spiritual text for a pluralistic culture. “The Lord is my shepherd” offers spiritual words anyone can say to any group at any time.<sup>4</sup>

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But what if the familiarity and treasured status of Psalm 23 makes us misunderstand it?

In 1965, the dean and organist of Chichester Cathedral in Sussex commissioned composer Leonard Bernstein to compose music for the psalms. Bernstein seized this opportunity to reframe the age-old insights of Psalm 23 with a fresh perspective. Recycling material from early sketches of his famed musical *West Side Story*, Bernstein composed a collection of psalms in three movements. The second begins with Psalm 23. Bernstein insisted that this piece be sung by a boy treble or countertenor, representing David as a young shepherd boy accompanied by harp. The ancient Hebrew psalmist, remade as a tenor soloist, begins slowly and sweetly. Eventually an angelic choir accompanies him. But then warlike sounds interrupt. Low, rumbling male voices and instruments bellow Psalm 2, “Why do

the nations rage?” The harsh disturbance is eventually overpowered by sweet sopranos singing Psalm 23. But the movement’s final measures recall the violent interruption, as if to symbolize the unending tangle of conflict and faith.

Bernstein’s “Chichester Psalms” reminds us how unwise it is to mindlessly pop Psalm 23 into our lives as a kind of religious pabulum or as a way to avoid painful truth and real threats.

In the movie *Titanic*, Leonardo DiCaprio plays Jack Dawson, a man from steerage who saves the beautiful Rose from marriage to her dull, well-heeled fiancée. The love of Jack and Rose transforms their lives and sets them free. But as they discover, freedom on a sinking ship is limited. As the ship rocks toward its watery grave, they dash between panicked shipmates, fighting to attain higher ground. At one point they pass four members of a string quartet who, moments earlier, had been serenading passengers with classical sonatas. Now the musicians are reciting “The LORD is my shepherd . . .” When the foursome gets to the phrase “yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,” Jack shoves past them. Leading his beloved Rose by the hand he calls, “You want to move a little faster through that valley?”

Jack’s the classic Hollywood hero. Handsome and bright, brash and cocksure, he has every confidence that he will save his beautiful girl. But maybe he’s right. Maybe a ship’s sinking is not the moment for offering sentiment. Maybe it’s more a time to put on a life preserver. Could it be that the practical, cynical Jack was acting more in the spirit of the psalms than the psalm-quoting quartet?

At the beginning of Clint Eastwood’s 1985 Western, *Pale Rider*, a scoundrel bullies an undersized town of

prospectors and their families. Determined to use their land for a hydraulic strip mine, the ruffian schemes to push law-abiding citizens to desert their claims. He sends thugs to pull down their tents and cabins. He transforms the miners' good and simple life into one filled with misery. In an early scene, his bullies have killed the much-loved dog of a settler's young daughter. She kneels, patting the fresh grave. Using the psalm's well-worn words, she has a brand-new dialogue with God:

The LORD is my shepherd,  
I shall not want.  
he leadeth me beside still  
waters;

*But I **do** want.*

he restoreth my soul.

*But they killed my dog.*

Yea though I walk through the  
valley of the shadow of death,  
I shall fear no evil;

*But I **am** afraid.*

for thou art with me;  
Thy rod and thy staff—they  
comfort me.

*But we need a **miracle**.*

Thy loving-kindness and  
mercy shall follow me all the  
days of my life,

*If you exist.*

and I shall dwell in the house  
of the LORD forever.

*But I'd like to get more of  
**this** life first.*

Like Bernstein's "Chichester Psalms," this prayer dialogue enables us to view Psalm 23 apart from its frequently over-sentimental overlay. But as Karl Jacobson points out, the miner's daughter prays only part of the psalm. On first viewing, the missing lines—parts of verses 2 and 3 and all of 5—do not seem crucial. But without these phrases the psalm's originally repeated emphasis on God's good care shrivels. Its central claim, "for thou art with me," is challenged. The psalm's familiar words of confidence and trust ring hollow as this little girl faces the reality of death.

To those of us enamored with overly romantic readings of Psalm 23, *Pale Rider* offers a gift. It pushes us from sentimental piety to frank dialogue. The psalm offers time-tested comfort. But why *do* bullies often win? Why *do* seventeen-year-olds die of cancer? Why *do* children grow up amid chaos and poverty? *Pale Rider* helps us see the wisdom of the ancient Hebrew editors who placed this familiar psalm immediately after the heartfelt lament of Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why . . . ?"

And consider "Jesus Walks," Kanye West's rap rendition of Psalm 23. West certainly isn't one to gloss over pain or dodge a frank conversation about injustice. Reset in urban Chicago ("Chi"), these ancient words burn with pain and hope.

You know what the Midwest is? Young & restless  
Where restless (N\*\*\*\*\*) might snatch your necklace  
And next these (N\*\*\*\*\*) might jack your Lexus  
Somebody tell these (N\*\*\*\*\*) who Kanye West is  
I walk through the valley of the Chi where death is  
Top floor the view alone will leave you breathless  
Uhhhh!

Try to catch it Uhhhh! It's kinda hard  
Getting choked by the detectives yeah yeah now  
check the method  
They be asking us questions, harass and arrest us  
Saying "we eat pieces of s\*\*\* like you for breakfast"  
Huh? Y'all eat pieces of s\*\*\*? What's the basis?  
We ain't going nowhere but got suits and cases  
A trunk full of coke rental car from Avis  
My momma used to say only Jesus can save us  
Well momma I know I act a fool  
But I'll be gone 'til November I got packs to move  
I hope (Jesus walks)  
God show me the way because the Devil trying to  
break me down  
(Jesus walks with me)  
The only thing that I pray is that my feet don't  
fail me now  
(Jesus walks)  
And I don't think there is nothing I can do now  
to right my wrongs  
(Jesus walks with me)  
I want to talk to God but I'm afraid because we  
ain't spoke in so long

Karl Jacobson points out that West, in the tradition of many poets before him, rewrites the psalm, adjusting the ancient words to name his own urban reality. David's "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death" becomes "As I walk through the valley of the Chi [Chicago] where death is." In West's retelling the "valley of the shadow of death" is not some distant symbol set in an ancient Palestinian meadow. The valley is Chicago, a real



place with real problems amid the real struggles of life and death. West prays for Jesus—the shepherd of the psalm—to walk with him in the midst of those struggles.<sup>6</sup>

Like Leonard Bernstein, Jack Dawson, and the miner’s daughter in *Pale Rider*, West resets this favorite psalm amid glaring pain, in his case the raw cry of a hurting city center David could never have imagined. By doing so, he accents the psalm’s purpose, calling vulnerable people beyond pious platitudes to something deeper and more desperate—to unvarnished trust. Setting out our desperate need, West echoes the psalm’s ancient invitation to trust.

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We can’t forget that this psalm (and the whole Hebrew Bible in which it is located) is a gift to the world from the Jews. According to Rabbi Margaret Moers Wenig, Psalm 23 is the ideal Sabbath psalm. In some strict homes it is recited five times each Sabbath:

- on Friday night before the conclusion of the service that begins Sabbath
- at dinner that same evening before Kiddush (a blessing over wine that helps “keep” the Sabbath)
- the next day at lunch before Kiddush
- during *Seudat Shelishit* (a late afternoon meal on the Sabbath)
- as part of the meal immediately after Sabbath concludes<sup>7</sup>

For practicing Jews, the trusting rest of the Sabbath is an art form. Rabbi Abraham Heschel writes that the Sabbath is God’s good gift designed to restore the human soul. Each Sabbath is an invitation for the community to participate in eternity. In keeping it well believers taste the

comfort God will one day bring forever. “On Sabbath we cease from our striving and scurrying and remember we are creation, not creator,” says Heschel. “Six days a week we wrestle with the world, wringing profit from the earth; on the Sabbath we especially care for the seed of eternity planted in the soul. The world has our hands, but our soul belongs to Someone Else.”<sup>8</sup>

Ancient rabbis, like the Psalter’s original editors, often highlighted the value of obeying torah. But they also warned that excessive piety might actually prevent devoted believers from fulfilling Torah. So they accented the gift of Sabbath rest, highlighting our need to trust in the God who provides, the One who gives life. In the language of Psalm 23, Sabbath is the day God leads us to still waters. It is the day he invites us to his banqueting table. It is the day he restores our soul. As Heschel says, it is the day believers remember they were not first created to work or to repair the world but to enjoy God. God’s people are not sweatshop slaves but creatures who bear God’s image. How appropriate then, for us to sing this trusting love song each Sabbath.<sup>9</sup>

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Seminary professor Rodney Cooper describes the way this theme of trust powerfully shapes African American preaching. He tells the story of a young black preacher and an old black preacher sitting near the pulpit side by side one Sunday morning. The young preacher stood up, walked to the pulpit, and read Psalm 23. The congregation politely said amen. Then the old preacher stood up. He followed the young preacher to the pulpit and read Psalm 23 again. The congregation wept, clapped, and shouted a hearty amen. When the old preacher sat down again, the young

preacher asked him why they responded with such emotion to his reading of the psalm. The old man answered, “Son, you read Psalm 23, but I *read* Psalm 23. You can read it, but I have lived it.”

African American preachers, Cooper says, “speak prophetically to people whose daily experiences overtly or subtly produce striving and stress due just to being who they are—Black.” Black preachers, he explains, must be in touch with the people’s pain. Because the first African American preachers were slaves themselves, they preached effectively to their people without formal training. They spoke to issues from their own identity. Today’s African American parishioners, he says, often say that Sunday is the only time when they can openly embrace their pain and encourage their hearts, to “let go and let God.” So black preaching must continually connect the biblical text to the situation people face today.<sup>10</sup>

Whether sung by Hasidic Jews learning to trust each Sabbath, or by slaves resting from oppressive labor, or by a nineteenth-century Springfield family learning trust in the face of a mother’s sudden death, the words of Psalm 23 work. Maybe because intuitively even the most hardened skeptic believes—or wants to believe—in the shepherding heart of God. A drug dealer in Chicago, a Jewish believer in Bosnia, and a high school junior in California want to believe in God’s gentle care for people who are lost and weak. Maybe it works because at the center of the story of any one of us is the story of *all* of us. We have the same dreads and dreams and doubts and fears in the night. We spend most of our energy holding ourselves together, but there are moments when we are painfully aware that the job is too big for us . . . and we need to trust someone else.

At twenty, flying was Paul's obsession, his great love. It was also a family tradition. One day he checked out a sturdy twin-prop Cessna from Tulip City Airport so he and a friend could fly north along the west coast of Lake Michigan. Chatting playfully they soared over spectacular sandy shorelines and pristine forests, logging hours to get his full pilot's license. He was to return at midnight.

At first his tardiness made his parents angry. What parent sleeps soundly before his or her child is home safe? By one o'clock they were saying, "Paul, stop doing things like this. Get it home." At two o'clock they called the family to say Paul hadn't come back yet. At four o'clock, voice trembling, they notified their pastor. "Tim, something has gone wrong. Paul's plane hasn't returned." The pastor threw on his jeans and hustled to the airport. At five o'clock family members and close friends huddled together, barely able to sit still on terminal chairs. Waiting.

The clock moved with painful slowness through the morning. Worry spread and deepened like a bad infection. At noon officials from the FAA drove into the airport parking lot. Paul's dad and mom, Dennis and Sally, sprinted out the door. Twenty years later those gathered can still see Sally collapsing in the parking lot. Officials had found Paul's plane in twenty feet of water off the Ludington coast. Their boy was dead.

Amid searing pain, Dennis and Sally staggered back into the terminal. Loved ones circled around them. Tears spilled on each other, hearts opened in grief. Emotions exploded. Dennis pounded his fist on the wall. Parents do all kinds of things when they lose a child. And then, after all their heat, sweat, and pain, Dennis turned to his pastor. "Tim, you've got to pray for us."

No seminary training can prepare a person for such a moment. What on earth do you pray? Who dares mouth pious clichés to a mother and father who have just lost a son? Tim grabbed Dennis under his right arm and a family friend under his left. Sally was held up by friends across the circle as they joined arms together. In that vulnerable moment, Tim reached across the centuries to borrow the words to pray, not trusting his own eloquence or verbal skill. Walking in the footsteps of pastors like Augustine and Ambrose, he prayed, “The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures . . .” At that point he broke down and cried. He couldn’t pray another word.

A stunning thing happened then. Dennis, whose heart had just been wrenched from his chest, picked up the prayer where Tim left off. “He leads me besides the still waters. . . .” Still waters? Only a few hours ago the angry waters of Lake Michigan had swallowed his boy’s plane as it sank to the bottom. Dennis broke down and cried like a baby. Then his wife, Sally, picked up the prayer. Full of grief, she continued “. . . he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me. Your rod and staff will comfort me.” She made it as far as the next line: “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies . . .” and then she couldn’t go on. What was she thinking about? A thousand peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches? Paul’s favorite backyard barbeque? A wedding feast that would never happen? She fell, weeping. Her friends tried to hold her up but the pain was too heavy to stand.

Then the most remarkable thing of all happened. Every person in that circle of grief continued praying Psalm 23. With one communal voice they continued the ancient words “You anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows” until they came to final line: “Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.”<sup>11</sup>

In the face of immediate and overwhelming pain they joined the ancient, never-ending chorus; they uttered words of trust tested for centuries. They had said these ancient words before—maybe mechanically, without even thinking about them. But this time they were desperate to say them again. In danger of falling apart, they turned to Psalm 23. And, like steel girders holding a bridge upright through a violent hurricane, these words held them fast, assuring them that even in the valley of the shadow of death, fear would not have the last word. At the very moment their emotions spun in violent chaos, those familiar and trusting words held them together. “The Lord is my shepherd. . . .”

