

A HESEDWORDS REFLECTION

Songs for the Road

Reflections on the Psalms of Ascent



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We are all on a journey. That is not a metaphor — or not only a metaphor. It is the most ordinary and most theological thing that can be said about a human life. You did not choose your starting point. You will not choose your ending point. What you are given is the road between them, and the company you keep on it, and the songs you find to sing along the way.

In 2009 my journey led me to Tasmania, to a small church in the suburb of Risdon Vale. The church was hurting. In 1985, five young people had drowned in a tragic vehicle accident returning home from a youth camp — a grief that had never quite lifted, compounded across the years by leadership challenges and the slow weight of a community that had not recovered its footing. They were not broken. But they were weary in the way communities become weary when they have carried something heavy for a long time without putting it down.

I came to care for them. And somewhere in those first months I understood that my path and theirs had merged. From this point forward we were to journey together.

What I had not anticipated was the neighbour.

Risdon Prison sits adjacent to the suburb, close enough that its presence shapes the community's life in ways both visible and invisible. And it was not long before the words of Matthew 25 began to press on me with the particular insistence that words acquire when they stop being text and become address. I was in prison and you visited me. Not organised a programme. Not advocated from a distance. Visited. Present. There.

The children came first into view — the ones with a parent on the other side of the wire, carrying consequences they had not chosen, largely invisible to the systems designed to protect them. From that visibility, Kids Days grew —

bringing children across the threshold of the wire, reclaiming a few hours of family life within a space designed for separation, and refusing to let the separation be the last word. And from that refusal, the Onesimus Foundation took shape: a ministry whose work is maintaining family relationships across the barrier of incarceration, journeying alongside families through the long road of a sentence and beyond.

It is not dramatic work, most of the time. It is the work of presence. Of showing up. Of walking with people who have further to go than seems fair, and refusing to leave them to walk it alone.

Then came the cardiac event.

The heart stopped. The room intervened. The life continued when it might not have. And in the days of stillness that followed — the enforced stillness of a body that has reminded you it is not indestructible — I found myself returning to fifteen ancient psalms that I had known for years but had not, until then, needed in quite this way.

They already knew the road I was on.

What follows is a travel journal — notes made on that road, by someone who needed to know where he was and where the road was going. The psalms shaped the questions. The questions shaped everything.

A NOTE BEFORE WE BEGIN

These reflections did not begin as a book. They began as a conversation — a man recently returned from the edge of death, reading ancient psalms, asking questions. The questions shaped everything. What emerged was not a commentary but something closer to a travel journal: notes made on a road, by someone who needed to know where he was and where the road was going.

The Psalms of Ascent — Psalms 120 to 134 — are fifteen songs sung by pilgrims making their way up to Jerusalem for the great festivals. They were not composed as private devotions. They were road songs, sung out loud, in company, with dust on your feet and the city still distant. They begin in exile and end in the temple courts at night, with hands lifted in blessing. Fifteen psalms. One journey.

The Hebrew word selah appears seventy-one times in the Psalter. It does not appear once in the Psalms of Ascent. No one is entirely sure what selah means — a musical pause, an instruction to lift the voice, a moment of reflection built into the liturgy. But its absence from these fifteen psalms is itself suggestive. Perhaps the ascent creates its own selah. Perhaps a road walked in the presence of God, with honest attention, becomes its own invitation to stop and take stock. In each chapter of this book, the section marked Selah is that invitation — a pause on the road, a looking around, a moment to ask where you are before you take the next step.

I came to these psalms in what I can only call a second gift of life. And I found that they already knew the road I was on.

You may not have experienced a cardiac arrest. But if you have ever known the weariness of living among people who seem constitutionally opposed to everything you value — if you have ever felt a stranger in your own circumstances — if you have ever sensed that you are somewhere you were never meant to stay — then Psalm 120 is written for you.

This is where the ascent begins. Not at the temple gate. Not even on the road. It begins in the honest recognition of where your feet actually are.

PART ONE

The First Half of the Road

Psalms 120–126

The Far Country

*Psalm 120**In my distress I called to the LORD, and he answered me.**Deliver me, O LORD, from lying lips, from a deceitful tongue.**What shall be given to you, and what more shall be done to you,
you deceitful tongue?**A warrior's sharp arrows, with glowing coals of the broom tree!**Woe to me, that I sojourn in Meshech, that I dwell among the tents of Kedar!**Too long have I had my dwelling among those who hate peace.**I am for peace, but when I speak, they are for war.*

PSALM 120 · ESV

WHERE WE ARE

Every journey begins somewhere. This one begins in discomfort — which is, in its own way, an act of honesty that most spiritual writing avoids.

There is no warm gathering of pilgrims here, no sense of festive preparation. The psalm opens mid-experience, in distress, surrounded by people whose words cannot be trusted. And then — before we have even oriented ourselves — verse 5 drops the geography of the soul into two place names most readers pass over quickly: *Meshech* and *Kedar*.

Meshech was to the far north — modern Turkey or the Caucasus region. Kedar was Arab tribal territory to the southeast. They point in opposite directions from Jerusalem, and that is precisely the point. The psalmist is not claiming to live in both places simultaneously. They are invoking two names that together mean: as far from home as it is possible to be. Wherever you are, it is not where you belong.

The word translated *sojourn* is the Hebrew *gur* — the word for a resident alien, a stranger without full belonging. The psalmist is not merely living in an unfamiliar place. They do not belong there. They are a foreigner in their own circumstances.

The distress is specific. It is not vague anxiety or existential malaise. It is the grinding weariness of lying lips and a deceitful tongue — of living among people for whom truth is negotiable and words are weapons. Verse 7 captures it with quiet devastation: *I am for peace, but when I speak, they are for war*. The psalmist keeps reaching toward *shalom*, and keeps meeting hostility. This has become a pattern, not an incident. *Too long*, they say. Too long.

And yet — notice the tense of verse 1. The psalm does not open with *I am crying*. It opens with testimony: *I called, and he answered*. The pilgrim has already been heard. The distress is real, but it is being narrated from a position of having survived it. Something is already different. The journey has already, quietly, begun.

WHAT THE TEXT OPENS

The genius of placing this psalm first in the collection is that the Psalter assumes many of its singers begin in exile. Not geographical exile necessarily, but the exile of living in environments where your deepest orientation is foreign to those around you. Where truth is slippery. Where *shalom* is unwanted. Where you are for peace and they are for war.

The Psalms of Ascent were almost certainly sung communally — pilgrims travelling together to Jerusalem for the great festivals of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. To hear Psalm 120 sung by a company of travellers is to understand that exile is not a private condition. Many voices sing *woe to me*. The *me* becomes a *we* on the road.

But something even more striking is embedded in the structure of this short psalm. It begins in the past tense — *I called, he answered* — and ends in the present — *I am for peace, but when I speak, they are for war*. The resolution has not yet arrived. The answered prayer has not dissolved the hostile environment. The psalmist is heard by God and still surrounded by enemies. Both things are simultaneously true.

This is the honest starting point the collection insists upon. Not: *God answered me and everything changed*. But: *God answered me, and I am still here, among people who want war, and the road ahead is long*. The ascent begins not in triumph but in truthful, tenacious hope.

SELAH

The Psalms of Ascent were sung in company. Pilgrims walked together, voices joining on the road. But the recognition that you are living in Meshech — that you are a stranger in your own circumstances — almost always arrives in solitude. On a hospital bed. In a quiet room at three in the morning. In the sudden stillness after a crisis, when the noise clears and you can finally hear where you actually are.

*In the days after the cardiac event, I found this psalm waiting for me in exactly that solitude — not the medical crisis itself but the longer background to it: the accumulated weariness of years spent in environments where the values you live by feel foreign, even suspect. Where you speak peace and the room chooses war. Where you are a *gur* — present, but not quite belonging.*

I don't think I was unusual in this. I think many people who have walked long enough in any vocation that runs against the grain of a culture know the geography of Meshech and Kedar. The names change. The feeling is the same.

What the cardiac event did — and what this psalm confirmed — was make the exile undeniable. You can live in Meshech for a long time without naming it. The crisis named it. And naming it, I discovered, is not despair. It is the first step.

Before you move to Psalm 121, sit with the question this psalm quietly asks:

Where is your Meshech? Not as a complaint to nurse, but as an honest accounting. What is the environment — the relationship, the culture, the season of life — in which you feel most like a stranger? Where have you been reaching for shalom and meeting war?

Name it. The psalm has given you permission.

And notice: the psalmist named it, and the journey became possible. The next psalm begins I lift my eyes to the hills. That lifting is only possible after you have looked honestly at where you are standing.

The road to Jerusalem begins in Meshech. It always has.

The Keeper on the Road

Psalm 121

I lift my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come?

My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.

He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.

Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade on 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 soul.

The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore.

PSALM 121 · ESV

WHERE WE ARE

Something has shifted between Psalm 120 and Psalm 121, and it is worth pausing to feel it before we move on.

In Psalm 120 we were stationary — stuck in Meshech, among deceitful tongues, too long in exile. The psalm ended with war still in the air. There was no resolution, no fanfare, no moment of decision narrated. And yet — the very existence of Psalm 121 tells us that the pilgrim moved. Somewhere between the last verse of Psalm 120 and the first verse of Psalm 121, feet were set on a road.

And the first gesture of that road is upward. *I lift my eyes to the hills.*

This is not yet arrival. The hills on the horizon could be the hills surrounding Jerusalem — the destination glimpsed from a distance — or they could be the hills that line the pilgrim road itself, places where bandits waited, where the journey became dangerous. The question that follows — *from where does my help come?* — suggests the hills are not entirely reassuring. The pilgrim looks up and asks: is help there, or is threat?

The answer comes immediately, and it reframes the whole landscape: *My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth*. Not from the hills themselves. Not from the city glimpsed beyond them. From the one who made them. The pilgrim is not alone on this road.

WHAT THE TEXT OPENS

This psalm turns entirely on a single Hebrew word: *shamar* — to keep, to guard, to watch over, to preserve. It appears six times in eight verses. That density is not accident. The psalmist hammers the word like a nail driven home again and again, because the pilgrim on the road needed to hear it repeatedly. He keeps. He keeps. He keeps.

Shamar in the Hebrew carries a range that the English word ‘keep’ barely touches. A shepherd *shamar*-ing a flock is watchful, active, alert to every threat. A guard *shamar*-ing a city gate is stationed, present, not absent. A mother *shamar*-ing words in her heart — as Rachel does with Joseph’s dreams in Genesis — is holding something treasured and fragile. God *shamar*-ing his covenant is fidelity sustained across centuries. It is never passive. *Shamar* is engaged, attentive, wide-awake watchfulness.

And the psalm makes a point of that wakefulness: *he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep* (v. 4). The gods of the ancient world slept. Baal famously slept — Elijah mocked him for it on Carmel: perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened. The psalmist is making a polemically precise claim: your keeper is not like that. He has no off hours. He does not step away.

The scope of the keeping expands with each verse in a way that rewards attention. The psalm begins with *your foot* — the most immediate, physical concern of a pilgrim on a rocky road — and moves outward through *your shade*, to *the sun and moon*, to *all evil*, to *your soul*, until it arrives at *your going out and your coming in, from this time forth and forevermore*. The keeper’s reach grows until it has swallowed every conceivable domain of threat.

But this is not a promise of an injury-free road. The psalm does not say the foot will never stumble — it says the foot will not be finally moved. The keeping is not exemption from suffering but the preservation of the deep self through it. The road will still be rocky. The sun will still beat down. The question the psalm answers is not *will I be spared?* but *will I be held?* And the answer, hammered six times in eight verses, is: yes. Through all of it. Yes.

One phrase in that expansion deserves particular attention: *he will keep your soul* — in Hebrew, *nafshekha*, your *nefesh*. This is the deep self, the seat of longing and desire and life itself. Not just your body safely delivered to Jerusalem. The *nefesh* is what cannot be destroyed by the road, even when

the road breaks the body. The keeper does not merely preserve your physical safety. He keeps the longing self — the self that longs for Zion — held and watched over, even before the destination is reached, even when the journey costs more than you anticipated.

This *shamar* language echoes through the canon in ways that deepen it further. The Aaronic blessing of Numbers 6 — *the LORD bless you and keep you* — uses the same word. The priestly blessing is not sentiment; it is a covenant declaration that God takes up the position of *shomer*, guardian, over his people. Psalm 121 is the pilgrim's experience of what the priestly blessing declared. And then in John 17, on the night before his death, Jesus prays with the same language running through his prayer: *Holy Father, keep them in your name... I kept them... keep them from the evil one*. The Greek word he uses is the Septuagint's translation of *shamar*. Jesus has been the keeper of those entrusted to him — present on the same road, under the same conditions — and now he hands that keeping to the Father.

What Jesus adds that the psalm only implies is this: the keeper was not watching from a distance. He kept by being present in the place of danger. The *shomer* walked the same road.

SELAH

The Psalms of Ascent were sung in company. But the recognition that you are being kept — truly held — almost always arrives in solitude. On a hospital bed. In a quiet room. In the stillness after a crisis when what felt like luck suddenly has the character of intention.

In the days after the cardiac event, I was told more than once that I was lucky to be alive. I understood what people meant, and I received it with the spirit in which it was offered. But luck was not quite the right word for what I was experiencing. Luck is impersonal — a random alignment of circumstances that happened to favour you. What I was carrying was something different. It had the character of being kept.

The distinction matters. Luck leaves you with relief and perhaps a vague resolve to make the most of things. Being kept leaves you with something closer to astonishment — and accountability. You were watched over. The keeping was intentional. And if the keeper is the one who made heaven and earth, then the question why was I kept? carries real weight.

I have not arrived at a tidy answer to that question. But the psalm does not offer one either. It does not explain why the keeper kept you — it simply declares that he does, and that his keeping is total. Your foot. Your soul. Your going out and your coming in. Everything.

What I found, sitting with Psalm 121, was that the question itself changed me. Not why did I survive? — which can spiral into either guilt or grandiosity — but what does it mean to be kept? And beneath that: has he not always been keeping me, on roads I walked without noticing?

Perhaps the cardiac event was not the beginning of the keeping. Perhaps it was simply the moment the keeping became undeniable.

Before you move to Psalm 122, carry this question with you:

Where on your road have you been kept without knowing it?

Not the dramatic moments only — the near misses, the obvious interventions. But the ordinary keeping: the foot that did not slip, the soul that held together under pressure it might not have survived, the going out and coming in of ten thousand ordinary days.

Our Feet Are Standing

Psalm 122

I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the LORD!"
Our feet have been standing within your gates, O Jerusalem!
Jerusalem — built as a city that is bound firmly together,
to which the tribes go up, the tribes of the LORD, as was decreed for Israel,
to give thanks to the name of the LORD.
There thrones for judgment were set, the thrones of the house of David.
Pray for the peace of Jerusalem! "May they be secure who love you!"
Peace be within your walls and security within your towers!"
For my brothers and companions' sake I will say, "Peace be within you!"
For the sake of the house of the LORD our God, I will seek your good.

PSALM 122 · ESV

WHERE WE ARE

Three psalms in, and something momentous has happened that the text almost refuses to make a drama of.

The pilgrim who began in Meshech — wearied by deceitful tongues, reaching for *shalom* and meeting war — has arrived. The feet that set out from the far country are now standing within the gates of Jerusalem. And the psalm registers this not with a shout of triumph but with something closer to quiet wonder: *our feet have been standing* — as if the pilgrim looks down, almost in disbelief, and notices where they are.

That restraint is itself significant. The arrival is real. But the psalm does not linger on the achievement of getting here. It turns immediately outward — to the city, to its meaning, to prayer for its peace. Arrival is not the end of the journey. It is the beginning of a new orientation.

WHAT THE TEXT OPENS

The psalm opens with a memory embedded in the present: *I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the LORD.'* The gladness did not originate in solitude. Someone else issued the invitation, and the joy was the response to a communal word. Already the psalm insists that this is not a private pilgrimage — the ascent is made together, and even the initial impulse came from outside the self.

The description of Jerusalem in verses 3 to 5 repays careful attention. The city is described as *bound firmly together* — in Hebrew, *chavrah lah yachdav*, knit into one. This is not merely an architectural observation about Jerusalem's compact hilltop geography, though that is present. It is a theological statement: the city holds together what might otherwise fall apart.

Verse 5 places *thrones for judgment* — the seat of *mishpat*, of justice — in the same city as the house of the LORD, the place of worship. Jerusalem is simultaneously where justice is administered and where God is praised. The psalm refuses to let these occupy different territories. The city that holds the throne of David and the temple of God in one ordered space is saying something about the nature of reality: worship and justice are not rivals. They share an address.

The closing movement of the psalm turns arrival into intercession. Having stood within the gates, received the gift of being there, the pilgrim's immediate response is to pray for the city's *shalom*. That word — *shalom* — has been present since Psalm 120, where the psalmist cried: *I am for peace, and they are for war*. Here, after the long road, *shalom* is prayed rather than merely longed for. The pilgrim who left Meshech reaching for peace that was refused now stands in Jerusalem and prays peace into existence.

There is also something worth noticing in who the prayer is for: *for my brothers and companions' sake* and *for the sake of the house of the LORD our God*. The arrived pilgrim does not pray for themselves. The posture of arrival is immediately relational and outward. I am here — therefore I pray for you.

SELAH

The threshold itself is often crossed in an instant — a specific day, a specific hour, a gate that opens and closes behind you. But the soul's awareness that it has crossed takes far longer to settle. The pilgrim's feet were standing within Jerusalem's gates before the pilgrim fully knew they were there. That gap — between the objective arrival and the subjective recognition of it — is where many of us live for months, sometimes years, after a crisis.

For me, the threshold was a specific moment on a specific day — a heart that stopped, a room that intervened, a life that continued when it might not have. But the awareness that I had arrived somewhere new came gradually: returning to the psalms, returning to preaching, returning to the work with different eyes. I had not simply survived. I had arrived somewhere. And like the pilgrim in the psalm, my instinct was not to celebrate my own resilience but to look outward — at the city, at the people entrusted to my care, at the work still to be done — and pray.

What strikes me most about this psalm's structure is that arrival and intercession are inseparable. The pilgrim crosses the threshold and immediately begins to pray for the city. Not later, when settled. Not after adequate rest. The gladness of arrival generates prayer as its first expression.

Perhaps this is what the second half of life, or any season of renewal, is really for. Not to consolidate what has been built, not merely to be grateful for survival, but to stand within whatever gates God has brought you to — and pray.

What threshold have you recently crossed that you have not yet stopped to name? And who are the brothers and companions for whom your arrival calls you to pray?

Eyes Fixed Upward

Psalm 123

*To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens!
 Behold, as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master,
 as the eyes of a maidservant to the hand of her mistress,
 so our eyes look to the LORD our God, until he has mercy upon us.
 Have mercy upon us, O LORD, have mercy upon us,
 for we have had more than enough of contempt.
 Our soul has had more than enough of the scorn of those who are at ease,
 of the contempt of the proud.*

PSALM 123 · ESV

WHERE WE ARE

Something important needs to be said before we enter this psalm: arrival does not dissolve everything.

Psalm 122 celebrated the threshold crossing — feet standing within Jerusalem's gates, the long road from Meshech finally behind. It would be reasonable to expect that arrival would bring resolution. That the contempt endured on the road would lift once the city was reached. That the hostility of Psalm 120 would belong entirely to the past.

Psalm 123 quietly refuses that expectation. The pilgrim is inside the city — and the contempt is still present. The proud are still at ease. The scorn still lands. The psalm does not explain how this is possible or why God has permitted it. It simply names it, with the economy of someone who has learned not to waste words on what cannot yet be answered.

And then it does something unexpected. Rather than turning outward toward the source of the contempt, or downward into the weight of it, it turns the eyes upward. Entirely, deliberately, stubbornly upward.

WHAT THE TEXT OPENS

The psalm's central image — verses 2 and 3 — is one of the most precisely observed in the entire Psalter: *As the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maidservant to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the LORD our God, until he has mercy upon us.*

Three things are happening in this image that are easily missed. The eyes watch the hand, not the face. This is not the devoted gaze of romantic love, though love is not absent. It is the attentive watchfulness of someone who takes all their direction from tiny signals — a slight movement of the hand, an almost imperceptible gesture indicating the master's will. To watch the hand was to be entirely oriented to another's will and timing, alert to the smallest movement.

The word *until* carries enormous weight. *So our eyes look to the LORD our God, until he has mercy upon us.* This is not acceptance that mercy may never come. The *until* is a declaration of stubborn, sustained expectation. The eyes will not move. The waiting has a destination — mercy — and the looking will continue as long as it takes. It is, in its quiet way, one of the most tenacious statements of faith in the Psalter.

The word translated *mercy* here is *chonen* — from the Hebrew root *chanan*, which gives us *chen*, the gracious, unearned favour of the powerful extended toward the vulnerable. The plea is not for justice in the forensic sense, not for vindication or recompense. It is for *chen* in action. The doubling in verse 3 — *have mercy upon us, have mercy upon us* — is not hysteria. It is insistence. The eyes are fixed, and they will not look away.

One morning while sitting with this psalm, I had been reading Hosea — the prophet's great cry in chapter 6: *let us press on to know the LORD; his going out is sure as the dawn.* What struck me, bringing the two texts together, was the difference in posture between them. Hosea's image burns with horizontal energy — the soul chasing after God with the urgency of pursuit. Psalm 123 is vertical and still — the soul fixed upward with the quiet attentiveness of a servant, not moving, not demanding, simply watching. Both are postures of complete dependence on God's initiative. But Hosea's image runs; Psalm 123's image waits. Together they describe a spirituality that is neither frantic nor passive — it is actively attentive. Eyes fixed. Not looking away.

SELAH

The contempt named in this psalm is not abstract. Those who work alongside people carrying the weight of incarceration, or justice involvement, or the accumulated shame of being consistently regarded as the wrong kind of person — they know exactly what the psalm means by those who are at ease. The ease of those who have never had their dignity systematically questioned. The scorn that does not always announce itself as scorn but is communicated in a raised eyebrow, a bureaucratic delay, an assumption made before a word is spoken.

The psalm does not offer a strategy for dismantling that contempt. It offers something both simpler and harder: a direction for the eyes.

I have sat with people who had every reason to fix their eyes on the source of the contempt directed at them — and watched what that does over time. The eyes that stay fixed on the scorn eventually begin to see only the scorn. It fills the field of vision. It becomes the defining reality. External contempt, sustained long enough, does not stay external. It migrates inward. The proud man's gaze becomes the prisoner's interior monologue. The system's assessment of a person's worth becomes the person's assessment of themselves.

After the cardiac event, I understood this differently than I had before. What this psalm offered me was not a denial of any of that. It offered a direction. To you I lift up my eyes — not because the contempt has ceased, not because the body has recovered its former confidence, not because the proud have relented, but because the one enthroned in the heavens is the only one whose mercy can reach where the contempt has gone. Including the contempt we have absorbed so deeply we have begun to mistake it for self-knowledge.

Where have you been fixing your eyes — on the source of contempt, or on the one who sits above it? And is any of that contempt no longer coming from outside, but from within?

CHAPTER FIVE

Let Israel Say

Psalm 124

*If it had not been the LORD who was on our side — let Israel say —
if it had not been the LORD who was on our side when people rose against us,
then they would have swallowed us up alive, when their anger was kindled against
us;
then the flood would have swept us away, the torrent would have gone over us;
then over us would have gone the raging waters.
Blessed be the LORD, who has not given us as prey to their teeth!
We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowlers;
the snare is broken, and we have escaped!
Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth.*

PSALM 124 · ESV

WHERE WE ARE

he pilgrim collection pauses here — and looks back.

T Five psalms into the ascent, the journey turns its face toward what was survived to begin the journey at all. Psalm 124 is testimony, not instruction. It does not tell the pilgrim what to do or where to look. It summons the community to remember together what they almost didn't survive — and to say it out loud.

Let Israel say. The communal summons at the opening is not incidental. This is not a private recollection. It is a liturgical act — the congregation called to own the testimony together, to speak the near-catastrophe in public, to let the relief be shared rather than hoarded. What was almost lost belongs to everyone. So does the account of being delivered.

There is a spiritual discipline embedded in that summons that is easily missed. Before the pilgrim arrives at the temple, before the great acts of worship and sacrifice, the collection requires this:

stop. Turn around. Look at what was behind you on that road. Name it. Say what would have happened if God had not been on your side.

The *almost* is the beginning of gratitude.

WHAT THE TEXT OPENS

The psalm's opening move is arrestingly unusual. The Hebrew word *lûlê* — *if it had not been* — is one of the most loaded conditional particles in the language. It forces the reader to inhabit the counterfactual — to stand inside the near-miss and feel its weight — before the relief is allowed to arrive.

The psalm repeats the conditional twice: *if it had not been the LORD who was on our side... if it had not been the LORD who was on our side*. The repetition mimics the catching of breath. It is a rhetorical device that makes the congregation hold the *almost* in their lungs before they exhale into the deliverance. You cannot rush past the *lûlê*. The psalm will not permit it.

Then comes a cascade of three images, each capturing a different texture of what was nearly endured. *Swallowed alive* — the verb is *bala'*, the gullet of the enemy, chaos as a devouring mouth. *The flood, the torrent, the raging waters* — *zêdônim*, insolent, proud. These are not merely dangerous waters. They are arrogant waters. *The bird escaping the snare* — what is remarkable is the precision of the deliverance: *the snare is broken*. Not that the bird slipped through, not that the bird found a gap. The trap itself is destroyed. The freedom is not provisional.

The psalm closes with eight words that function as the theological grammar of the entire Ascent collection: *Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth*. The one who set the boundaries of the deep is the one who said: not this one. Not today.

S E L A H

The communal summons — let Israel say — has stayed with me longer than almost anything else in this collection.

There is a reticence, I think, among many people who have survived something significant, about claiming the survival as testimony. It can feel presumptuous. Why me and not another? What does my deliverance say about those who were not delivered? These are honest questions and they deserve honest sitting-with, not dismissal.

But the psalm's own structure answers them. The testimony is required not for the sake of the one who survived but for the sake of those who have not yet escaped. The living witness keeps hope alive for those still in the snare. Survival, on these terms, is not a badge of individual favour. It is a stewardship. The testimony is offered outward, for the companions.

I have seen this happen in the work I do alongside people carrying the weight of fractured histories. When a person carrying shame hears another say — simply, plainly, without performance — the snare is broken, and I escaped, something shifts. Not because the words are magical, but because they make the unimaginable imaginable. If that trap could snap, perhaps this one can too.

What is your lûlê — your 'if it had not been'? And have you said it out loud, in the company of even one other person, as an act of gratitude rather than grievance?

The snare is broken. That is worth saying.

The Mountain That Cannot Be Moved

Psalm 125

Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever.

As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the LORD surrounds his people, from this time forth and forevermore.

For the scepter of wickedness shall not rest over the land allotted to the righteous, lest the righteous stretch out their hands to do wrong.

Do good, O LORD, to those who are good, and to those who are upright in their hearts!

But those who turn aside to their crooked ways the LORD will lead away with evil-doers.

Peace be upon Israel!

PSALM 125 · ESV

WHERE WE ARE

Psalm 124 left the pilgrim breathless — the flood barely survived, the snare barely broken, the escape still fresh in the lungs. It was a psalm of retrospective wonder, sung with the tremor of someone who has just realised how close it was.

Psalm 125 is the stillness after that tremor. The breathlessness settles. The psalm does not rush. It makes no petition, voices no urgency, recalls no danger. Instead it does something that only becomes possible after the near-miss has been named and the escape has been testified to: it speaks the structure of reality for those who trust. Not what God will do, not what the pilgrim hopes for — but what *is*. Architecturally. Permanently. From this time forth and forevermore.

This is the psalm of settled security. And it arrives at exactly the right moment in the journey — when the pilgrim has survived enough to need not comfort but foundation.

WHAT THE TEXT OPENS

The psalm's opening comparison stops the reader immediately, because it works in an unexpected direction. You would expect the psalmist to say: *those who trust in the LORD are like a rock* — something solid, immovable by its own nature. But that is not what the psalm says. It says: *those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion*. And Zion's immovability, the psalm immediately explains, is not intrinsic. It derives entirely from what surrounds it.

The logic is concentric and worth following carefully. The trusting person is secure because they are like Zion. Zion is secure because the mountains encircle it. And those encircling mountains are identified as the LORD himself surrounding his people. The security is borrowed all the way down.

The Hebrew word at the centre of this image is *saviv* — surrounding, encircling, on every side. It is the word of total enclosure. Not protection from one direction while another flank remains exposed. The LORD is *saviv* — surrounding on every side, comprehensively, without gap, from this time forth and forevermore.

The Hebrew word at the heart of the security is *batach* — trust. It is not a mild or cautious word. *Batach* carries the sense of leaning your full weight on something, of resting against a support with the confidence that it will hold. What Psalm 125 declares is that *batach* directed toward the LORD produces the condition of Zion: immovable, surrounded, abiding forever. The weight you lean is not dropped or lost. It is held.

The psalm ends on a bifurcation that is rare in the Ascent collection. Two outcomes, two kinds of people. And then, quietly, the closing word: *shalom* be upon Israel. Peace — that word which has been travelling with us since Psalm 120, where the psalmist reached for it and met war — is now pronounced over the community. Not prayed for, as in Psalm 122. Pronounced. Declared. The journey is doing something to the pilgrim's relationship with *shalom* — moving it from longing to intercession to declaration.

S E L A H

There is a particular temptation that comes with surviving something significant — and it is not the temptation toward pride or self-congratulation, which is obvious enough to be guarded against. It is a subtler temptation: the temptation to locate your security in the survival itself. To make the escape the ground of your confidence going forward. I got through that — therefore I can get through anything.

Psalm 125 dismantles that temptation quietly but completely. The trusting person is not like a rock. They are like Zion — which is to say, their security is entirely derived. It comes from what surrounds them, not from what they contain. The immovability is borrowed.

After the cardiac event, I understood this in my body before I understood it in my mind. What Psalm 125 insists is that the survival means something about the encircling. The mountains did not decide to surround Zion. They were positioned. The security was architectural before it was experiential, and the architect was not the city.

This is, I think, what the second gift of life is really for. Not to discover what you are made of. Not to prove your resilience or consolidate your legacy. But to lean — with the full weight of batash — on the one who surrounds.

Where have you been locating your security — in what you have survived, or in what surrounds you? And what would it mean to lean your full weight there today?

The mountain does not hold itself up. It is held. And that, the psalm insists, is not weakness. It is the most permanent condition available to those who trust.

Like Those Who Dream

Psalm 126

*When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.
 Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy;
 then they said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them."
 The LORD has done great things for us; we are glad.
 Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like streams in the Negev!
 Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy!
 He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing,
 shall come home with shouts of joy, bearing his sheaves.*

PSALM 126 · ESV

WHERE WE ARE

Something shifts at Psalm 126 that is worth pausing to feel before entering the text. The first six psalms of the ascent have moved through exile, through the road, through the threshold, through contempt, through narrow escape, through the settled security of the encircling hills. The journey has had a clear forward momentum — away from Meshech, toward Jerusalem.

And now, at Psalm 126, the journey does something unexpected. It does not stop. But it turns. The pilgrim looks backward and forward simultaneously — celebrating what God has already done while crying out for what has not yet fully come. The psalm holds both hands open at once: one receiving the gift of what has been given, one reaching for what has not yet arrived.

This is the psalm of the incomplete restoration. And it may be the most honest psalm in the collection.

WHAT THE TEXT OPENS

The psalm opens in a register that is almost disorienting in its joy. *We were like those who dream* — the Hebrew suggests the quality of something too good to be believed, the experience of waking

and finding that the thing you thought was a dream is actually real. The return from Babylon had that quality.

But before verse 3 has settled, verse 4 turns with a cry that seems to contradict everything just celebrated: *restore our fortunes, O LORD, like streams in the Negev*. Why does the psalm cry out for the very thing it just celebrated receiving?

The answer lies in a single Hebrew phrase — *shub shebut* — translated *restore our fortunes* but carrying far more freight than that rendering suggests. The phrase describes a reversal of exile at the deepest level — not merely the return of lost property, but the turning back of a turning away. It is closer to: *turn us back to what we were meant to be*. Body and soul. Circumstance and interior life. All of it.

The image the psalm chooses for this restoration is the Negev in flood. The Negev is semi-desert — bone dry for most of the year, the riverbeds cracked and empty. But when the rains come, the *wadis* run with shocking, violent abundance. The psalm is not asking for slow improvement. It is asking for the sovereign, overwhelming reversal that only God can produce.

The three-tense structure of this short psalm is its theological genius. Memory — *when the LORD restored, we were like those who dream*. Lament — *restore our fortunes, like streams in the Negev*. Hope — *those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy*. Past, present, future held in a single breath. The pattern is always the same. Restoration moves through apparent loss. Life comes through what looked like death.

S E L A H

Psalm 126 is, of all the Ascent psalms, the one that has sat most honestly with where I actually found myself in the months following the cardiac event.

There was genuine celebration — the dreamlike quality of waking and finding yourself still here, still breathing, still with people you love gathered around you. The LORD has done great things for us. That was real. I did not need to manufacture that gladness.

But the psalm gave me something else that the celebration alone could not give: permission to cry restore our fortunes in the same breath. Because the restoration was real and the incompleteness was also real. The body was healing but not healed. The sense of a new beginning was present but the shape of it was not yet clear. The seeds were in the ground but there was no harvest yet visible.

There is a pressure in recovery — from illness, from any significant disruption — to resolve too quickly into one tense. Either to live entirely in the past tense of what was nearly lost, which becomes its own kind of paralysis. Or to rush into the future tense of what will be built, which can become a way of avoiding the weight of the present. The psalm refuses both escapes.

Shub shebut — the cry for restoration — is not a denial of what has been given. It is the recognition that what has been given is the first fruits, not the full harvest. The restoration is genuine and incomplete simultaneously. Both things are true.

What are the seeds you are carrying right now — the things you are planting in conditions of uncertainty, giving away what you can barely afford to give, trusting a harvest you cannot yet see?

Name them. The weeping that accompanies the sowing is not a sign that the sowing is wrong. It may be the most honest thing about it.

↑ — Midway Pause — ↑

Stop here. Not because the road demands it. Because you do.

Seven psalms behind you. Seven ahead. This is the ridge — the place where the path levels briefly before the final ascent begins. The city is closer than it was. Meshech is further than it feels.

Take the pack off. Sit down on whatever stone the road has provided. Remove your sandals. Let the breeze find your feet. There is a brook here. Drink from it.

The warrior-king of Psalm 110 drinks from the brook by the way — and therefore lifts his head. Not at a prepared table. Not from a carried supply. From whatever water the road itself offers, received without ceremony, in the middle of the journey. That drinking is what makes the final ascent possible. The lifted head is the gift of the one who stopped long enough to receive.

This is that stop. Sit with what seven psalms have done to you. Not what they have taught you — what they have done. The road changes the one who walks it, quietly, without announcement, in ways only visible when you pause long enough to notice.

You left from Meshech. And now you are here, on this ridge, and Meshech is behind you. You are not the same person who sang that first psalm.

He walked this road. Not as a scholar who studied these psalms. As a pilgrim who sang them. Every year from childhood, the road to Jerusalem, the company of travellers, the songs rising as the city came into view. Dusty feet. A brook by the way. The same words you have been singing. These psalms were his conversation with the Father.

When you sing these psalms, you are not singing toward him. You are singing with him.

The harvest is not yet visible. The seeds are in the ground. The second half of the journey lies ahead, and you are not yet who you will be when Psalm 134 finds you standing in the temple courts with your hands lifted.

But you are here. On this ridge. The breeze on your feet. The brook beside you. Drink. Then lift your head.

The city is closer than it was.

PART TWO

The Second Half of the Road

Psalms 127–134

The House the LORD Builds

Psalm 127

*Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labour in vain.
Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.
It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest,
eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives sleep to his beloved.
Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward.
Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one's youth.
Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them!
He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate.*

PSALM 127 · ESV

WHERE WE ARE

Something unexpected happens at Psalm 127. The pilgrim who has been walking the road — **S**urviving Meshech, being kept by the God who neither slumbers nor sleeps, arriving at Jerusalem, waiting through contempt, escaping the flood, resting in the encircling hills, planting seeds in tears — is suddenly inside. Not in the temple. In a house. Around a table. In the ordinary daily texture of a life with a roof and walls and the smell of bread and the noise of children.

The road has not ended. But the psalm insists on something the ascent has perhaps made it too easy to forget: the domestic is not the lesser reality. The house being built, the city being watched, the sleep of the beloved, the children around the table — these are not resting places before the spiritual work begins. They are part of what the ascent is for.

And yet — the psalm immediately qualifies the domestic with the same note that has run through every psalm in the collection. Not even this can be built without the LORD. Not even home.

This is the seventh of fifteen psalms — the structural centre of the collection. What stands at the centre of the Psalms of Ascent is not a vision of the temple, not a great theological declaration, not

even a prayer. It is a psalm about a house. And about what makes a house something other than vanity.

WHAT THE TEXT OPENS

The psalm's opening word sets everything that follows: *unless*. The Hebrew is '*im-lo*' — unless, if not, except. It is the grammar of contingency applied to the most fundamental human activities. Building. Watching. Waking early. Going late to rest. All of it held in the condition: unless the LORD.

The word for vain here is not the familiar *hebel* of Ecclesiastes — not vapour, not breath. The word is *shav'* — emptiness, worthlessness, even falsehood. It carries a harder edge. This is not merely futile; it is false. And *shav'* is the same word that appears in the Decalogue: you shall not take the name of the LORD your God in *shav'*. Labour that excludes God from its foundation is not simply less effective. It is a kind of lie about the nature of reality.

Then comes the counter-word, devastating in its simplicity: *he gives sleep to his beloved*. Sleep here is *shenah* — genuine unguarded rest. The person whose building is *shav'*, who rises before dawn and goes late to bed eating bread pressed out by anxiety, cannot sleep. The person whose building rests on the LORD can lie down. This is *menuha* — the rest-word we will follow through the rest of the collection — surfacing in its most bodily form.

The word for heritage in the psalm's second movement is *nachalah* — one of the most theologically weighted words in the Hebrew vocabulary. *Nachalah* is covenant-inheritance language. In Deuteronomy and Joshua, it is what the LORD gives Israel — the portion that cannot be earned, only received. The psalm places children in exactly the same category. They are *nachalah* from the LORD. Not the product of human planning. Not an achievement of will or effort or strategy. Given.

This is why children are the proof of the first argument. If you understand that children are gift — that the life you hold in your arms arrived as *nachalah*, not as your own achievement — you understand something about the nature of all gift.

S E L A H

When the cardiac event arrived, it interrupted something. Not dramatically, but with the quiet, non-negotiable authority that only a body speaking in a language you can no longer ignore can produce. It interrupted a pattern of building.

I do not want to overstate this. I was not, by any clinical measure, a person destroyed by anxious striving. I had rested, loved, been loved, worked in ways that felt purposeful. But the hospital bed has a way of clarifying things. What became clear, in the days of stillness that followed, was how much of my energy had been directed toward the wrong kind of building. Not evil building. Not corrupt building. Building that was shav' — empty — not because the materials were wrong but because the foundation had subtly shifted.

The Onesimus Foundation exists because a church in Risdon Vale decided that children who had a parent in prison were themselves victims. Kids Day was not primarily an act of compassion toward the parent, though it was that too. It was an act of mishpat — of justice — toward the child. And so the work began: year by year, with the particular kind of building that requires the LORD or it falls.

What I had forgotten — what the cardiac event returned me to — was that the work was never mine to hold. Nachalah is received, not manufactured. The families who had been kept together across the barrier of incarceration were not the product of my effort. They were gift. I had been receiving gift and slowly, imperceptibly, learning to experience it as my own achievement. And the body, in its abrupt wisdom, called that shav'.

He gives sleep to his beloved. In the weeks of recovery, I slept differently than I had in years. With the quality of sleep that belongs to someone who has been reminded that they are not the one doing the building.

What in your life are you building as if it were yours to achieve — and what would it look like to receive it, instead, as nachalah?

The house the LORD builds does not require you to stay awake all night. The city is kept by the one who made heaven and earth, and he does not close his eyes. You can sleep.

The Ordinary Blessing

Psalm 128

Blessed is everyone who fears the LORD, who walks in his ways!

You shall eat the fruit of the labour of your hands; you shall be blessed, and it shall be well with you.

Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house;

your children will be like olive shoots around your table.

Behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the LORD.

The LORD bless you from Zion! May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life!

May you see your children's children! Peace be upon Israel!

PSALM 128 · ESV

WHERE WE ARE

Psalm 127 left us with a question: whose hands are doing the building? The answer it gave was not abstract. It was bodily — the sleep of the beloved, the child received as *nachalah*, the gate where the family's name is upheld. The theology landed in a kitchen.

Psalm 128 stays in that kitchen. And it does something that is easy to undervalue precisely because it is so unhurried and domestic: it shows us what the life built on the fear of the LORD actually looks like from the inside, on an ordinary day, when nothing dramatic is happening.

There is no crisis in this psalm. No enemy, no flood, no contempt to endure, no depth to cry from. There is a table. There is a vine. There are children. There is bread earned by honest labour and eaten without anxiety. The psalm does not apologise for the smallness of this scene. It calls it blessed.

WHAT THE TEXT OPENS

The psalm opens with *ashrei* — blessed, happy, to be envied. It is the same word that opens the entire Psalter in Psalm 1, and the same word that opened the Beatitudes from Jesus's lips on the mountain. Each time it appears in Scripture it is worth pausing to ask: what does the canon mean by blessed?

Here the answer is immediately covenantal. The blessed person is the one who fears the LORD and walks in his ways. Fear of the LORD — *yirat Adonai* — is not terror. It is the orientation of a life rightly ordered toward God, the posture that recognises who is the builder and who is the one being built.

Then the image that is perhaps the most quietly beautiful in all fifteen psalms: *your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table*. The vine and the olive are not decorative. They are the two most economically significant plants in the ancient Near Eastern world. A fruitful vine within the house is not merely pleasant. It is the sign of genuine flourishing, of life producing life.

The psalm closes, as Psalm 125 closed, with *shalom* upon Israel. But notice what has happened to *shalom* across the journey. In Psalm 120 it was longed for and refused. In Psalm 122 it was prayed. In Psalm 125 it was declared. And now in Psalm 128 it is simply the last word — quiet, unhurried, almost matter-of-fact. This is where *shalom* lives. Not in the dramatic moments only, but in the ordinary ones. At the table. With the children. In the house the LORD built.

S E L A H

I have sat at tables like the one this psalm describes. Not always — the road has had its Meshech seasons, its floods, its long plantings in tears. But I have sat at them. And what strikes me now, reading this psalm from the far side of a cardiac event, is how little I noticed them when I was there.

The cardiac event, among its other clarifications, clarified this. In the days of recovery, when the ordinary rhythms of a life were suspended — the meals, the conversations, the small routines that constitute a household — their absence made their weight visible. What I had been given, and had not quite known I was given, became suddenly legible.

The grandchildren verse lands differently after a cardiac event. May you see your children's children. I had not been certain I would. In the weeks of recovery, our eighth grandchild was born — in the UK, while I was still recovering in Australia. I did not hold her. But I was alive to know she had arrived. Her name was Rebekah — from the Hebrew Rivkah, meaning held fast, secured.

What the Onesimus Foundation has always understood — sometimes more instinctively than theologically — is that the work of maintaining family across incarceration is the work of recovering the ordinary blessing for those from whom it has been taken. Not the dramatic intervention. Not the transformative programme. The table. The visit. The child who gets to sit near the parent, even in a prison visiting room, and know they have not been forgotten.

*What ordinary blessing have you been moving through without registering?
And what would it mean to sit at the table today — whatever table is yours —
and receive it as ashrei?*

They Have Not Prevailed

Psalm 129

“Greatly have they afflicted me from my youth” — let Israel say —

“Greatly have they afflicted me from my youth, yet they have not prevailed against me.

The plowers plowed upon my back; they made their furrows long.”

The LORD is righteous; he has cut the cords of the wicked.

May all who hate Zion be put to shame and turned backward!

*Let them be like the grass on the housetops, which withers before it grows up,
with which the reaper does not fill his hand nor the binder of sheaves his arms,
nor do those who pass by say, “The blessing of the LORD be upon you!”*

PSALM 129 · ESV

WHERE WE ARE

The domestic warmth of Psalm 128 has not prepared us for this. We move from the fruitful vine and the olive shoots around the table to plows driven across a human back, furrows cut long and deep into flesh. The collection does not allow us to stay in the kitchen. The road reasserts itself.

And yet the psalm does not open in despair. It opens in testimony — and testimony of a particular kind. *Greatly have they afflicted me from my youth — let Israel say.* The communal summons is the first thing. Before the affliction is described, the community is called to say it together. What has been endured is not a private wound to be nursed in solitude. It is a shared history to be spoken aloud, owned corporately, narrated in company.

Israel has been afflicted from its beginning. And Israel is still here to say so. That still-here-ness is the psalm’s entire argument.

WHAT THE TEXT OPENS

The psalm's structure is deceptively simple. Two movements: testimony of survival (verses 1–4), then a prayer for judgment against the enemy (verses 5–8). But the weight falls almost entirely on the first movement, and within that movement on a single phrase that carries the whole theological load: *yet they have not prevailed*.

Lo yakhelu li. They have not been able against me. The affliction is not denied — it is named in its full violence. The plowers plowed upon my back. The image is visceral and precise. The back of a human being treated as a field, the furrows cut long and deep. This is not metaphor softening reality. It is metaphor intensifying it.

But then — *yet*. The hinge word. The affliction is real and the affliction has not won. Both things simultaneously true. The theological ground of that insistence is verse 4: *the LORD is righteous; he has cut the cords of the wicked*. The word for righteous here is *tsaddiq* — not righteousness as moral conformity but righteousness as the fidelity of the one who keeps covenant. The furrows were plowed. And then the cords were cut. The sequence matters. The psalm is not promising exemption from suffering. It is declaring that suffering is not the final word.

S E L A H

There is a particular kind of suffering that does not arrive as a single crisis but as a long pattern — the accumulated weight of years in an environment where the values you live by are consistently met with opposition, where the furrows are plowed slowly and the damage is not dramatic enough to name until you look back and see how deep they went.

I have known that kind of suffering in the work. Not the acute crisis — those have their own clarity — but the chronic wearing down of institutions that do not change, systems that grind on, the same families cycling through the same courts and prisons across generations. The plowers are not always malicious — but institutional indifference is not passive. It is relentless. It cuts the same furrows into the same families across generations.

What Psalm 129 offered me — and offers still — is not a strategy for changing the systems. It is something prior to strategy: the insistence on narrating survival. Greatly have they afflicted me from my youth — let Israel say. The communal summons before the theology. The speaking-aloud before the analysis. There is something the community needs to do before it can think clearly about what to do next, and that something is to say together what has been endured and then say the second thing: yet they have not prevailed.

What is the long affliction — the pattern rather than the crisis — that you have been carrying? And have you said it aloud, in company, as testimony rather than complaint?

The psalm does not ask you to minimise what was plowed into you. It asks you to add the second sentence. Greatly have they afflicted me. And then: yet they have not prevailed. Both sentences. In that order.

¹ Dr Vanessa Goodwin's post-doctoral research traced patterns of justice involvement across multiple generations of Tasmanian families, providing empirical evidence for what many working in this field observe intuitively: that contact with the justice system is not primarily an individual phenomenon but a family systems phenomenon. Dr Goodwin later served as Tasmania's Attorney-General and Minister for Corrections. Her research has informed the theological and practical framework of the Onesimus Foundation from its earliest days.

Out of the Depths

Psalm 130

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD!

O Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy!

If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?

But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared.

I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope;

my soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen for the morning,

more than watchmen for the morning.

O Israel, hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love,

and with him is plentiful redemption.

And he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities.

PSALM 130 · ESV

WHERE WE ARE

We have come a long way from Meshech. The pilgrim has survived the road, arrived at Jerusalem, endured contempt, escaped the flood, rested in the encircling hills, planted seeds in tears, built a house, sat at a table, and narrated a long history of affliction that did not prevail. The collection has covered extraordinary ground.

And now, without warning or explanation, the bottom drops out.

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.

No context is given. No cause is named. The psalm opens in the abyss and offers nothing but the cry itself. This is the psalm for the moment when there is nothing to say except: help. When the road, the survival, the table, the testimony — none of it is currently accessible. The psalm's Latin title — *De Profundis* — has given it a life beyond the Psalter. Augustine preached it. Luther called it one of the Pauline psalms, the ones that go deepest into the human condition before the gospel. Bonhoeffer sat with it in prison.

And it sits here, in the Psalms of Ascent, at the opening of the final movement toward Zion. Before the pilgrim arrives at the temple courts, the collection requires this: descent. The *de profundis* is not a setback in the pilgrimage. It is part of the route.

WHAT THE TEXT OPENS

The psalm's opening word in Hebrew is *mimma'amaqqim* — out of the depths, from the deep places. It is the language of Sheol, of the place beneath all places, of the condition in which there is no footing. The psalmist is not at the bottom of a difficult season. They are at the bottom of everything.

And they cry. Even from the depths, the direction of the cry is upward. This is not passive resignation and it is not despair. It is the most concentrated form of prayer available to a person with nothing left: the voice, sent upward, from the place where nothing else can be sent.

The psalm then makes its most surprising theological move. *If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?* The argument is precise. If the relationship between God and the human creature were purely transactional, purely forensic, governed entirely by what is owed and what is deserved — then no one could stand before him. The question *who could stand?* is rhetorical. The answer is: no one.

But — and here is the hinge on which the entire psalm turns — *with you there is forgiveness*. The Hebrew word is *selichah* — pardon, forgiveness, the releasing of what is owed. And then the most counterintuitive clause in the psalm: *that you may be feared*. Forgiveness produces *yirah* — awe, reverence. Grace produces fear, not the other way around. The one who has been forgiven much knows, in a way that the self-sufficient never can, exactly who God is.

The simile that follows is precise and worth inhabiting: *more than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning*. The repetition is not accidental. The watchman on the city wall through the long night — cold, alert, straining for the first grey at the horizon — knows with certainty that morning is coming. But the night is long and the waiting is real and the watching requires everything the watchman has. The psalmist's waiting is like that: certain of the morning, but living through the dark.

SELAH

There is a reason this psalm has been read at bedsides and gravesides for twenty centuries. It does not require explanation or context. It simply opens, and the person who is in the depths recognises where they are, and knows they are not the first person to have been here.

I have sat with people in the depths. Not the depths of theological abstraction but the specific, bodily depths of incarceration, of family fracture, of the accumulated shame that the justice system can carve into a person across years of contact. The person who has been processed by the machinery of justice — who has had their name become a case number, their story become a file, their family become a collateral consequence — knows something about mimma'amaqqim that cannot be learned from the outside.

What selichah does — what the God of Psalm 130 does — is refuse to let the ledger be the last word. Not by pretending the ledger does not exist. But by absorbing what is on it and returning the person to a standing they could not have earned. Who could stand? No one. But with you there is forgiveness. Everyone who receives it.

The movement from personal cry to communal address — O Israel, hope in the LORD — is the movement the cardiac event eventually made possible. The person who has waited through a long night and seen the morning has something to say to those still in the dark. Not advice. Not a programme. Just the watchman's word: I have been at this wall through the night, and I can tell you that the morning comes. Wait for it.

Where are you in the psalm's movement — still in the depths, or in the waiting, or beginning to turn toward the community with the watchman's word?

Out of the depths, the voice goes up. That is enough to begin.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Quiet Soul

Psalm 131

*O LORD, my heart is not lifted up; my eyes are not raised too high;
I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvellous for me.
But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother;
like a weaned child is my soul within me.
O Israel, hope in the LORD from this time forth and forevermore.*

PSALM 131 · ESV

WHERE WE ARE

Psalm 130 left us at the wall. The watchman, cold and alert, straining for the first grey of morning, certain the sun would rise but living through the dark until it did. And at the last, the personal had become pastoral — *O Israel, hope in the LORD* — the one who had waited through the night turning to speak to those still in the dark.

Psalm 131 is what comes after the night watch ends. Not triumph. Not the fanfare of arrival. Something quieter and stranger than either: a soul that has stopped straining. A heart that is not lifted up. Eyes that are not raised too high. And the image the psalmist reaches for — to describe this interior condition that is so difficult to name — is a child who has been weaned, resting against its mother. Not nursing. Not hungry. Not reaching. Simply present, simply held, in the particular quality of rest that belongs to the one who has learned that what they need is already given.

It is three verses long. It may be the most concentrated psalm in the entire collection.

WHAT THE TEXT OPENS

The psalm opens with a triple negative. My heart is not lifted up. My eyes are not raised too high. I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvellous for me. Three renunciations. Three things the psalmist is not doing. And the cumulative weight of them is the portrait of a particular kind of spiritual failure that is rarely named as failure — the failure of the overreaching soul, the

person who cannot rest in what they have been given because they are always pressing toward what lies beyond it.

Against this the psalmist sets the weaned child. And it is worth sitting with the precision of that image, because it is not the nursing child — the child crying for the breast, reaching for what it needs. It is the weaned child. The child who has passed through the crisis of weaning — who has learned, through a process that is not painless, that the hunger will not destroy it, that the need will be met in other ways. This child is not passive. It has arrived somewhere. It rests not from inexperience but from the knowledge that comes on the far side of the wanting.

The communal summons at the close — *O Israel, hope in the LORD from this time forth and forevermore* — is quieter than its counterparts in Psalms 124, 129, and 130. In Psalm 130 the watchman turned to the community with urgent words: the morning is coming, wait for it. In Psalm 131 the turning is quieter. The weaned child simply rests against the mother — and invites Israel to the same posture. Hope in the LORD. Not strive. Not press. Hope. Rest your weight against the one who holds you.

S E L A H

This is the psalm I did not know I needed until the cardiac event made it available.

I had spent a long ministry occupied with things too great for me. Not wrongly — the work was real, the calling was genuine, the things that needed doing needed doing. But there is a way of doing necessary work that is gabah — that lifts the heart above its station, that takes on the weight of outcomes that were never in human hands to secure, that cannot distinguish between faithful effort and anxious control. I had not known, until the body intervened, how much of what I carried was the latter dressed as the former.

The weaning is the right image for what the cardiac event accomplished. It was not gentle. Weaning is not gentle. There is a period of protest, of reaching for what is no longer available in the old way, of genuine loss. The loss of a certain kind of energy. The loss of the pace that had felt like faithfulness. But what the weaning revealed — what I could not have seen without it — was that the weight I had been carrying was not mine to carry.

There is a misreading of this psalm that needs to be named. The weaned child's rest is not distance. It is not the peace of the person who has retreated from the complexity to a safe place where the outcomes no longer press. The weaned child is still in the room — still present, still fully alive to what is happening around it. What it has laid down is not the engagement but the illusion that the engagement is what secures the holding. This is not a retreat from mishpat. It is mishpat without the messiah complex — the fierce, quiet tenacity of the person who stays because the staying matters, not because the staying will resolve everything.

What are you still occupying yourself with that is too great and too marvellous for you? And what would it mean to lay it down — not as defeat, but as the weaned child lays down the reaching, having learned that the holding does not depend on the grasping?

The Place Where God Rests

Psalm 132

*Remember, O LORD, in David's favour, all the hardships he endured,
how he swore to the LORD and vowed to the Mighty One of Jacob,
"I will not enter my house or get into my bed,
I will not give sleep to my eyes or slumber to my eyelids,
until I find a place for the LORD, a dwelling place for the Mighty One of Jacob."
For the LORD has chosen Zion; he has desired it for his dwelling place:
"This is my resting place forever; here I will dwell, for I have desired it.
I will abundantly bless her provisions; I will satisfy her poor with bread."*

PSALM 132 · ESV (SELECTED VERSES)

WHERE WE ARE

The collection has been moving toward this psalm for a long time. Since Psalm 120 the pilgrim has been walking toward a place — away from Meshech, toward Jerusalem, toward the house where God dwells. Every psalm in the collection has been oriented by that destination, even when it was not named.

And now, in Psalm 132, the LORD himself speaks and names the place he has chosen.

This is my resting place forever; here I will dwell, for I have desired it.

The Hebrew word is *menuha* — rest, resting place, the place of settled dwelling. We have been following this word through the collection since the sleep of the beloved in Psalm 127, since the weaned child of Psalm 131. Now it arrives at its source. The rest that the beloved receives, the rest that the quieted soul inhabits — these are participations in the rest of God himself.

This is the theological centre of the entire Psalms of Ascent. Not the midway structural centre — that was Psalm 127 with its domestic wisdom. But the theological load-bearing point of the whole collection: the declaration that God himself has a resting place, that he has desired it, and that Zion is where he has chosen to dwell.

WHAT THE TEXT OPENS

The psalm opens not with God but with David — and with David's oath. Before the LORD speaks his own desire, the psalm narrates the human longing that preceded it: David's vow to find a dwelling place for the LORD, his refusal to enter his own house or sleep in his own bed until he had secured the place where God would rest. The contrast is deliberate and theologically rich. David subordinates his own *menuha* to the LORD's *menuha*. And the LORD responds not only by accepting the dwelling place David prepared but by swearing his own oath in return — covenant for covenant, vow for vow.

The word *menuha* in verse 14 carries the full weight of everything the word has gathered across the Psalms of Ascent and across the canon. *Menuha* is where the journey ends. In Genesis, God rested on the seventh day — not from exhaustion but as the completion of creative work, the settling into what has been made. The consequences of the LORD's resting at Zion unfold in the psalm's closing verses with a generosity that takes the breath away. The poor are satisfied with bread. The priests are clothed with salvation. The saints shout for joy. These are the natural overflow of God's settled presence among his people.

And then the Christological thread that has been running beneath the surface of the whole collection breaks through with unmistakable clarity. John's Gospel opens with the declaration that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us — the Greek word is *eskênôsen*, tabernacled, the tent of meeting made permanent in a human body. The *menuha* the LORD declared at Zion is the *menuha* that Jesus embodies. The resting place of God is no longer a building on a hill. It is a person.

SELAH

This is my resting place forever; here I will dwell, for I have desired it.

I have returned to this verse more times than I can count across the years of the work. Not as a proof text. As a grounding declaration. The work of maintaining family relationships across incarceration is not, at its roots, a social programme or a ministry strategy or even a theological conviction. It is a response to the fact that the LORD has a menuha — a place where he has chosen to dwell — and that the poor are satisfied with bread there, and that the community gathered around that menuha is called to be the place where what God desires becomes visible.

I have seen this. Not theoretically. In specific rooms, on specific days, with specific families. The visiting room of a prison is not an obvious candidate for the resting place of God. It has fluorescent lighting and plastic chairs. And yet — I have been in that room when something was present that I could not account for by the furniture or the programme or the goodwill of the people involved. Something settled. Something that had the character of menuha.

One image has stayed with me longer than most. We ran a homework programme in the prison — bringing children in with their schoolwork and educational games, creating a space where a father and child could simply do life together. One boy and his father came regularly. They did the homework. And then they played Concentration — the card-matching game, the one that requires nothing but attention and memory and the willingness to sit still long enough to see what is hidden. When the father was released, one of the first things he did was send his son down to the shop to buy a pack of playing cards. To carry what the prison had given them into the free world. The menuha formed in the visiting room was real enough to travel.

Where have you seen the menuha of God — the settled, desired presence of the LORD — in the places you least expected it? And what would it mean to recognise those places not as occasions for God's presence but as his chosen dwelling?

How Good and Pleasant

Psalm 133

*Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!
 It is like the precious oil on the head, running down on the beard,
 on the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes!
 It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion!
 For there the LORD has commanded the blessing, life forevermore.*

PSALM 133 · ESV

WHERE WE ARE

After the grandeur of Psalm 132 — the double oath, the covenant sworn to David, the LORD declaring his eternal resting place — Psalm 133 arrives with the simplicity of an exclamation. Behold. Look at this. See what is in front of you.

What is in front of the pilgrim, finally arrived at Zion, is not a theological system or a liturgical programme. It is people. Brothers — the Hebrew *achim*, which carries the full warmth of kinship — dwelling together in unity. After the long road from Meshech, after the keeping and the contempt and the flood and the depths and the weaning, the collection turns its eyes on the gathered community and says: this. This is what the journey was for. Not the destination alone. The people who arrived together.

WHAT THE TEXT OPENS

The word *yachad* — unity, togetherness, being-as-one — is the psalm's theological centre. *Yachad* in Hebrew carries more than agreement or cooperation. It names a quality of shared life in which the boundaries between persons do not disappear but the persons are genuinely, organically connected. It is not uniformity. It is the particular richness that comes when genuinely different people are genuinely held together.

The first image — the precious oil on Aaron's head — is deliberately excessive. The anointing oil ran down his beard and onto the collar of his robes. The psalm takes this image and does not tidy it

up. The oil does not stop at a theologically appropriate point. It keeps running. Down the beard, down to the collar, saturating everything it touches.

The second image — the dew of Hermon falling on the mountains of Zion — is geographically impossible and theologically precise. Hermon is in the far north, the snow-capped peak whose dew and melt-water feed the Jordan. Zion is in the south, a limestone hill that receives very little dew. Hermon's dew does not fall on Zion. The geography is wrong. But that is precisely the point. The psalm is not making a meteorological claim. It is saying that the abundance of one place becomes the refreshment of another. And the mechanism of that migration is *yachad*.

The psalm's final line closes the theological circuit: *for there the LORD has commanded the blessing, life forevermore*. The word *there* — *sham* — is doing enormous work. There, in the place of *yachad*. There, where the oil runs and the dew falls. Not in the individual, however devout. Not in the institution, however ancient. In the *yachad* — the living togetherness of those who have made the ascent and arrived at the same place.

S E L A H

I have spent a ministry trying to create the conditions for yachad in places where unity seemed impossible. Not the unity of agreement — that has never been the goal and was never realistic. The unity of yachad: the particular, organic togetherness of people who have genuinely different histories and genuinely different positions who are nonetheless held together by something that runs deeper than their differences.

Early in my ministry at Risdon Vale — the church that neighbours the prison — I was able to arrange for prisoners to join us occasionally for Sunday services. One elderly man came regularly. He had been sentenced for a serious offence, and yet he found in that congregation something he had not expected: acceptance, a place where he was received rather than processed. Around the same time a family began attending. The husband was a Federal Police Officer. He had used his access to find details of the prisoner's offence, and he was struggling — genuinely struggling — to sit in the same room as someone who had done what this man had done.

I met with them. I listened. I understood. And I told him what my dream for that church was: a place where a policeman and a prisoner could sit together, where a correctional officer and the person they had once supervised could be in fellowship. Not because the offence didn't matter. But because the room had to be large enough for both of them, or it wasn't large enough for the gospel. I helped the family find another church.

It was a loss. I knew it was a loss when it happened. There were Sundays after they left when the empty chairs were simply empty. But the room had to stay open. The dream had to stay larger than the comfort. Subsequently, correctional officers and prisoners came into fellowship together in that room. The yachad I had dreamed of, filling the room I had kept open for it.

Where is the yachad in your life — the unity that is not manufactured but commanded, not convenient but organic? And where have you seen the oil run further than you expected, saturating things you did not plan for the blessing to reach?

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Last Word of the Road

Psalm 134

*Come, bless the LORD, all you servants of the LORD,
who stand in the house of the LORD by night!
Lift up your hands to the holy place and bless the LORD!
May the LORD bless you from Zion, he who made heaven and earth!*

PSALM 134 · ESV

WHERE WE ARE

he road is over.

T Fifteen psalms. One journey. From Meshech to the temple courts, from exile to arrival, from the deceitful tongues of people who chose war to the lifted hands of people who have chosen blessing. The ascent is complete.

It is worth pausing before we enter the text to feel what has been travelled. The pilgrim who sang *woe to me, that I sojourn in Meshech* is now standing in the house of the LORD. The feet that set out from the far country are standing where they were always meant to stand. The *shalom* that was longed for and refused in Psalm 120, prayed in Psalm 122, declared in Psalm 125, received quietly at the table in Psalm 128 — it is here now.

And the psalm that marks this arrival does not linger. It does not describe the temple or narrate the moment of entering or offer a theology of what has been accomplished. It simply turns — immediately, almost urgently — to what the arrival calls for. *Come, bless the LORD*. The ascent ends not in contemplation but in blessing. Not in the pilgrim receiving, but in the pilgrim giving. The last gesture of the journey is the lifted hand.

WHAT THE TEXT OPENS

The word bless here is *barak* — the same word that has been present throughout the collection, the word that carries the weight of covenant favour flowing in both directions between God and his

people. Now, at the collection's end, *barak* flows upward — from the servants to the LORD. The people bless God.

Can the creature bless the Creator? What does it mean for a human being to bless the one who needs nothing, lacks nothing, is diminished by nothing? The most honest answer is that human blessing of God is the acknowledgment of who he is — the overflow of a heart that has received so much that it must give something back, even knowing the giving adds nothing to the one who receives it. *Barak* directed toward God is the creature's response to the Creator's prior generosity.

The posture is specific: *lift up your hands to the holy place*. The raised hands of ancient worship — open, empty, upward — are the physical expression of *barak*. Not clenched fists grasping what has been accumulated. Not folded hands in private devotion. Open hands, raised, toward the place where the LORD dwells. The gesture that says: I have nothing to offer except this — the open hands that received everything, returned now in the direction from which everything came.

And then — in the psalm's final verse, in the collection's final verse — the blessing turns. *May the LORD bless you from Zion, he who made heaven and earth*. The servants blessed the LORD. The LORD blesses the servants. *Barak* flows upward and then flows back down. And it comes from the one who made heaven and earth — the title that has run through the collection since Psalm 121, since *my help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth*. The keeper of the pilgrim on the road is the same one who blesses the pilgrim at the journey's end. The road and the arrival have the same author.

The Christological thread surfaces here with quiet power. Luke 24 records that on the day of the resurrection, Jesus led his disciples out to Bethany — and lifted his hands and blessed them. And while he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven. The last thing the disciples saw was the lifted hands. Jesus enacted Psalm 134 at his ascension. The servants standing in the house of the LORD by night received the blessing of the lifted hands. And then he was gone. And they returned to Jerusalem with great joy.

SELAH

I did not come to these psalms fresh. They were already part of the regular rhythm of my reading — the daily movement through the Psalter that has shaped my mornings for more years than I can easily count. But in the weeks of recovery, moving through them in the ordinary course of that reading, I stumbled into Psalm 120 and stopped. Not because it was unfamiliar. Because it was, suddenly, precisely familiar in a way it had not been before. Meshech. The deceitful tongues. The reaching for shalom and the meeting of war. And the psalm did not so much teach me something new as give voice to something I had been living without adequate words for. That is what the best texts do. They do not inform us of what we did not know. They name what we already knew but could not say.

I have arrived. Not at the end of the work — the work continues, the road continues, the families who need the nachalah of their relationships restored are still there, the system is still grinding, the children are still carrying what was never theirs to carry. The ascent does not dissolve the world that was left behind in Meshech. It changes the one who walks it.

That is what I have discovered in these fifteen psalms. The journey does not fix the circumstances. It forms the pilgrim. The person who arrives at Psalm 134 with lifted hands is not the same person who cried woe to me in Psalm 120. Not because the suffering has been resolved or the exile has ended or the system has changed. But because something has been learned on the road that could not have been learned any other way. The keeping is real. The menuha is real. The yachad is real. The barak that flows between creature and Creator — upward in lifted hands, downward from Zion — is real.

The cardiac event was my Meshech. Not only my Meshech — the work had been Meshech in its own way for years, the accumulated weariness of a system that does not change as fast as the families need it to. But the cardiac event was where the psalm found me. Where I discovered that I was a gur — a resident alien — in my own assumptions about my own strength and the durability of my own effort. And where the road began.

May the LORD bless you from Zion, he who made heaven and earth. That blessing is not mine to give. I am not the source of it. I am, at best, one of the servants standing in the house by night — keeping the flame burning in the hours when the pilgrims are resting, watching for the morning, lifting whatever I have to offer in the direction from which everything came.

Lift up your hands.

The road has been good. The keeper has been faithful.

*The city was closer than it seemed from Meshech,
and the journey was worth every step.*

Shalom upon Israel.

The Journey Continues

he road does not end.

That is perhaps the most important thing the Psalms of Ascent have to say, and it is easy to miss because collections of writing tend toward conclusions — the sense that something has been resolved, that the reader can close the cover and rest. But the pilgrims who sang these fifteen psalms did not sing them once. Three times a year, every year, the same road. The same songs. Passover, Pentecost, Tabernacles — three times the bands of travellers formed on the roads converging toward Jerusalem, three times the dust rose, three times the voices found Psalm 120 and began again. *In my distress I called to the LORD*. Not once. Repeatedly. Because Meshech keeps happening.

The collection was never designed to be walked once and finished. It was designed for a community that needed to locate itself — again, and again, and again — on the same road, with the same songs, discovering each time that the psalms already knew where they were.

Writing this book has done something to me that I did not entirely anticipate. I came to these psalms in the aftermath of the cardiac event, needing to know where I was and where the road was going. What I discovered was that the psalms were not simply a map for that particular season. They were a grammar — a way of reading any season, any road, any moment of disorientation. The process of sitting with each psalm long enough to write about it meant sitting with it long enough to be changed by it. That is not the same thing as studying it. Study can be kept at a careful distance. What these psalms required was something closer to what the pilgrims themselves brought to the road: the willingness to let the song do its work on you while you walk.

I need to say something honest about the people I work alongside, and what they have taught me.

In Tasmania, approximately five out of ten people who are released from prison reoffend within two years. That statistic is not an indictment of the people it describes. It is a description of how hard the road is — how deeply the patterns run, how relentlessly the circumstances press, how insufficient individual willpower is against the accumulated weight of what a life has built up around itself.

I have watched people I care about walk back through the gate. I have sat with families who have been through this more than once. And somewhere in those years of sitting with them, I arrived at something I had not expected: the recognition that I am not really any different from the people I

work with. The scale of the mistakes may differ. The consequences may differ. But the propensity — the deep, stubborn human tendency to repeat the patterns that entrap us, to find ourselves back in the same Meshech we thought we had left, reaching again for shalom and meeting again the war we thought was behind us — that is not theirs alone. It is mine. It is everyone's.

Self-will is important. But it is never enough. What the Psalms of Ascent understand — and what the people I journey alongside have taught me in embodied form — is that the road was never designed to be walked alone.

Change requires community. A community journeying together, honest enough to name where they actually are, courageous enough to keep walking when the road is harder than expected, and held together by songs that belong to everyone equally — not to the one with the best theology or the cleanest record or the most years of faithful walking, but to every voice willing to lift itself on the road.

Life is messy. The psalms know this. They do not begin in the temple courts and work backward. They begin in Meshech — in the specific, grinding, undeniable mess of where people actually are — and they walk forward from there, without pretending the mess was not real. The flood is real. The furrows plowed upon the back are real. The depths are real. The seeds planted in tears are real.

And the road is also real. The keeping is real. The mercy is real. The *menuha* — the rest of God, breaking through into a prison visiting room, into a game of Concentration played over a plastic table, into the birth of an eighth grandchild while her grandfather recovered on the far side of the world — that is real too.

Both things simultaneously true. That is the grammar the psalms teach. Not resolution but honest, tenacious, communal hope.

So the journey continues. Three times a year the pilgrims formed on the roads and found Psalm 120 and began again. Not because they had failed the first time. But because the road is long and the songs are for walking, and a community that only sings once is not yet a community — it is an audience. What makes it a community is the return.

If you have walked these fifteen psalms and found yourself at Psalm 134 with your hands lifted — take a breath. Rest in the blessing that flows from Zion, from the one who made heaven and earth.

And then, when the next season comes — when Meshech appears again in whatever form it takes, when the voices for war drown out your reaching for shalom, when the flood rises or the furrows

deepen or the depths close over you — find your companions. Take up the songs. Set your feet on the road.

The psalms will already be there, knowing the road you are on, waiting for your voice to join them. The LORD who keeps your going out and your coming in — from this time forth and forevermore — will be keeping it still.

Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth.

These reflections did not begin with artificial intelligence. They began with years of ministry, reading, prayer, suffering, and conversation.

During the development of this manuscript, AI became a conversation partner. It challenged assumptions, tested arguments, suggested structures, and helped refine expression. Many of the words that follow emerged through that dialogue.

The experiences, convictions, interpretations, and conclusions remain my own.

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