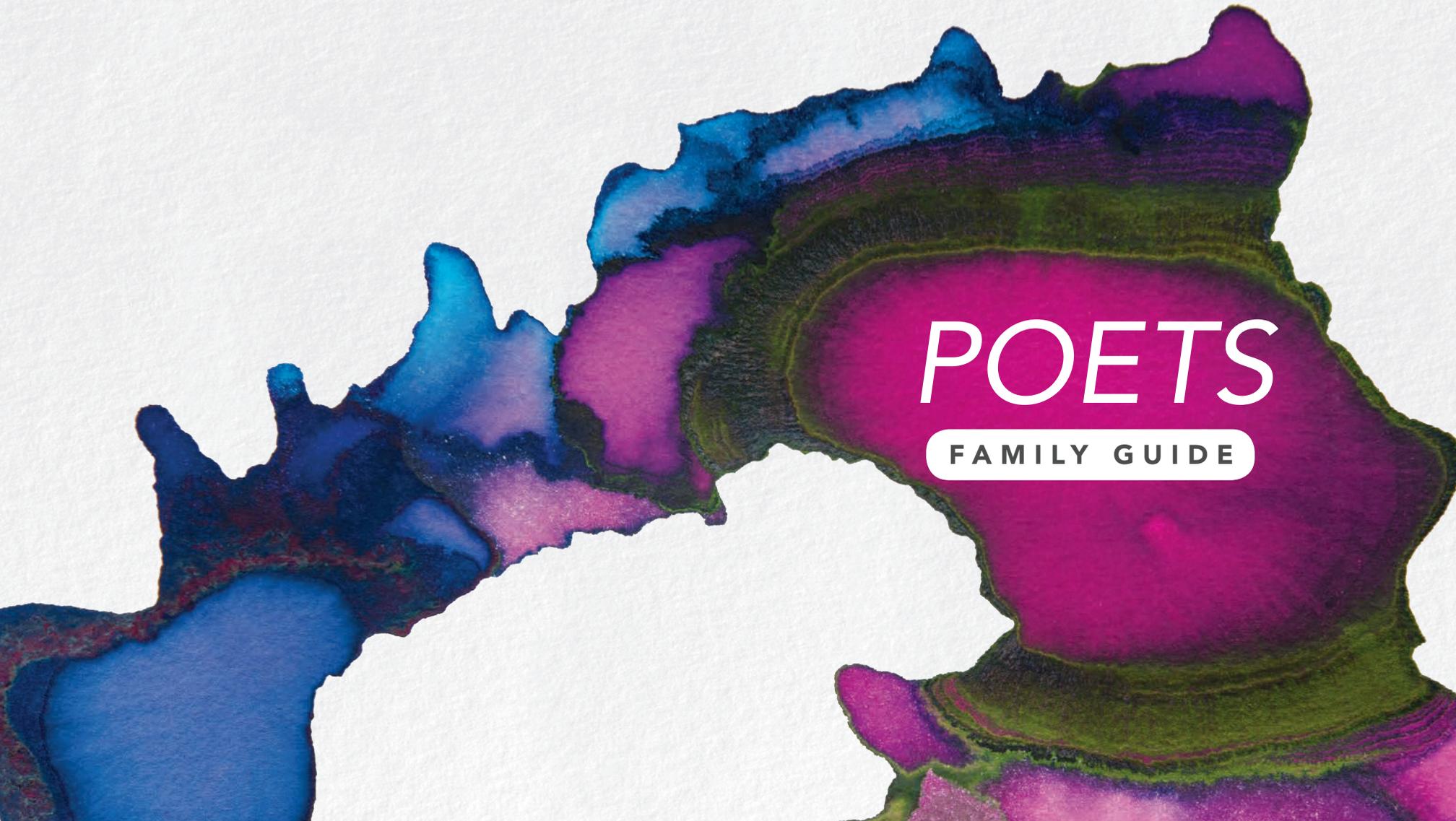


I M M E R S E

The Bible Reading Experience™



POETS

FAMILY GUIDE

*Almighty God,
Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
grant, we pray,
that we might be grounded and settled
in your truth
by the coming of your Holy Spirit
into our hearts.*

*What we do not know,
reveal to us;
what is lacking within us,
make complete;
that which we do know,
confirm in us;
and keep us blameless in your service,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

Amen.

Immerse: Poets Family Guide copyright © 2018 by Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. All rights reserved.

Features and Bible helps copyright © 2018 by the Institute for Bible Reading. All rights reserved.

Cover design by Company Bell. Illustrations copyright © Rachael Van Dyke. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible*, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

TYNDALE, *New Living Translation*, *NLT*, and the New Living Translation logo are registered trademarks of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

Immerse, *Immerse: The Reading Bible*, and *Immerse: The Bible Reading Experience* are trademarks of the Institute for Bible Reading.

—— Welcome to ——

I M M E R S E

The Bible Reading Experience

Leading a family is arguably one of the most challenging tasks a person can undertake. And since families are the core unit in the church, their growth and development directly impacts the health of the communities where they serve. The *Immerse: Poets Family Reading Guide* is a resource designed to assist parents, guardians, and other family leaders to guide their families in the transformative Immerse experience.

Planning Your Family Experience

This family guide is essentially an abridged version of *Immerse: Poets*. So it's an excellent way for young readers in your family to participate in the Immerse experience without becoming overwhelmed. The readings are shorter than the readings in *Immerse: Poets* and are always drawn from within a single day's reading. This helps everyone in the family to stay together, whether reading from the family guide or the complete *Poets* volume.

Each daily Bible reading in the family guide is introduced by a short paragraph to orient young readers to what they are about to read. This paragraph will also help to connect the individual daily Scripture passages to the big story revealed in the whole Bible. (This is an excellent tool for helping you guide your family discussions.)

The family guide readings end with a feature called Talking Together, created especially for young readers. These provide reflective statements and questions to help them think more deeply about the Scriptures they have read. (Talking Together is also useful for guiding your family discussions.)

The readings in the family guide are intended primarily for children in grades 4 to 8. Older children may be better suited for reading the full text of *Immerse: Poets*. (These age suggestions are only provided as a guideline. You know what is most appropriate for your children.)

Sometimes the best way to get everyone on the same page is to read something together aloud. If your family enjoys reading aloud together on a regular basis, that may be the most natural way for you to use the family reading guide. For families that haven't tried this, you may want to experiment with it by reading from this guide. Begin each daily reading with the introductory paragraph to give context, followed immediately by the daily Scripture passage. Then the Talking Together feature can help you lead a family discussion.

And don't forget about the audio and video resources available at ImmerseBible.com. These small group tools could be just what your family needs to stay engaged in the Immerse experience.

Enjoy your journey into Scripture with your family. We hope and pray that this family resource will help you and your family to experience God's word together.

DAY 1

Keeping It Real

(from *Poets*, pages A9-A10, 3)

As the Jewish people assembled their Scriptures over time, they included another group of books that they called the Writings. . . .

The sages and scribes who wrote and gathered the Writings provided stories, songs, and wise words to God’s people to keep them closely tethered to their ancient identity and calling. The unique stories and historical records of the Writings can be found in the *Chronicles* volume. The poetical books from the Writings are collected here in *Poets*.

The first books in this volume (Psalms, Lamentations, and Song of Songs) are collections of song lyrics. These song collections . . . are closely tied to Israel’s life and history, expressing the agony of their trials and the joy of their celebrations. . . .

These Hebrew songs are primarily expressed through parallel lines of Hebrew poetry. Most Hebrew poetry is written in groupings of parallel lines (usually two lines, though sometimes three). These lines work together in various ways, often using rich metaphors and other poetic features, to state and then revisit their points. Second and third lines can reinforce, extend, deepen, or even talk back to the opening statements.

The final books in this collection (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job) come from Israel’s wisdom tradition. These books share customary features with the wisdom writing of the ancient Near Eastern cultures, but they have the invaluable advantage of seeing life from within the context of a covenant relationship with God. They proclaim that “fear of the LORD”—Yahweh, Israel’s covenant God—“is the foundation of true knowledge.”

These wisdom books explore the workings of life in God’s good but fractured world. Their core premise is that the Creator has embedded

his wisdom into his creation, and they invite people to find and then follow that good way of life. Wisdom books commend the path of “wisdom” or “righteousness,” asserting that the God who created the world is the one who can best instruct us on how to live and flourish within it. . . .

It is a tremendous gift to us that the Bible is not just a collection of lectures about God. These books of songs and wisdom literature add depth, color, and texture to the biblical narrative. Through the use of beautiful lyric poetry and striking imagery, they help us fully realize that God’s truth is truth for us in our lives today. They invite us to see all the struggles, triumphs, and complications of our own lives within the bigger story of God’s ongoing work to bring flourishing life and peace to the world he created.

PSALM 1

Oh, the joys of those who do not
follow the advice of the wicked,
or stand around with sinners,
or join in with mockers.

But they delight in the law of the LORD,
meditating on it day and night.
They are like trees planted along the riverbank,
bearing fruit each season.
Their leaves never wither,
and they prosper in all they do.

But not the wicked!
They are like worthless chaff, scattered by the wind.
They will be condemned at the time of judgment.
Sinners will have no place among the godly.
For the LORD watches over the path of the godly,
but the path of the wicked leads to destruction.

—from the first book of *Psalms*

TALKING TOGETHER:

The ancient people of Israel, like all of us, had to learn that God’s revelation to them was not merely a theory but divine truth for all of the kinds of situations that humans encounter in the world. God’s story with us includes everything that happens, from painful tragedies to times of

deep and tremendous joy and gratitude. The songs and wisdom of the biblical poets make sure that we keep it real in our relationship with God. Do you find it hard or easy to talk to God about everything in your life—the good as well as the hard and challenging?

DAY 2

In Light of All That Is, Who Are We?

(from *Poets*, pages 8, 13)

What does it mean to be human? What did God have in mind for us when he made us in the first place? These two psalms reflect on the core questions of our identity. What is our role in the world? What kind of people does God want us to be?



PSALM 8

For the choir director: A psalm of David, to be accompanied by a stringed instrument.

O LORD, our Lord, your majestic name fills the earth!
 Your glory is higher than the heavens.
 You have taught children and infants
 to tell of your strength,
 silencing your enemies
 and all who oppose you.

When I look at the night sky and see the work of your fingers—
 the moon and the stars you set in place—
 what are mere mortals that you should think about them,
 human beings that you should care for them?
 Yet you made them only a little lower than God
 and crowned them with glory and honor.
 You gave them charge of everything you made,
 putting all things under their authority—
 the flocks and the herds
 and all the wild animals,
 the birds in the sky, the fish in the sea,
 and everything that swims the ocean currents.

O LORD, our Lord, your majestic name fills the earth!

PSALM 15

A psalm of David.

Who may worship in your sanctuary, LORD?
 Who may enter your presence on your holy hill?
 Those who lead blameless lives and do what is right,
 speaking the truth from sincere hearts.
 Those who refuse to gossip
 or harm their neighbors
 or speak evil of their friends.
 Those who despise flagrant sinners,
 and honor the faithful followers of the LORD,
 and keep their promises even when it hurts.
 Those who lend money without charging interest,
 and who cannot be bribed to lie about the innocent.
 Such people will stand firm forever.

—*from the first book of Psalms*

TALKING TOGETHER:

These two ancient worship songs of Israel are built on piercing questions: Look at everything! How can humans be significant given the vastness and grandeur of the universe? And then: What does God want from us? What does he want us to do? The way to get at the deepest truths is to ask the deepest questions. What does Psalm 8 tell us about our fundamental role in the world? What does Psalm 15 tell us about how we're supposed to live out that role?

DAY 3

The God Who Hears, the God Who Saves

(from *Poets*, pages 21-23)

A great number of the Psalms are about people crying out to God for help in the midst of very dire situations. Here in Psalm 22, one of the many psalms of David in this collection, we can listen in as David describes his plight in painful detail. One of the key things we learn from

Israel's ancient songbook is that we can be completely honest with God. We don't have to worry about whether he can take it when we tell him the truth about where we are and how we feel.



PSALM 22

For the choir director: A psalm of David, to be sung to the tune "Doe of the Dawn."

My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?
 Why are you so far away when I groan for help?
 Every day I call to you, my God, but you do not answer.
 Every night I lift my voice, but I find no relief.

Yet you are holy,
 enthroned on the praises of Israel.
 Our ancestors trusted in you,
 and you rescued them.
 They cried out to you and were saved.
 They trusted in you and were never disgraced.

But I am a worm and not a man.
 I am scorned and despised by all!
 Everyone who sees me mocks me.
 They sneer and shake their heads, saying,
 "Is this the one who relies on the LORD?
 Then let the LORD save him!
 If the LORD loves him so much,
 let the LORD rescue him!"

Yet you brought me safely from my mother's womb
 and led me to trust you at my mother's breast.
 I was thrust into your arms at my birth.
 You have been my God from the moment I was born.

Do not stay so far from me,
 for trouble is near,
 and no one else can help me.
 My enemies surround me like a herd of bulls;
 fierce bulls of Bashan have hemmed me in!
 Like lions they open their jaws against me,
 roaring and tearing into their prey.
 My life is poured out like water,
 and all my bones are out of joint.
 My heart is like wax,
 melting within me.

My strength has dried up like sunbaked clay.
 My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth.
 You have laid me in the dust and left me for dead.
 My enemies surround me like a pack of dogs;
 an evil gang closes in on me.
 They have pierced my hands and feet.
 I can count all my bones.
 My enemies stare at me and gloat.
 They divide my garments among themselves
 and throw dice for my clothing.

O LORD, do not stay far away!
 You are my strength; come quickly to my aid!
 Save me from the sword;
 spare my precious life from these dogs.
 Snatch me from the lion's jaws
 and from the horns of these wild oxen.

I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters.
 I will praise you among your assembled people.
 Praise the LORD, all you who fear him!
 Honor him, all you descendants of Jacob!
 Show him reverence, all you descendants of Israel!
 For he has not ignored or belittled the suffering of the
 needy.
 He has not turned his back on them,
 but has listened to their cries for help.

I will praise you in the great assembly.
 I will fulfill my vows in the presence of those who worship you.
 The poor will eat and be satisfied.
 All who seek the LORD will praise him.
 Their hearts will rejoice with everlasting joy.
 The whole earth will acknowledge the LORD and return to him.
 All the families of the nations will bow down before him.
 For royal power belongs to the LORD.
 He rules all the nations.

Let the rich of the earth feast and worship.
 Bow before him, all who are mortal,
 all whose lives will end as dust.
 Our children will also serve him.
 Future generations will hear about the wonders of the
 Lord.

His righteous acts will be told to those not yet born.
They will hear about everything he has done.

—*from the first book of Psalms*

TALKING TOGETHER:

Psalm 22 is an amazing combination of both deep despair and deep trust. It gives voice to David's bleak honesty about the pain and danger he is in. And yet David also reminds himself that God has shown up to help his people in the past. He knows God can and will do this again for him. Perhaps this is why Jesus himself quotes this psalm when he is in agony while dying on the cross. The immediate feeling of being abandoned by God really can be united with a deeper, abiding trust in God and his faithfulness to us.

What do the last few stanzas of this song teach us about how and why we can trust God to save us?

DAY 4

A Unique Kind of Power

(from *Poets*, pages 32-33)

The starting point for understanding the entire story of the Bible is to acknowledge that God is the world's Creator. Everything else flows from this basic claim: Our world belongs to God, and he loves what he has made. He gave us the freedom to go our own way if we want to—and we have—but we can't stop God's plans for the world from finally coming true. Psalm 33 helps us understand what follows from this essential foundation to our story with God.



PSALM 33

Let the godly sing for joy to the LORD;
it is fitting for the pure to praise him.
Praise the LORD with melodies on the lyre;
make music for him on the ten-stringed harp.
Sing a new song of praise to him;
play skillfully on the harp, and sing with joy.

For the word of the LORD holds true,
and we can trust everything he does.
He loves whatever is just and good;
the unfailing love of the LORD fills the earth.

The LORD merely spoke,
and the heavens were created.
He breathed the word,
and all the stars were born.
He assigned the sea its boundaries
and locked the oceans in vast reservoirs.
Let the whole world fear the LORD,
and let everyone stand in awe of him.
For when he spoke, the world began!
It appeared at his command.

The LORD frustrates the plans of the nations
and thwarts all their schemes.
But the LORD's plans stand firm forever;
his intentions can never be shaken.

What joy for the nation whose God is the LORD,
whose people he has chosen as his inheritance.

The LORD looks down from heaven
and sees the whole human race.
From his throne he observes
all who live on the earth.
He made their hearts,
so he understands everything they do.
The best-equipped army cannot save a king,
nor is great strength enough to save a warrior.
Don't count on your warhorse to give you
victory—
for all its strength, it cannot save you.

But the LORD watches over those who fear him,
those who rely on his unfailing love.
He rescues them from death
and keeps them alive in times of famine.

We put our hope in the LORD.
He is our help and our shield.
In him our hearts rejoice,
for we trust in his holy name.

Let your unfailing love surround us, LORD,
for our hope is in you alone.

—*from the first book of Psalms*

TALKING TOGETHER:

God created our world through his great power and love. He wants the world to be a certain kind of place—filled with justice and goodness. What does this mean for us and our view of the world? What does this mean for how we relate to God?

DAY 5

How This Story Ends

(from *Poets*, pages 37-40)

The Bible is very aware of the fact that life is often unfair. Those who love God and follow his ways of living can still suffer greatly. In fact, they can and do get hurt or taken advantage of by those who ignore God and live only for themselves. But things are not always what they seem! Time and truth walk hand in hand, and the final reality will show things for what they really are. God will judge, heal, and restore everything. Psalm 37 is a song about where this story of ours is going.



PSALM 37

A psalm of David.

Don't worry about the wicked
or envy those who do wrong.
For like grass, they soon fade away.
Like spring flowers, they soon wither.

Trust in the LORD and do good.
Then you will live safely in the land and prosper.
Take delight in the LORD,
and he will give you your heart's desires.

Commit everything you do to the LORD.
Trust him, and he will help you.

He will make your innocence radiate like the dawn,
and the justice of your cause will shine like the noonday sun.

Be still in the presence of the LORD,
and wait patiently for him to act.
Don't worry about evil people who prosper
or fret about their wicked schemes.

Stop being angry!
Turn from your rage!
Do not lose your temper—
it only leads to harm.
For the wicked will be destroyed,
but those who trust in the LORD will possess the land.

Soon the wicked will disappear.
Though you look for them, they will be gone.
The lowly will possess the land
and will live in peace and prosperity.

The wicked plot against the godly;
they snarl at them in defiance.
But the Lord just laughs,
for he sees their day of judgment coming.

The wicked draw their swords
and string their bows
to kill the poor and the oppressed,
to slaughter those who do right.
But their swords will stab their own hearts,
and their bows will be broken.

It is better to be godly and have little
than to be evil and rich.
For the strength of the wicked will be shattered,
but the LORD takes care of the godly.

Day by day the LORD takes care of the innocent,
and they will receive an inheritance that lasts forever.
They will not be disgraced in hard times;
even in famine they will have more than enough.

But the wicked will die.
The LORD's enemies are like flowers in a field—
they will disappear like smoke.

The wicked borrow and never repay,
 but the godly are generous givers.
 Those the LORD blesses will possess the land,
 but those he curses will die.

The LORD directs the steps of the godly.
 He delights in every detail of their lives.
 Though they stumble, they will never fall,
 for the LORD holds them by the hand.

Once I was young, and now I am old.
 Yet I have never seen the godly abandoned
 or their children begging for bread.
 The godly always give generous loans to others,
 and their children are a blessing.

Turn from evil and do good,
 and you will live in the land forever.
 For the LORD loves justice,
 and he will never abandon the godly.

He will keep them safe forever,
 but the children of the wicked will die.
 The godly will possess the land
 and will live there forever.

The godly offer good counsel;
 they teach right from wrong.
 They have made God's law their own,
 so they will never slip from his path.

The wicked wait in ambush for the godly,
 looking for an excuse to kill them.
 But the LORD will not let the wicked succeed
 or let the godly be condemned when they are put on trial.

Put your hope in the LORD.
 Travel steadily along his path.
 He will honor you by giving you the land.
 You will see the wicked destroyed.

I have seen wicked and ruthless people
 flourishing like a tree in its native soil.
 But when I looked again, they were gone!
 Though I searched for them, I could not find them!

Look at those who are honest and good,
 for a wonderful future awaits those who love peace.
 But the rebellious will be destroyed;
 they have no future.

The LORD rescues the godly;
 he is their fortress in times of trouble.
 The LORD helps them,
 rescuing them from the wicked.
 He saves them,
 and they find shelter in him.

—*from the first book of Psalms*

TALKING TOGETHER:

In Psalm 37 we have a strong, clear word about God's promised future. But in the meantime, seeing and living under injustice is hard. The losses and the devastation are real. We see evil prosper for long seasons. People get hurt. What injustices in our world bother you the most? Do you get angry or deeply upset about them? How can we balance our rightful strong reactions to what's wrong in our world with the peace that comes from trusting God to make things right?

DAY 6

The Hardest Things

(from *Poets*, pages 167-170)

In 587 BC, the city of Jerusalem was attacked and overrun by the Babylonian armies. The great Temple of Solomon was destroyed, and most of the people of Israel were either killed or taken captive. Just a few poor stragglers were left behind in the rubble. It was an event that shook the people of God to their core. Had God abandoned them? Was their part in God's story over?

The book of Lamentations is a collection of five powerful songs of great sadness and lament. Most of these songs are acrostics, meaning that their stanzas—the main parts—begin with the twenty-two consecutive letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Perhaps only such an orderly

structure can hold the sorrow, doubt, and despair together long enough to be offered to God as a desperate prayer.



Jerusalem, once so full of people,
is now deserted.
She who was once great among the nations
now sits alone like a widow.
Once the queen of all the earth,
she is now a slave.
She sobs through the night;
tears stream down her cheeks.
Among all her lovers,
there is no one left to comfort her.
All her friends have betrayed her
and become her enemies.
Judah has been led away into captivity,
oppressed with cruel slavery.
She lives among foreign nations
and has no place of rest.
Her enemies have chased her down,
and she has nowhere to turn.
The roads to Jerusalem are in mourning,
for crowds no longer come to celebrate the festivals.
The city gates are silent,
her priests groan,
her young women are crying—
how bitter is her fate!
Her oppressors have become her masters,
and her enemies prosper,
for the LORD has punished Jerusalem
for her many sins.
Her children have been captured
and taken away to distant lands.
All the majesty of beautiful Jerusalem
has been stripped away.
Her princes are like starving deer
searching for pasture.
They are too weak to run
from the pursuing enemy.

In the midst of her sadness and wandering,
Jerusalem remembers her ancient splendor.
But now she has fallen to her enemy,
and there is no one to help her.
Her enemy struck her down
and laughed as she fell.

Jerusalem has sinned greatly,
so she has been tossed away like a filthy rag.
All who once honored her now despise her,
for they have seen her stripped naked and humiliated.
All she can do is groan
and hide her face.

She defiled herself with immorality
and gave no thought to her future.
Now she lies in the gutter
with no one to lift her out.
“LORD, see my misery,” she cries.
“The enemy has triumphed.”

The enemy has plundered her completely,
taking every precious thing she owns.
She has seen foreigners violate her sacred Temple,
the place the LORD had forbidden them to enter.

Her people groan as they search for bread.
They have sold their treasures for food to stay alive.
“O LORD, look,” she mourns,
“and see how I am despised.”

“Does it mean nothing to you, all you who pass by?
Look around and see if there is any suffering like mine,
which the LORD brought on me
when he erupted in fierce anger.

“He has sent fire from heaven that burns in my bones.
He has placed a trap in my path and turned me back.
He has left me devastated,
racked with sickness all day long.

“He wove my sins into ropes
to hitch me to a yoke of captivity.
The Lord sapped my strength and turned me over to my enemies;
I am helpless in their hands.

“The Lord has treated my mighty men
with contempt.
At his command a great army has come
to crush my young warriors.
The Lord has trampled his beloved city
like grapes are trampled in a winepress.

“For all these things I weep;
tears flow down my cheeks.
No one is here to comfort me;
any who might encourage me are far away.
My children have no future,
for the enemy has conquered us.”

Jerusalem reaches out for help,
but no one comforts her.
Regarding his people Israel,
the LORD has said,
“Let their neighbors be their enemies!
Let them be thrown away like a filthy rag!”

“The LORD is right,” Jerusalem says,
“for I rebelled against him.
Listen, people everywhere;
look upon my anguish and despair,
for my sons and daughters
have been taken captive to distant
lands.

“I begged my allies for help,
but they betrayed me.
My priests and leaders
starved to death in the city,
even as they searched for food
to save their lives.

“LORD, see my anguish!
My heart is broken
and my soul despairs,
for I have rebelled against you.
In the streets the sword kills,
and at home there is only death.

“Others heard my groans,
but no one turned to comfort me.

When my enemies heard about my troubles,
they were happy to see what you had done.
Oh, bring the day you promised,
when they will suffer as I have suffered.

“Look at all their evil deeds, LORD.
Punish them,
as you have punished me
for all my sins.
My groans are many,
and I am sick at heart.”

—*the first song of Lamentations*

TALKING TOGETHER:

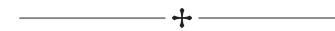
We need these words of pain and unimaginable suffering in our Bible—words that we choke on and can barely speak. This confirms that the Scriptures are willing to confront the most difficult realities that we know. Our life with God has to be honest. There are times when we are driven to question God, to express our very real doubts and challenges to him directly. Talk about the kinds of suffering God’s people go through all around the world. Talk about the hardest things you or your own family have faced. Have you been able to take these things directly to God?

DAY 7

Pain, but Even Deeper Hope

(from *Poets*, pages 173-177)

All five songs of Lamentations are expressions of serious sadness and pain. But deep in the heart of Lamentations, the seed of something new is planted. Right in the middle of the third and central song, we find words of hope and renewal. Even in the face of utter loss and complete destruction, God’s people know that he is still God. These words let us know that we aren’t abandoned forever. God will return to us and show us his mercy and unfailing love.



I am the one who has seen the afflictions
that come from the rod of the LORD’s anger.

He has led me into darkness,
 shutting out all light.
 He has turned his hand against me
 again and again, all day long.

He has made my skin and flesh grow old.
 He has broken my bones.
 He has besieged and surrounded me
 with anguish and distress.
 He has buried me in a dark place,
 like those long dead.

He has walled me in, and I cannot escape.
 He has bound me in heavy chains.
 And though I cry and shout,
 he has shut out my prayers.
 He has blocked my way with a high stone wall;
 he has made my road crooked.

He has hidden like a bear or a lion,
 waiting to attack me.
 He has dragged me off the path and torn me in
 pieces,
 leaving me helpless and devastated.
 He has drawn his bow
 and made me the target for his arrows.

He shot his arrows
 deep into my heart.
 My own people laugh at me.
 All day long they sing their mocking songs.
 He has filled me with bitterness
 and given me a bitter cup of sorrow to drink.

He has made me chew on gravel.
 He has rolled me in the dust.
 Peace has been stripped away,
 and I have forgotten what prosperity is.
 I cry out, "My splendor is gone!
 Everything I had hoped for from the LORD is lost!"

The thought of my suffering and homelessness
 is bitter beyond words.
 I will never forget this awful time,
 as I grieve over my loss.

Yet I still dare to hope
 when I remember this:

The faithful love of the LORD never ends!
 His mercies never cease.
 Great is his faithfulness;
 his mercies begin afresh each morning.
 I say to myself, "The LORD is my inheritance;
 therefore, I will hope in him!"

The LORD is good to those who depend on him,
 to those who search for him.
 So it is good to wait quietly
 for salvation from the LORD.
 And it is good for people to submit at an early age
 to the yoke of his discipline:

Let them sit alone in silence
 beneath the LORD's demands.
 Let them lie face down in the dust,
 for there may be hope at last.
 Let them turn the other cheek to those who strike them
 and accept the insults of their enemies.

For no one is abandoned
 by the Lord forever.
 Though he brings grief, he also shows compassion
 because of the greatness of his unfailing love.
 For he does not enjoy hurting people
 or causing them sorrow.

If people crush underfoot
 all the prisoners of the land,
 if they deprive others of their rights
 in defiance of the Most High,
 if they twist justice in the courts—
 doesn't the Lord see all these things?

Who can command things to happen
 without the Lord's permission?
 Does not the Most High
 send both calamity and good?
 Then why should we, mere humans, complain
 when we are punished for our sins?

Instead, let us test and examine our ways.

Let us turn back to the LORD.

Let us lift our hearts and hands
to God in heaven and say,

“We have sinned and rebelled,
and you have not forgiven us.

“You have engulfed us with your anger, chased us down,
and slaughtered us without mercy.

You have hidden yourself in a cloud
so our prayers cannot reach you.

You have discarded us as refuse and garbage
among the nations.

“All our enemies
have spoken out against us.

We are filled with fear,
for we are trapped, devastated, and ruined.”

Tears stream from my eyes
because of the destruction of my people!

My tears flow endlessly;
they will not stop
until the LORD looks down
from heaven and sees.

My heart is breaking
over the fate of all the women of Jerusalem.

My enemies, whom I have never harmed,
hunted me down like a bird.

They threw me into a pit
and dropped stones on me.

The water rose over my head,
and I cried out, “This is the end!”

But I called on your name, LORD,
from deep within the pit.

You heard me when I cried, “Listen to my
pleading!

Hear my cry for help!”

Yes, you came when I called;
you told me, “Do not fear.”

Lord, you have come to my defense;
you have redeemed my life.

You have seen the wrong they have done to me, LORD.

Be my judge, and prove me right.

You have seen the vengeful plots
my enemies have laid against me.

LORD, you have heard the vile names they call me.

You know all about the plans they have made.

My enemies whisper and mutter
as they plot against me all day long.

Look at them! Whether they sit or stand,
I am the object of their mocking songs.

Pay them back, LORD,
for all the evil they have done.

Give them hard and stubborn hearts,
and then let your curse fall on them!

Chase them down in your anger,
destroying them beneath the LORD’s
heavens.

—*the third song of Lamentations*

TALKING TOGETHER:

The hardest time to hang on to our trust in God is when life’s circumstances overwhelm us with despair. These times might be short, or they might last a long time. The real question is whether we will hold on to God’s promise that even when things are darkest, he is with us. He doesn’t abandon us. Have you ever asked God to show you his compassion? Have you appealed to him to give you a sign of his faithfulness when things are hard? Have you ever had to pray to God through your tears?

DAY 8

The Lord of all the Earth

(from *Poets*, pages 49-51)

Sometimes it seems that the best word to describe events in the world is chaos. Politics creates confusion. Violence and war create fear. Natural

disasters shake the earth itself. Everything seems unstable. We don't know what will happen next, and it feels like anything could happen. In such times, the thing to do is return to the basics. What do we always know is true? Whom can we always count on?



PSALM 46

For the choir director: A song of the descendants of Korah, to be sung by soprano voices.

God is our refuge and strength,
always ready to help in times of trouble.
So we will not fear when earthquakes come
and the mountains crumble into the sea.
Let the oceans roar and foam.
Let the mountains tremble as the waters
surge!

Interlude

A river brings joy to the city of our God,
the sacred home of the Most High.
God dwells in that city; it cannot be destroyed.
From the very break of day, God will protect it.
The nations are in chaos,
and their kingdoms crumble!
God's voice thunders,
and the earth melts!
The LORD of Heaven's Armies is here among us;
the God of Israel is our fortress.

Interlude

Come, see the glorious works of the LORD:
See how he brings destruction upon the
world.
He causes wars to end throughout the earth.
He breaks the bow and snaps the spear;
he burns the shields with fire.

“Be still, and know that I am God!
I will be honored by every nation.
I will be honored throughout the world.”

The LORD of Heaven's Armies is here among us;
the God of Israel is our fortress.

Interlude

PSALM 48

A song. A psalm of the descendants of Korah.

How great is the LORD,
how deserving of praise,
in the city of our God,
which sits on his holy mountain!
It is high and magnificent;
the whole earth rejoices to see it!
Mount Zion, the holy mountain,
is the city of the great King!
God himself is in Jerusalem's towers,
revealing himself as its defender.

The kings of the earth joined forces
and advanced against the city.
But when they saw it, they were stunned;
they were terrified and ran away.
They were gripped with terror
and writhed in pain like a woman in labor.
You destroyed them like the mighty ships of
Tarshish
shattered by a powerful east wind.

We had heard of the city's glory,
but now we have seen it ourselves—
the city of the LORD of Heaven's Armies.
It is the city of our God;
he will make it safe forever.

Interlude

O God, we meditate on your unfailing love
as we worship in your Temple.
As your name deserves, O God,
you will be praised to the ends of the earth.
Your strong right hand is filled with victory.
Let the people on Mount Zion rejoice.
Let all the towns of Judah be glad
because of your justice.

Go, inspect the city of Jerusalem.
Walk around and count the many towers.
Take note of the fortified walls,
and tour all the citadels,
that you may describe them
to future generations.

For that is what God is like.
 He is our God forever and ever,
 and he will guide us until we die.

—*from the second book of Psalms*

TALKING TOGETHER:

At the heart of the Bible's story is the claim that God is battling against the chaos in the world. A great rebellion has come into God's creation, and he is working to overcome it. In ancient times he chose the nation of Israel—the family of Abraham—to be the people he would start with. He established them as a nation and gave them land. God made his home in Jerusalem, living right among his people. This was all a sign that he would one day reclaim the entire earth as his, and bring his presence back to the world.

In Jesus, this is all becoming reality. Jesus reigns as Lord of all the earth, and the Good News about his victory continues to spread to all people. Say a prayer of thanksgiving and praise to God for how he is working to heal and restore all things. He is the world's Great King!

DAY 9

LORD, Don't Forget Me!

(from *Poets*, pages 57-59)

God is not only the God of great things. He is also the God of small things, and he cares for us personally. He made each one of us, and he loves each one of us. One of the most beautiful things about God is that even though he is a great and majestic God, the Creator of all things, he is also a personal God filled with concern for his people. Yes, even for you and for me.



PSALM 55

For the choir director: A psalm of David, to be accompanied by stringed instruments.

Listen to my prayer, O God.
 Do not ignore my cry for help!

Please listen and answer me,
 for I am overwhelmed by my troubles.
 My enemies shout at me,
 making loud and wicked threats.
 They bring trouble on me
 and angrily hunt me down.

My heart pounds in my chest.
 The terror of death assaults me.
 Fear and trembling overwhelm me,
 and I can't stop shaking.
 Oh, that I had wings like a dove;
 then I would fly away and rest!
 I would fly far away
 to the quiet of the wilderness.

How quickly I would escape—
 far from this wild storm of hatred.
 Confuse them, Lord, and frustrate their plans,
 for I see violence and conflict in the city.
 Its walls are patrolled day and night against invaders,
 but the real danger is wickedness within the city.
 Everything is falling apart;
 threats and cheating are rampant in the
 streets.

It is not an enemy who taunts me—
 I could bear that.
 It is not my foes who so arrogantly insult me—
 I could have hidden from them.
 Instead, it is you—my equal,
 my companion and close friend.
 What good fellowship we once enjoyed
 as we walked together to the house of God.

Let death stalk my enemies;
 let the grave swallow them alive,
 for evil makes its home within them.

But I will call on God,
 and the LORD will rescue me.
 Morning, noon, and night
 I cry out in my distress,
 and the LORD hears my voice.
 He ransoms me and keeps me safe

Interlude

from the battle waged against me,
 though many still oppose me.
 God, who has ruled forever,
 will hear me and humble them.
 For my enemies refuse to change their ways;
 they do not fear God.

Interlude

As for my companion, he betrayed his friends;
 he broke his promises.
 His words are as smooth as butter,
 but in his heart is war.
 His words are as soothing as lotion,
 but underneath are daggers!

Give your burdens to the LORD,
 and he will take care of you.
 He will not permit the godly to slip and fall.

But you, O God, will send the wicked
 down to the pit of destruction.
 Murderers and liars will die young,
 but I am trusting you to save me.

—*from the second book of Psalms*

TALKING TOGETHER:

Because God is the great Ruler of all the earth, we know he has the power to help us. Because God knows each one of us, we can have confidence that he listens to our individual prayers for help. When we need him, he hears us. He's not too busy with all the big things going on in the world. So when you want to run away from all your troubles, run instead to God himself. Tell him everything you need and everything you feel. He wants to hear from you.

DAY 10

Of Rulers and Justice

(from *Poets*, pages 76-77)

The leaders and rulers of the nations obviously have enormous influence in the world. They have the power to help or hurt many people. God built the world to be organized and run by people with different kinds and levels of authority. Psalm 72 is a prayer for such leaders. Their role in the world under God is to use their authority to work for justice, to serve and protect the life of the world. God wants people to thrive and live well, and so he wants the leaders of his world to love what God himself loves.



PSALM 72

A psalm of Solomon.

Give your love of justice to the king, O God,
 and righteousness to the king's son.
 Help him judge your people in the right way;
 let the poor always be treated fairly.
 May the mountains yield prosperity for all,
 and may the hills be fruitful.
 Help him to defend the poor,
 to rescue the children of the needy,
 and to crush their oppressors.
 May they fear you as long as the sun shines,
 as long as the moon remains in the sky.
 Yes, forever!

May the king's rule be refreshing like spring rain on freshly cut grass,
 like the showers that water the earth.

May all the godly flourish during his reign.

May there be abundant prosperity until the moon is no more.

May he reign from sea to sea,

and from the Euphrates River to the ends of the earth.

Desert nomads will bow before him;

his enemies will fall before him in the dust.

The western kings of Tarshish and other distant lands
 will bring him tribute.

The eastern kings of Sheba and Seba
will bring him gifts.

All kings will bow before him,
and all nations will serve him.

He will rescue the poor when they cry to him;
he will help the oppressed, who have no one to defend them.

He feels pity for the weak and the needy,
and he will rescue them.

He will redeem them from oppression and violence,
for their lives are precious to him.

Long live the king!

May the gold of Sheba be given to him.

May the people always pray for him
and bless him all day long.

May there be abundant grain throughout the land,
flourishing even on the hilltops.

May the fruit trees flourish like the trees of Lebanon,
and may the people thrive like grass in a field.

May the king's name endure forever;
may it continue as long as the sun shines.

May all nations be blessed through him
and bring him praise.

Praise the LORD God, the God of Israel,
who alone does such wonderful things.

Praise his glorious name forever!

Let the whole earth be filled with his glory.
Amen and amen!

—*from the second book of Psalms*

TALKING TOGETHER:

So often we see our leaders failing to live up to their responsibilities under God. They end up serving themselves and not the greater good. A regular part of our prayers should be asking God to give our leaders a heart for justice and righteousness—doing what's right for other people. We are used to seeing and hearing people pray for their own needs, and God wants us to do that. But it's important for us to also remember to pray for our leaders and all the leaders of the peoples of the world. The lives of so many depend on it!

DAY 11

Entering the Joy of Love

(from *Poets*, pages 184-187)

Almost all cultures have a treasury of love songs that people draw upon to declare their love to one another. The cultures of the Middle East, including that of ancient Israel, are no exception. Song of Songs is a collection of these poetic lyrics celebrating the gift of human love. One of the features of traditional Hebrew culture is that brides and grooms are often portrayed as queens and kings. This reminds us of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, appointed to be rulers of the new world God had created. The poetry in these love songs draws on rich images of nature to symbolize the beauty of the human body. The resulting celebration of this couple in love reflects the joy that God himself has for his creatures.

————— † —————

How beautiful you are, my darling,
how beautiful!
Your eyes are like doves.

You are so handsome, my love,
pleasing beyond words!
The soft grass is our bed;
fragrant cedar branches are the beams of our house,
and pleasant smelling firs are the rafters. . . .

+

Ah, I hear my lover coming!
He is leaping over the mountains,
bounding over the hills.
My lover is like a swift gazelle
or a young stag.
Look, there he is behind the wall,
looking through the window,
peering into the room.

My lover said to me,
“Rise up, my darling!
Come away with me, my fair one!

Look, the winter is past,
 and the rains are over and gone.
 The flowers are springing up,
 the season of singing birds has come,
 and the cooing of turtledoves fills the air.
 The fig trees are forming young fruit,
 and the fragrant grapevines are blossoming.
 Rise up, my darling!
 Come away with me, my fair one!”

My dove is hiding behind the rocks,
 behind an outcrop on the cliff.
 Let me see your face;
 let me hear your voice.
 For your voice is pleasant,
 and your face is lovely.

Catch all the foxes,
 those little foxes,
 before they ruin the vineyard of love,
 for the grapevines are blossoming!

My lover is mine, and I am his.
 He browses among the lilies.
 Before the dawn breezes blow
 and the night shadows flee,
 return to me, my love, like a gazelle
 or a young stag on the rugged mountains. . . .

+

Who is this sweeping in from the wilderness
 like a cloud of smoke?
 Who is it, fragrant with myrrh and frankincense
 and every kind of spice?
 Look, it is Solomon’s carriage,
 surrounded by sixty heroic men,
 the best of Israel’s soldiers.
 They are all skilled swordsmen,
 experienced warriors.
 Each wears a sword on his thigh,
 ready to defend the king against an attack in the
 night.

King Solomon’s carriage is built
 of wood imported from Lebanon.
 Its posts are silver,
 its canopy gold;
 its cushions are purple.
 It was decorated with love
 by the young women of Jerusalem.

Come out to see King Solomon,
 young women of Jerusalem.
 He wears the crown his mother gave him on his wedding day,
 his most joyous day.

—*from the Song of Songs*

TALKING TOGETHER:

One crucial aspect of the biblical story is the fact that God made the world to be physical, and this is part of its goodness. Human beings share in this physical nature, so that is part of our own goodness. God delights in the physical creation he made, so it is appropriate for us to also share this joy. Being spiritual is not about rejecting physical things but helping them to find their God-given purpose.

In the past, some Christians have wrongly taught that physical things are bad just because they are physical. What are some things we can do to show God we are grateful for his physical creation and that we appreciate its beauty? How can we guard against misusing physical things just for our own pleasure?

DAY 12

The Great Power of Love

(from *Poets*, pages 189-191, 193)

Song of Songs continues celebrating human love in the next poem, this time focusing on how both the man and the woman see beauty in each other. The descriptions are exotic, built on detailed comparisons with many different elements of nature. The point of all this is to teach us the power of love. God has built this power into his creation, and he meant for it to be used for good.



Make this promise, O women of Jerusalem—
 If you find my lover,
 tell him I am weak with love.

+

Why is your lover better than all others,
 O woman of rare beauty?
 What makes your lover so special
 that we must promise this?

My lover is dark and dazzling,
 better than ten thousand
 others!

His head is finest gold,
 his wavy hair is black as a raven.

His eyes sparkle like doves
 beside springs of water;
 they are set like jewels
 washed in milk.

His cheeks are like gardens of spices
 giving off fragrance.

His lips are like lilies,
 perfumed with myrrh.

His arms are like rounded bars of gold,
 set with beryl.

His body is like bright ivory,
 glowing with lapis lazuli.

His legs are like marble pillars
 set in sockets of finest gold.

His posture is stately,
 like the noble cedars of Lebanon.

His mouth is sweetness itself;
 he is desirable in every way.

Such, O women of Jerusalem,
 is my lover, my friend.

+

Where has your lover gone,
 O woman of rare beauty?

Which way did he turn
 so we can help you find him?

My lover has gone down to his garden,
 to his spice beds,
 to browse in the gardens
 and gather the lilies.

I am my lover's, and my lover is mine.
 He browses among the lilies.

You are beautiful, my darling,
 like the lovely city of Tirzah.
 Yes, as beautiful as Jerusalem,
 as majestic as an army with billowing banners.

Turn your eyes away,
 for they overpower me.

Your hair falls in waves,
 like a flock of goats winding down the slopes of Gilead.

Your teeth are as white as sheep
 that are freshly washed.

Your smile is flawless,
 each tooth matched with its twin.

Your cheeks are like rosy pomegranates
 behind your veil.

Even among sixty queens
 and eighty concubines
 and countless young women,

I would still choose my dove, my perfect one—
 the favorite of her mother,
 dearly loved by the one who bore her.

The young women see her and praise her;
 even queens and royal concubines sing her praises:

“Who is this, arising like the dawn,
 as fair as the moon,
 as bright as the sun,
 as majestic as an army with billowing banners?” . . .

+

Who is this sweeping in from the desert,
 leaning on her lover?

I aroused you under the apple tree,
 where your mother gave you birth,
 where in great pain she delivered you.
 Place me like a seal over your heart,
 like a seal on your arm.
 For love is as strong as death,
 its jealousy as enduring as the grave.
 Love flashes like fire,
 the brightest kind of flame.
 Many waters cannot quench love,
 nor can rivers drown it.
 If a man tried to buy love
 with all his wealth,
 his offer would be utterly scorned.

—*from the Song of Songs*

TALKING TOGETHER:

Sometimes physical things are used wrongly, or even abused. This is true of human bodies, too. But Song of Songs helps us enter into and appreciate how to truly rejoice in human love. How can we continue to enjoy the good things of God's creation while making sure we don't use them wrongly? How is powerful human love similar to our relationship with God? Do you think it can point us to God himself?

DAY 13

We Are in Great Trouble!

(from *Poets*, pages 79-80)

There are times when we face our own individual troubles. These trials should drive us to God, because he cares about each one of us. But there are also times when the people of God together face tremendous hardships. Sometimes whole communities are put to great tests when the forces of evil are against them. Ancient Israel faced times like this, and when that happened, they turned to God together as one people. Israel knew this was a punishment for their own disobedience to God, yet they cried out him so the disaster would not last forever.



PSALM 74

A psalm of Asaph.

O God, why have you rejected us so long?
 Why is your anger so intense against the sheep of your own pasture?
 Remember that we are the people you chose long ago,
 the tribe you redeemed as your own special possession!
 And remember Jerusalem, your home here on earth.
 Walk through the awful ruins of the city;
 see how the enemy has destroyed your sanctuary.

There your enemies shouted their victorious battle cries;
 there they set up their battle standards.
 They swung their axes
 like woodcutters in a forest.
 With axes and picks,
 they smashed the carved paneling.
 They burned your sanctuary to the ground.
 They defiled the place that bears your name.
 Then they thought, "Let's destroy everything!"
 So they burned down all the places where God was worshiped.

We no longer see your miraculous signs.
 All the prophets are gone,
 and no one can tell us when it will end.
 How long, O God, will you allow our enemies to insult you?
 Will you let them dishonor your name forever?
 Why do you hold back your strong right hand?
 Unleash your powerful fist and destroy them.

You, O God, are my king from ages past,
 bringing salvation to the earth.
 You split the sea by your strength
 and smashed the heads of the sea monsters.
 You crushed the heads of Leviathan
 and let the desert animals eat him.
 You caused the springs and streams to gush forth,
 and you dried up rivers that never run dry.
 Both day and night belong to you;
 you made the starlight and the sun.
 You set the boundaries of the earth,
 and you made both summer and winter.

See how these enemies insult you, LORD.
 A foolish nation has dishonored your name.
 Don't let these wild beasts destroy your turtledoves.
 Don't forget your suffering people forever.

Remember your covenant promises,
 for the land is full of darkness and violence!
 Don't let the downtrodden be humiliated again.
 Instead, let the poor and needy praise your name.

Arise, O God, and defend your cause.
 Remember how these fools insult you all day long.
 Don't overlook what your enemies have said
 or their growing uproar.

—*from the third book of Psalms*

TALKING TOGETHER:

One of the ongoing questions in the biblical story is how God will deal with his chosen people when they go wrong. He chose them in the first place so that they could be part of his plan to bring life to the world. So he has to correct them when they get off track and lose their sense of purpose. But he can't punish them forever, because his bigger purpose still stands. He wants to work with his people to bring light to all peoples. This tension is one of the biggest issues the entire Bible struggles with.

Talk about why it matters if God is faithful to his covenant promises. What would happen if he just gave up on human beings?

DAY 14

What God Wants from Us

(from *Poets*, pages 90-91)

God loves his world and his people. He is working to save us. As a part of this, he is working to bring us back into a right relationship with him. Being rightly related to God includes being the kind of people he wants in the world and following the path he shows us. Psalm 81 tells us God is looking for people who are loyal to him and don't turn away to worship other gods. Psalm 82 tells us God expects leaders to follow God's own heart for those who are poor and helpless.



PSALM 81

For the choir director: A psalm of Asaph, to be accompanied by a stringed instrument.

Sing praises to God, our strength.
 Sing to the God of Jacob.
 Sing! Beat the tambourine.
 Play the sweet lyre and the harp.
 Blow the ram's horn at new moon,
 and again at full moon to call a festival!
 For this is required by the decrees of Israel;
 it is a regulation of the God of Jacob.
 He made it a law for Israel
 when he attacked Egypt to set us free.

I heard an unknown voice say,
 "Now I will take the load from your shoulders;
 I will free your hands from their heavy tasks.
 You cried to me in trouble, and I saved you;
 I answered out of the thundercloud
 and tested your faith when there was no water
 at Meribah.

Interlude

"Listen to me, O my people, while I give you stern warnings.
 O Israel, if you would only listen to me!
 You must never have a foreign god;
 you must not bow down before a false god.
 For it was I, the LORD your God,
 who rescued you from the land of Egypt.
 Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it with good things.

"But no, my people wouldn't listen.
 Israel did not want me around.
 So I let them follow their own stubborn desires,
 living according to their own ideas.
 Oh, that my people would listen to me!
 Oh, that Israel would follow me, walking in my paths!
 How quickly I would then subdue their enemies!
 How soon my hands would be upon their foes!
 Those who hate the LORD would cringe before him;
 they would be doomed forever.
 But I would feed you with the finest wheat.
 I would satisfy you with wild honey from the rock."

PSALM 82*A psalm of Asaph.*

God presides over heaven's court;
 he pronounces judgment on the heavenly beings:
 "How long will you hand down unjust decisions
 by favoring the wicked?"

Interlude

"Give justice to the poor and the orphan;
 uphold the rights of the oppressed and the destitute.
 Rescue the poor and helpless;
 deliver them from the grasp of evil people.
 But these oppressors know nothing;
 they are so ignorant!
 They wander about in darkness,
 while the whole world is shaken to the core.
 I say, 'You are gods;
 you are all children of the Most High.
 But you will die like mere mortals
 and fall like every other ruler.'"

Rise up, O God, and judge the earth,
 for all the nations belong to you.

*—from the third book of Psalms***TALKING TOGETHER:**

Gathering with God's people and praising him, worshiping him, and praying to him are good and right things to do. But God is looking for more. Just as in Israel's time, God is looking for a people who show allegiance to him by doing what he wants.

In our world today, the temptation to worship a false god—or idol—is often about trusting in things like money, power, or politics to save us. Some people give all their time and attention to themselves, trying to look the best they can or have the perfect body without thinking or caring much about other people who really need help. What false gods do you see people serving today? Why are these things so tempting for us? What do you think God is going to do about this modern kind of worship of false gods?

DAY 15**When God Makes His Home with Us***(from Poets, pages 92-94)*

What will it look like when all is right between God and humans? What happens when we joyfully live within his Temple and worship God well? Psalms 84 and 85 give us a vision of just such a scenario. We remember that Israel's Temple was filled with images and representations of God's whole creation (the sea, sky, garden plants and trees, etc.). This tells us it was meant to be a symbol of the entire universe. God's presence filled the Temple, making it his home. So traveling up to Jerusalem to worship God in the Temple was a preview of what the entire world would one day be.

**PSALM 84**

For the choir director: A psalm of the descendants of Korah, to be accompanied by a stringed instrument.

How lovely is your dwelling place,
 O LORD of Heaven's Armies.
 I long, yes, I faint with longing
 to enter the courts of the LORD.
 With my whole being, body and soul,
 I will shout joyfully to the living God.
 Even the sparrow finds a home,
 and the swallow builds her nest and raises her young
 at a place near your altar,
 O LORD of Heaven's Armies, my King and my God!
 What joy for those who can live in your house,
 always singing your praises.

Interlude

What joy for those whose strength comes from the LORD,
 who have set their minds on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem.
 When they walk through the Valley of Weeping,
 it will become a place of refreshing springs.
 The autumn rains will clothe it with blessings.
 They will continue to grow stronger,
 and each of them will appear before God in
 Jerusalem.

O LORD God of Heaven's Armies, hear my prayer.
Listen, O God of Jacob.

O God, look with favor upon the king, our shield!
Show favor to the one you have anointed.

A single day in your courts
is better than a thousand anywhere else!
I would rather be a gatekeeper in the house of my God
than live the good life in the homes of the wicked.
For the LORD God is our sun and our shield.
He gives us grace and glory.
The LORD will withhold no good thing
from those who do what is right.
O LORD of Heaven's Armies,
what joy for those who trust in you.

PSALM 85

For the choir director: A psalm of the descendants of Korah.

LORD, you poured out blessings on your land!
You restored the fortunes of Israel.
You forgave the guilt of your people—
yes, you covered all their sins.
You held back your fury.
You kept back your blazing anger.

Now restore us again, O God of our salvation.
Put aside your anger against us once more.
Will you be angry with us always?
Will you prolong your wrath to all generations?
Won't you revive us again,
so your people can rejoice in you?
Show us your unfailing love, O LORD,
and grant us your salvation.

I listen carefully to what God the LORD is saying,
for he speaks peace to his faithful people.
But let them not return to their foolish ways.
Surely his salvation is near to those who fear him,
so our land will be filled with his glory.

Unfailing love and truth have met together.
Righteousness and peace have kissed!

Interlude

Interlude

Truth springs up from the earth,
and righteousness smiles down from heaven.
Yes, the LORD pours down his blessings.
Our land will yield its bountiful harvest.
Righteousness goes as a herald before him,
preparing the way for his steps.

—from the third book of Psalms

TALKING TOGETHER:

What is your best dream—not just for yourself but for the whole world? What would this life and this place be like if nothing went wrong and everything was set right? Imagine people everywhere listening to God and following his ways. Imagine all those who are helpless—the sick, the poor, the forgotten—being protected by God himself. Imagine living in peace and knowing you are always safe. We haven't seen it yet, but we can pray that God will quickly complete his work of repairing this world. We can tell him we long to see love and truth meet together on the earth.

DAY 16

Finding Joy in Wisdom

(from *Poets*, pages 197, 200-202)

The people of the world do not always behave wisely. None of us always knows the best way to handle a situation or what the right thing to do is. The fact is, we need wisdom. We need insight from outside of ourselves. Because when we find true wisdom, we will live a better life and things are more likely to go well for us. This is precisely what God wants for us. He wants our lives to flourish. So the Bible includes wisdom books. These writings focus on learning how to navigate life with a full awareness of God and his good teachings.

Proverbs is the first wisdom book we encounter, and it is very different from the books we've read so far. It starts with a lengthy invitation for us to accept wisdom and to acknowledge that real wisdom is knowing God.



These are the proverbs of Solomon, David's son, king of Israel.

Their purpose is to teach people wisdom and discipline,
to help them understand the insights of the wise.
Their purpose is to teach people to live disciplined and successful lives,
to help them do what is right, just, and fair.
These proverbs will give insight to the simple,
knowledge and discernment to the young.

Let the wise listen to these proverbs and become even wiser.

Let those with understanding receive guidance
by exploring the meaning in these proverbs and parables,
the words of the wise and their riddles.

Fear of the LORD is the foundation of true knowledge,
but fools despise wisdom and discipline. . . .



My child, never forget the things I have taught you.

Store my commands in your heart.
If you do this, you will live many years,
and your life will be satisfying.
Never let loyalty and kindness leave you!
Tie them around your neck as a reminder.
Write them deep within your heart.
Then you will find favor with both God and people,
and you will earn a good reputation.

Trust in the LORD with all your heart;
do not depend on your own understanding.
Seek his will in all you do,
and he will show you which path to take.

Don't be impressed with your own wisdom.
Instead, fear the LORD and turn away from evil.
Then you will have healing for your body
and strength for your bones.

Honor the LORD with your wealth
and with the best part of everything you produce.
Then he will fill your barns with grain,
and your vats will overflow with good wine.

My child, don't reject the LORD's discipline,
and don't be upset when he corrects you.
For the LORD corrects those he loves,
just as a father corrects a child in whom he delights.

Joyful is the person who finds wisdom,
the one who gains understanding.
For wisdom is more profitable than silver,
and her wages are better than gold.
Wisdom is more precious than rubies;
nothing you desire can compare with her.
She offers you long life in her right hand,
and riches and honor in her left.
She will guide you down delightful paths;
all her ways are satisfying.
Wisdom is a tree of life to those who embrace her;
happy are those who hold her tightly.

By wisdom the LORD founded the earth;
by understanding he created the heavens.
By his knowledge the deep fountains of the earth burst
forth,
and the dew settles beneath the night sky.

My child, don't lose sight of common sense and
discernment.
Hang on to them,
for they will refresh your soul.
They are like jewels on a necklace.
They keep you safe on your way,
and your feet will not stumble.
You can go to bed without fear;
you will lie down and sleep soundly.
You need not be afraid of sudden disaster
or the destruction that comes upon the wicked,
for the LORD is your security.
He will keep your foot from being caught in a trap.

Do not withhold good from those who deserve it
when it's in your power to help them.
If you can help your neighbor now, don't say,
"Come back tomorrow, and then I'll help you."

Don't plot harm against your neighbor,
for those who live nearby trust you.

Don't pick a fight without reason,
when no one has done you harm.

Don't envy violent people
or copy their ways.
Such wicked people are detestable to the LORD,
but he offers his friendship to the godly.

The LORD curses the house of the wicked,
but he blesses the home of the upright.

The LORD mocks the mockers
but is gracious to the humble.

The wise inherit honor,
but fools are put to shame!

—*from the book of Proverbs*

TALKING TOGETHER:

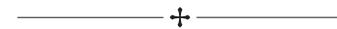
In many ways the opening to the book of Proverbs is a song to wisdom, singing its praises and urging us to deeply embrace it. Already in this introduction we start to see what real wisdom looks like—loving God, living well and peacefully with our neighbors, not letting wealth rule us, and accepting and learning from correction. What did you learn about wisdom in this opening section of Proverbs? Is there some part of this wisdom that is harder for you to follow than other parts?

DAY 17

Making a Commitment

(from *Poets*, pages 202-203)

The lengthy opening section of Proverbs continues here, inviting us to take wisdom deep into our hearts and lives. Wisdom is not meant to be some form of knowledge that we simply learn in our heads but something we continually live out in everything we do. It's not just about knowing things but also about doing things. The whole point of learning wisdom is to lead us to living well. God's love for us includes sharing the wisdom we need to live a good life with him.



My children, listen when your father corrects you.
Pay attention and learn good judgment,
for I am giving you good guidance.

Don't turn away from my instructions.
For I, too, was once my father's son,
tenderly loved as my mother's only child.

My father taught me,
"Take my words to heart.

Follow my commands, and you will live.
Get wisdom; develop good judgment.
Don't forget my words or turn away from them.
Don't turn your back on wisdom, for she will protect you.

Love her, and she will guard you.
Getting wisdom is the wisest thing you can do!
And whatever else you do, develop good
judgment.

If you prize wisdom, she will make you great.
Embrace her, and she will honor you.
She will place a lovely wreath on your head;
she will present you with a beautiful crown."

My child, listen to me and do as I say,
and you will have a long, good life.

I will teach you wisdom's ways
and lead you in straight paths.

When you walk, you won't be held back;
when you run, you won't stumble.
Take hold of my instructions; don't let them go.
Guard them, for they are the key to life.

Don't do as the wicked do,
and don't follow the path of evildoers.
Don't even think about it; don't go that way.
Turn away and keep moving.
For evil people can't sleep until they've done their evil deed for the day.
They can't rest until they've caused someone to stumble.
They eat the food of wickedness
and drink the wine of violence!

The way of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn,
which shines ever brighter until the full light of day.

But the way of the wicked is like total darkness.
They have no idea what they are stumbling over.

My child, pay attention to what I say.
Listen carefully to my words.

Don't lose sight of them.
Let them penetrate deep into your heart,
for they bring life to those who find them,
and healing to their whole body.

Guard your heart above all else,
for it determines the course of your life.

Avoid all perverse talk;
stay away from corrupt speech.

Look straight ahead,
and fix your eyes on what lies before you.
Mark out a straight path for your feet;
stay on the safe path.
Don't get sidetracked;
keep your feet from following evil.

—*from the book of Proverbs*

TALKING TOGETHER:

Gaining wisdom doesn't just happen by accident. We learn here that we have to commit to seeking it out, paying attention, taking hold of it, and following through in our actions. Have you made a commitment to something before? How did it go? Were you able to follow through on your promise? What does this passage say happens to those who commit to living wisely?

DAY 18

What Is a Proverb?

(from *Poets*, pages 211-213)

Biblical proverbs are usually short two-line sayings that make a single, simple point. They are meant to be a straightforward and practical kind of wisdom, giving us good advice for living. They are not absolute promises

about how things will go if we follow them. Rather, they are statements about how things will usually go for those who are wise and those who are not. All things being equal, those who follow the path of wisdom are more likely to prosper in this life while those who take foolish shortcuts typically end up paying a price or missing out. Wise King Solomon's advice to us: Seek wisdom, and grab hold of it when you find it!



The proverbs of Solomon:

A wise child brings joy to a father;
a foolish child brings grief to a mother.

Tainted wealth has no lasting value,
but right living can save your life.

The LORD will not let the godly go hungry,
but he refuses to satisfy the craving of the wicked.

Lazy people are soon poor;
hard workers get rich.

A wise youth harvests in the summer,
but one who sleeps during harvest is a disgrace.

The godly are showered with blessings;
the words of the wicked conceal violent intentions.

We have happy memories of the godly,
but the name of a wicked person rots away.

The wise are glad to be instructed,
but babbling fools fall flat on their faces.

People with integrity walk safely,
but those who follow crooked paths will be exposed.

People who wink at wrong cause trouble,
but a bold reproof promotes peace.

The words of the godly are a life-giving fountain;
the words of the wicked conceal violent intentions.

Hatred stirs up quarrels,
but love makes up for all offenses.

Wise words come from the lips of people with understanding,
but those lacking sense will be beaten with a rod.

Wise people treasure knowledge,
but the babbling of a fool invites disaster.

The wealth of the rich is their fortress;
the poverty of the poor is their destruction.

The earnings of the godly enhance their lives,
but evil people squander their money on sin.

People who accept discipline are on the pathway to life,
but those who ignore correction will go astray.

Hiding hatred makes you a liar;
slandering others makes you a fool.

Too much talk leads to sin.
Be sensible and keep your mouth shut.

The words of the godly are like sterling silver;
the heart of a fool is worthless.

The words of the godly encourage many,
but fools are destroyed by their lack of common sense.

The blessing of the LORD makes a person rich,
and he adds no sorrow with it.

Doing wrong is fun for a fool,
but living wisely brings pleasure to the sensible.

The fears of the wicked will be fulfilled;
the hopes of the godly will be granted.

When the storms of life come, the wicked are whirled away,
but the godly have a lasting foundation.

Lazy people irritate their employers,
like vinegar to the teeth or smoke in the eyes.

Fear of the LORD lengthens one's life,
but the years of the wicked are cut short.

The hopes of the godly result in happiness,
but the expectations of the wicked come to nothing.

The way of the LORD is a stronghold to those with integrity,
but it destroys the wicked.

The godly will never be disturbed,
but the wicked will be removed from the land.

—from the book of Proverbs

TALKING TOGETHER:

Laziness, how we use money, talking too much, slandering other people, peace-making, and keeping our integrity—the proverbs cover these and many more topics. Life throws many different situations at us. It's not always easy to know the best way to navigate them. Learning from those who are older and more experienced is one way to gain wisdom more quickly. Were there any topics here that you had never thought about before? Which proverbs are the most interesting or helpful to you in your life right now?

DAY 19

The Two Paths

(from *Poets*, pages 219-221)

The biggest part of the book of Proverbs is the collection of the wise sayings of King Solomon, who was famous for his wisdom. One thing to watch for in these proverbs is how the two lines work together. Sometimes the second line simply reinforces the first point, but sometimes it looks at the same topic from the other side. Either way, all the proverbs set forth a vision that offers us a crucial choice in life: the way of wisdom or the path of foolishness.



The wise are cautious and avoid danger;
fools plunge ahead with reckless confidence.

Short-tempered people do foolish things,
and schemers are hated.

Simpletons are clothed with foolishness,
but the prudent are crowned with knowledge.

Evil people will bow before good people;
the wicked will bow at the gates of the godly.

The poor are despised even by their neighbors,
while the rich have many “friends.”

It is a sin to belittle one's neighbor;
blessed are those who help the poor.

If you plan to do evil, you will be lost;
if you plan to do good, you will receive unfailing love and
faithfulness.

Work brings profit,
but mere talk leads to poverty!

Wealth is a crown for the wise;
the effort of fools yields only foolishness.

A truthful witness saves lives,
but a false witness is a traitor.

Those who fear the LORD are secure;
he will be a refuge for their children.

Fear of the LORD is a life-giving fountain;
it offers escape from the snares of death.

A growing population is a king's glory;
a prince without subjects has nothing.

People with understanding control their anger;
a hot temper shows great foolishness.

A peaceful heart leads to a healthy body;
jealousy is like cancer in the bones.

Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker,
but helping the poor honors him.

The wicked are crushed by disaster,
but the godly have a refuge when they die.

Wisdom is enshrined in an understanding heart;
wisdom is not found among fools.

Godliness makes a nation great,
but sin is a disgrace to any people.

A king rejoices in wise servants
but is angry with those who disgrace him.

A gentle answer deflects anger,
but harsh words make tempers flare.

The tongue of the wise makes knowledge appealing,
but the mouth of a fool belches out foolishness.

The LORD is watching everywhere,
keeping his eye on both the evil and the good.

Gentle words are a tree of life;
a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit.

Only a fool despises a parent's discipline;
whoever learns from correction is wise.

There is treasure in the house of the godly,
but the earnings of the wicked bring trouble.

The lips of the wise give good advice;
the heart of a fool has none to give.

The LORD detests the sacrifice of the wicked,
but he delights in the prayers of the upright.

The LORD detests the way of the wicked,
but he loves those who pursue godliness.

Whoever abandons the right path will be severely disciplined;
whoever hates correction will die.

Even Death and Destruction hold no secrets from the LORD.
How much more does he know the human heart!

Mockers hate to be corrected,
so they stay away from the wise.

A glad heart makes a happy face;
a broken heart crushes the spirit.

A wise person is hungry for knowledge,
while the fool feeds on trash.

For the despondent, every day brings trouble;
for the happy heart, life is a continual feast.

Better to have little, with fear for the LORD,
than to have great treasure and inner turmoil.

—*from the book of Proverbs*

TALKING TOGETHER:

One of the main things we learn from the book of Proverbs is that life is made up of thousands of little choices that add up to a big choice. Whatever major decision we make about a direction to take in life is proved or disproved in all the smaller, everyday decisions we make. Is there something we can build into our lives to increase our awareness

of the importance of each action and every word in our lives? What can we do to remember this truth that many little choices make up a big choice?

DAY 20

The Power of Our Words

(from *Poets*, pages 226, 230)

Many of the Bible's proverbs have to do with speech—the way we use our words. As another wisdom book in the Bible (James, in the New Testament) teaches us, the tongue is small but powerful. In many ways, wisdom begins with how and even when we speak. The things we say are a doorway into our hearts, revealing what lives there. In the selections from Proverbs below, you'll find that several have to do with speech. A wise life begins with wise words.



Even fools are thought wise when they keep silent;
with their mouths shut, they seem intelligent.

Unfriendly people care only about themselves;
they lash out at common sense.

Fools have no interest in understanding;
they only want to air their own opinions.

Doing wrong leads to disgrace,
and scandalous behavior brings contempt.

Wise words are like deep waters;
wisdom flows from the wise like a bubbling brook.

It is not right to acquit the guilty
or deny justice to the innocent.

Fools' words get them into constant quarrels;
they are asking for a beating.

The mouths of fools are their ruin;
they trap themselves with their lips.

Rumors are dainty morsels
that sink deep into one's heart.

A lazy person is as bad as
someone who destroys things.

The name of the LORD is a strong fortress;
the godly run to him and are safe.

The rich think of their wealth as a strong defense;
they imagine it to be a high wall of safety.

Haughtiness goes before destruction;
humility precedes honor.

Spouting off before listening to the facts
is both shameful and foolish.

The human spirit can endure a sick body,
but who can bear a crushed spirit?

Intelligent people are always ready to learn.
Their ears are open for knowledge. . . .

Don't say, "I will get even for this wrong."
Wait for the LORD to handle the matter.

The LORD detests double standards;
he is not pleased by dishonest scales.

The LORD directs our steps,
so why try to understand everything along the way?

Don't trap yourself by making a rash promise to God
and only later counting the cost.

A wise king scatters the wicked like wheat,
then runs his threshing wheel over them.

The LORD's light penetrates the human spirit,
exposing every hidden motive.

Unfailing love and faithfulness protect the king;
his throne is made secure through love.

The glory of the young is their strength;
the gray hair of experience is the splendor of the old.

—*from the book of Proverbs*

TALKING TOGETHER:

What specific things do these proverbs teach us about how we use words? Why is it often helpful to use few words rather than many or

even to keep quiet? Why do we enjoy hearing rumors and gossip about people? How can words ruin people? Why is it so tempting to speak before we know all the facts? Why do we like to brag? What is your own weak spot with words? What are your strong points?

DAY 21

The Wisdom God Built into the World

(from *Poets*, pages 238-240)

One of the key points of Israel's wisdom tradition is that God has created the world with wisdom built right into it. So when we follow God's wisdom, we're doing more than following God's teaching. We are lining our lives up with the very nature of things. This is one of the reasons why living wisely helps us live well. Of course, the world is also broken in many ways. So there's no guarantee that wisdom will lead to a more successful life. But wisdom does reflect the way the world is supposed to work, which is why so often it really does help us live better lives.



These are more proverbs of Solomon, collected by the advisers of King Hezekiah of Judah.

It is God's privilege to conceal things
and the king's privilege to discover them.

No one can comprehend the height of heaven, the depth of the earth,
or all that goes on in the king's mind!

Remove the impurities from silver,
and the sterling will be ready for the silversmith.

Remove the wicked from the king's court,
and his reign will be made secure by justice.

Don't demand an audience with the king
or push for a place among the great.
It's better to wait for an invitation to the head table
than to be sent away in public disgrace.

Just because you've seen something,
don't be in a hurry to go to court.

For what will you do in the end
if your neighbor deals you a shameful defeat?

When arguing with your neighbor,
don't betray another person's secret.
Others may accuse you of gossip,
and you will never regain your good reputation.

Timely advice is lovely,
like golden apples in a silver basket.

To one who listens, valid criticism
is like a gold earring or other gold jewelry.

Trustworthy messengers refresh like snow in summer.
They revive the spirit of their employer.

A person who promises a gift but doesn't give it
is like clouds and wind that bring no rain.

Patience can persuade a prince,
and soft speech can break bones.

Do you like honey?
Don't eat too much, or it will make you sick!

Don't visit your neighbors too often,
or you will wear out your welcome.

Telling lies about others
is as harmful as hitting them with an ax,
wounding them with a sword,
or shooting them with a sharp arrow.

Putting confidence in an unreliable person in times of trouble
is like chewing with a broken tooth or walking on a lame foot.

Singing cheerful songs to a person with a heavy heart
is like taking someone's coat in cold weather
or pouring vinegar in a wound.

If your enemies are hungry, give them food to eat.
If they are thirsty, give them water to drink.
You will heap burning coals of shame on their heads,
and the LORD will reward you.

As surely as a north wind brings rain,
so a gossiping tongue causes anger!

It's better to live alone in the corner of an attic
than with a quarrelsome wife in a lovely home.

Good news from far away
is like cold water to the thirsty.

If the godly give in to the wicked,
it's like polluting a fountain or muddying a spring.

It's not good to eat too much honey,
and it's not good to seek honors for yourself.

A person without self-control
is like a city with broken-down walls.

—*from the book of Proverbs*

TALKING TOGETHER:

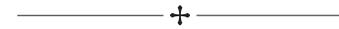
One way to realize the importance of what a book like Proverbs teaches is to consider what it would be like to do the opposite of what it says. (Of course, some of the proverbs themselves tell us about the consequences of not following wisdom.) Think for a moment about a world where people are constantly lying or arguing or bragging about themselves. Reflect on what it would be like if everyone constantly shared bad or embarrassing news about other people or could never be counted on to do what they said they would do. What would a world with no wisdom at all be like?

DAY 22

Wisdom and Life

(from *Poets*, pages 246-248)

How does the book of Proverbs fit into the rest of the Bible? We know that overall, the Bible is telling us the story of God, the world, and God's plan for salvation and healing. So what do wisdom sayings have to do with this? The answer is that practical words of wisdom are part of God's teaching for how to live well, and that's what God is working on in the whole story. Humans have been rebelling against God and God's instructions for living. The proverbs in the Bible are one of the ways God draws us back to himself and to the life he intended for us.



The sayings of Agur son of Jakeh contain this message.

I am weary, O God;
I am weary and worn out, O God.
I am too stupid to be human,
and I lack common sense.
I have not mastered human wisdom,
nor do I know the Holy One.

Who but God goes up to heaven and comes back down?
Who holds the wind in his fists?
Who wraps up the oceans in his cloak?
Who has created the whole wide world?
What is his name—and his son's name?
Tell me if you know!

Every word of God proves true.
He is a shield to all who come to him for protection.
Do not add to his words,
or he may rebuke you and expose you as a liar.

O God, I beg two favors from you;
let me have them before I die.
First, help me never to tell a lie.
Second, give me neither poverty nor riches!
Give me just enough to satisfy my needs.
For if I grow rich, I may deny you and say, "Who is the LORD?"
And if I am too poor, I may steal and thus insult God's holy name.

Never slander a worker to the employer,
or the person will curse you, and you will pay for it.

Some people curse their father
and do not thank their mother.
They are pure in their own eyes,
but they are filthy and unwashed.
They look proudly around,
casting disdainful glances.
They have teeth like swords
and fangs like knives.
They devour the poor from the earth
and the needy from among humanity.

The leech has two suckers
that cry out, “More, more!”

There are three things that are never satisfied—
no, four that never say, “Enough!”:
the grave,
the barren womb,
the thirsty desert,
the blazing fire.

The eye that mocks a father
and despises a mother’s instructions
will be plucked out by ravens of the valley
and eaten by vultures.

There are three things that amaze me—
no, four things that I don’t understand:
how an eagle glides through the sky,
how a snake slithers on a rock,
how a ship navigates the ocean,
how a man loves a woman.

—*from the book of Proverbs*

TALKING TOGETHER:

Being humble and honest about ourselves is one of the very first steps to finding God’s wisdom. Our tendency is often to assume we already know everything we need to know. It can be hard to admit we don’t know something, that we have more to learn. But in these sayings of Agur we find wisdom because we find humility. Agur knows what he doesn’t know, and he’s willing to acknowledge that God alone sees and knows all things.

Actually, this attitude can make life more interesting, knowing we are always on a journey of learning. We can always grow deeper in knowledge and better in understanding. How can we make our lives more about patient listening, learning, and growing? What practical steps will lead to this fruit in our lives?

DAY 23

The LORD Alone Is the True King

(from *Poets*, pages 105-106)

We return now to the fourth major group of songs in the book of Psalms. Here we find a clear emphasis on the fact that God is the true King and LORD of the earth. But if God really does rule, then his people can expect him to act to make things right in the world. So this collection of worship songs revolves around these two themes: God is King, but God still needs to act to save his people. We praise God as the rightful Ruler of all things. And we continue to ask him to come and show all people that he is the world’s Creator and King by bringing his justice.



PSALM 96

Sing a new song to the LORD!
Let the whole earth sing to the LORD!
Sing to the LORD; praise his name.
Each day proclaim the good news that he saves.
Publish his glorious deeds among the nations.
Tell everyone about the amazing things he does.
Great is the LORD! He is most worthy of praise!
He is to be feared above all gods.
The gods of other nations are mere idols,
but the LORD made the heavens!
Honor and majesty surround him;
strength and beauty fill his sanctuary.

O nations of the world, recognize the LORD;
recognize that the LORD is glorious and strong.
Give to the LORD the glory he deserves!
Bring your offering and come into his courts.
Worship the LORD in all his holy splendor.
Let all the earth tremble before him.
Tell all the nations, “The LORD reigns!”
The world stands firm and cannot be shaken.
He will judge all peoples fairly.

Let the heavens be glad, and the earth rejoice!
 Let the sea and everything in it shout his praise!
 Let the fields and their crops burst out with joy!
 Let the trees of the forest sing for joy
 before the LORD, for he is coming!
 He is coming to judge the earth.
 He will judge the world with justice,
 and the nations with his truth.

PSALM 97

The LORD is king!
 Let the earth rejoice!
 Let the farthest coastlands be glad.
 Dark clouds surround him.
 Righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.
 Fire spreads ahead of him
 and burns up all his foes.
 His lightning flashes out across the world.
 The earth sees and trembles.
 The mountains melt like wax before the LORD,
 before the Lord of all the earth.
 The heavens proclaim his righteousness;
 every nation sees his glory.
 Those who worship idols are disgraced—
 all who brag about their worthless gods—
 for every god must bow to him.
 Jerusalem has heard and rejoiced,
 and all the towns of Judah are glad
 because of your justice, O LORD!
 For you, O LORD, are supreme over all the earth;
 you are exalted far above all gods.
 You who love the LORD, hate evil!
 He protects the lives of his godly people
 and rescues them from the power of the wicked.
 Light shines on the godly,
 and joy on those whose hearts are right.
 May all who are godly rejoice in the LORD
 and praise his holy name!

—from the fourth book of Psalms

TALKING TOGETHER:

We live in a world in which many, many people do not acknowledge that God is King. They don't see God, and they don't know God or worship him. Therefore many leaders and countries go their own way and ignore the way of life shown to us by the Messiah, Jesus. But Psalms 96 and 97 remind us that the LORD really does reign. Jesus really is Lord of all things. And Jesus is coming to rightly judge the world, its leaders, and its peoples and to set all things right.

If we are living in the Kingdom of God, how should that change the way we live now? Is it harder to do because we can't openly see that God is the true King? What does it mean to live in hope for the future, when Jesus will return to us?

DAY 24

A Life of Gratitude

(from *Poets*, pages 111-112)

When we recognize that God is the Creator and true Ruler of all things, we are naturally filled with gratitude and praise for all that he's done for us. Psalm 103 is a beautiful celebration of the good gifts we have from God. This song gives us a sense of our proper place in the world as small and short-lived creatures. So yes, we are in a humble position, but the good news is that our Creator loves us! He will even overcome our own wrongdoing and set us back on the right path.



PSALM 103

A psalm of David.

Let all that I am praise the LORD;
 with my whole heart, I will praise his holy name.
 Let all that I am praise the LORD;
 may I never forget the good things he does for me.
 He forgives all my sins
 and heals all my diseases.
 He redeems me from death
 and crowns me with love and tender mercies.
 He fills my life with good things.
 My youth is renewed like the eagle's!

The LORD gives righteousness
and justice to all who are treated unfairly.

He revealed his character to Moses
and his deeds to the people of Israel.

The LORD is compassionate and merciful,
slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love.

He will not constantly accuse us,
nor remain angry forever.

He does not punish us for all our sins;
he does not deal harshly with us, as we deserve.

For his unfailing love toward those who fear him
is as great as the height of the heavens above the earth.

He has removed our sins as far from us
as the east is from the west.

The LORD is like a father to his children,
tender and compassionate to those who fear him.

For he knows how weak we are;
he remembers we are only dust.

Our days on earth are like grass;
like wildflowers, we bloom and die.

The wind blows, and we are gone—
as though we had never been here.

But the love of the LORD remains forever
with those who fear him.

His salvation extends to the children's children
of those who are faithful to his covenant,
of those who obey his commandments!

The LORD has made the heavens his throne;
from there he rules over everything.

Praise the LORD, you angels,
you mighty ones who carry out his plans,
listening for each of his commands.

Yes, praise the LORD, you armies of angels
who serve him and do his will!

Praise the LORD, everything he has created,
everything in all his kingdom.

Let all that I am praise the LORD.

—from the fourth book of Psalms

TALKING TOGETHER:

The key to a life well lived is always having a sense of gratitude. Gratitude is a deep thankfulness for the grace and good things in our lives. When we live with this awareness, it shows we understand that there is a Creator who has given us all things, even life itself. Gratitude is the right response to good times, and it can sustain us through hard times.

Do you feel a sense of thankfulness for the gifts in your life? Can we choose to be more grateful for everything God has done for us? How can gratitude keep us from making major mistakes in our lives?

DAY 25

When We Ruin the Story

(from *Poets*, pages 116-119)

The last song in the fourth section of Psalms wonders out loud about what happens when humans fail to live up to their calling and purpose given to them by God. God chose the people of Israel to be the ones who would bring blessing and salvation to the rest of the world. But they didn't seem capable of being completely faithful to their covenant with God. So what can God do about this? We know that God has intention is to always work through humans to do his work in the world. Do we ruin his plans when we don't do our part?



PSALM 106

Praise the LORD!

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good!

His faithful love endures forever.

Who can list the glorious miracles of the LORD?

Who can ever praise him enough?

There is joy for those who deal justly with others
and always do what is right.

Remember me, LORD, when you show favor to your people;
come near and rescue me.

Let me share in the prosperity of your chosen ones.

Let me rejoice in the joy of your people;

let me praise you with those who are your heritage.

Like our ancestors, we have sinned.
 We have done wrong! We have acted wickedly!
 Our ancestors in Egypt
 were not impressed by the LORD's miraculous deeds.
 They soon forgot his many acts of kindness to them.
 Instead, they rebelled against him at the Red Sea.
 Even so, he saved them—
 to defend the honor of his name
 and to demonstrate his mighty power.
 He commanded the Red Sea to dry up.
 He led Israel across the sea as if it were a desert.
 So he rescued them from their enemies
 and redeemed them from their foes.
 Then the water returned and covered their enemies;
 not one of them survived.
 Then his people believed his promises.
 Then they sang his praise.

Yet how quickly they forgot what he had done!
 They wouldn't wait for his counsel!
 In the wilderness their desires ran wild,
 testing God's patience in that dry wasteland.
 So he gave them what they asked for,
 but he sent a plague along with it.
 The people in the camp were jealous of Moses
 and envious of Aaron, the LORD's holy priest.
 Because of this, the earth opened up;
 it swallowed Dathan
 and buried Abiram and the other rebels.
 Fire fell upon their followers;
 a flame consumed the wicked.

The people made a calf at Mount Sinai;
 they bowed before an image made of gold.
 They traded their glorious God
 for a statue of a grass-eating bull.
 They forgot God, their savior,
 who had done such great things in Egypt—
 such wonderful things in the land of Ham,
 such awesome deeds at the Red Sea.
 So he declared he would destroy them.
 But Moses, his chosen one, stepped between the LORD and the
 people.

He begged him to turn from his anger and not destroy them.
 The people refused to enter the pleasant land,
 for they wouldn't believe his promise to care for them.
 Instead, they grumbled in their tents
 and refused to obey the LORD.
 Therefore, he solemnly swore
 that he would kill them in the wilderness,
 that he would scatter their descendants among the nations,
 exiling them to distant lands.

Then our ancestors joined in the worship of Baal at Peor;
 they even ate sacrifices offered to the dead!
 They angered the LORD with all these things,
 so a plague broke out among them.
 But Phinehas had the courage to intervene,
 and the plague was stopped.
 So he has been regarded as a righteous man
 ever since that time.

At Meribah, too, they angered the LORD,
 causing Moses serious trouble.
 They made Moses angry,
 and he spoke foolishly.

Israel failed to destroy the nations in the land,
 as the LORD had commanded them.
 Instead, they mingled among the pagans
 and adopted their evil customs.
 They worshiped their idols,
 which led to their downfall.
 They even sacrificed their sons
 and their daughters to the demons.
 They shed innocent blood,
 the blood of their sons and daughters.
 By sacrificing them to the idols of Canaan,
 they polluted the land with murder.
 They defiled themselves by their evil deeds,
 and their love of idols was adultery in the LORD's sight.

That is why the LORD's anger burned against his
 people,
 and he abhorred his own special possession.
 He handed them over to pagan nations,
 and they were ruled by those who hated them.

Their enemies crushed them
 and brought them under their cruel power.
 Again and again he rescued them,
 but they chose to rebel against him,
 and they were finally destroyed by their sin.
 Even so, he pitied them in their distress
 and listened to their cries.
 He remembered his covenant with them
 and relented because of his unfailing love.
 He even caused their captors
 to treat them with kindness.

Save us, O LORD our God!
 Gather us back from among the nations,
 so we can thank your holy name
 and rejoice and praise you.

Praise the LORD, the God of Israel,
 who lives from everlasting to everlasting!
 Let all the people say, "Amen!"

Praise the LORD!

—*from the fourth book of Psalms*

TALKING TOGETHER:

God shows amazing patience with us. He has expectations for us, wanting us to join with him in his work of restoring the world. When we fail, he stays with us, forgiving us and getting us back on track. He has promised that he won't do this without us! What we say and do with our lives matters in God's Story. What does this persistence tell us about God himself? How does his faithfulness and patience with us help us stay on track?

DAY 26

Like Chasing the Wind

(from *Poets*, pages 253-254, 257)

We don't live in a world where everyone follows the wisdom of God's good ways. Many things have gone terribly wrong. Our experience

of life is a deep mystery: We know not only creation and life but also brokenness and death. The book of Ecclesiastes addresses this mystery head-on. The book of Proverbs teaches us that when we follow God's wisdom things generally go well for us. But Ecclesiastes tells us that this isn't always true.

There is something broken in our world, so justice doesn't always happen. Ecclesiastes makes us look at the hard things in life. There is a mystery in life about why both good things and bad things happen. We can't always figure out the reason, which seems to make the world unpredictable. Why is this? And what should we do about it? How should we live if we can't figure out how and why everything happens?



These are the words of the Teacher, King David's son, who ruled in Jerusalem.

"Everything is meaningless," says the Teacher, "completely meaningless!"

What do people get for all their hard work under the sun? Generations come and generations go, but the earth never changes. The sun rises and the sun sets, then hurries around to rise again. The wind blows south, and then turns north. Around and around it goes, blowing in circles. Rivers run into the sea, but the sea is never full. Then the water returns again to the rivers and flows out again to the sea. Everything is wearisome beyond description. No matter how much we see, we are never satisfied. No matter how much we hear, we are not content.

History merely repeats itself. It has all been done before. Nothing under the sun is truly new. Sometimes people say, "Here is something new!" But actually it is old; nothing is ever truly new. We don't remember what happened in the past, and in future generations, no one will remember what we are doing now.

+

I, the Teacher, was king of Israel, and I lived in Jerusalem. I devoted myself to search for understanding and to explore by wisdom everything being done under heaven. I soon discovered that God has dealt a tragic existence to the human race. I observed everything going on under the sun, and really, it is all meaningless—like chasing the wind.

What is wrong cannot be made right.

What is missing cannot be recovered.

I said to myself, “Look, I am wiser than any of the kings who ruled in Jerusalem before me. I have greater wisdom and knowledge than any of them.” So I set out to learn everything from wisdom to madness and folly. But I learned firsthand that pursuing all this is like chasing the wind.

The greater my wisdom, the greater my grief.
To increase knowledge only increases sorrow.

I said to myself, “Come on, let’s try pleasure. Let’s look for the ‘good things’ in life.” But I found that this, too, was meaningless. So I said, “Laughter is silly. What good does it do to seek pleasure?” After much thought, I decided to cheer myself with wine. And while still seeking wisdom, I clutched at foolishness. In this way, I tried to experience the only happiness most people find during their brief life in this world.

I also tried to find meaning by building huge homes for myself and by planting beautiful vineyards. I made gardens and parks, filling them with all kinds of fruit trees. I built reservoirs to collect the water to irrigate my many flourishing groves. I bought slaves, both men and women, and others were born into my household. I also owned large herds and flocks, more than any of the kings who had lived in Jerusalem before me. I collected great sums of silver and gold, the treasure of many kings and provinces. I hired wonderful singers, both men and women, and had many beautiful concubines. I had everything a man could desire!

So I became greater than all who had lived in Jerusalem before me, and my wisdom never failed me. Anything I wanted, I would take. I denied myself no pleasure. I even found great pleasure in hard work, a reward for all my labors. But as I looked at everything I had worked so hard to accomplish, it was all so meaningless—like chasing the wind. There was nothing really worthwhile anywhere. . . .

+

Don’t be surprised if you see a poor person being oppressed by the powerful and if justice is being miscarried throughout the land. For every official is under orders from higher up, and matters of justice get lost in red tape and bureaucracy. Even the king milks the land for his own profit!

Those who love money will never have enough. How meaningless to think that wealth brings true happiness! The more you have, the more people come to help you spend it. So what good is wealth—except perhaps to watch it slip through your fingers!

People who work hard sleep well, whether they eat little or much. But the rich seldom get a good night’s sleep.

—from the book of Ecclesiastes

TALKING TOGETHER:

There are many, many things that people try in order to find meaning in life. But again and again it doesn’t seem to work. It can be easy for people to give up, and many do. Things just don’t seem to work out, so why try? There is a crookedness and futility in so much of life, and we can’t figure it all out.

The first thing we learn from Ecclesiastes is that it makes sense to find enjoyment in the present moment in small pleasures. These gifts are also from the hand of God. Sometimes the big things are too much for us and don’t make sense. Make a point to enjoy something good that’s right in front of you today. Thank God for it, and pray that he will also take care of the larger problems in your world.

DAY 27

It Will Be Clear in the End

(from *Poets*, pages 261-262, 264-265)

At the end of the book of Ecclesiastes we find this wise man’s major conclusion to his musings on life. Even though we cannot always see the deeper meaning of life in how things work out, it is crucial to know that God is watching and working in ways that we don’t know. Indeed, one day God will make everything clear and bring all our actions to light.

— + —

I have observed something else under the sun. The fastest runner doesn’t always win the race, and the strongest warrior doesn’t always win the battle. The wise sometimes go hungry, and the skillful are not necessarily wealthy. And those who are educated don’t always lead successful lives. It is all decided by chance, by being in the right place at the right time.

People can never predict when hard times might come. Like fish in a net or birds in a trap, people are caught by sudden tragedy.

Here is another bit of wisdom that has impressed me as I have watched the way our world works. There was a small town with only a few people, and a great king came with his army and besieged it. A poor, wise man knew how to save the town, and so it was rescued. But afterward no one thought to thank him. So even though wisdom is better than strength, those who

are wise will be despised if they are poor. What they say will not be appreciated for long.

Better to hear the quiet words of a wise person
than the shouts of a foolish king.
Better to have wisdom than weapons of war,
but one sinner can destroy much that is good.

As dead flies cause even a bottle of perfume to stink,
so a little foolishness spoils great wisdom and honor.

A wise person chooses the right road;
a fool takes the wrong one.

You can identify fools
just by the way they walk down the street!

If your boss is angry at you, don't quit!
A quiet spirit can overcome even great mistakes. . . .

Light is sweet; how pleasant to see a new day dawning.

When people live to be very old, let them rejoice in every day of life. But let them also remember there will be many dark days. Everything still to come is meaningless.

Young people, it's wonderful to be young! Enjoy every minute of it. Do everything you want to do; take it all in. But remember that you must give an account to God for everything you do. So refuse to worry, and keep your body healthy. But remember that youth, with a whole life before you, is meaningless. . . .

+

Keep this in mind: The Teacher was considered wise, and he taught the people everything he knew. He listened carefully to many proverbs, studying and classifying them. The Teacher sought to find just the right words to express truths clearly.

The words of the wise are like cattle prods—painful but helpful. Their collected sayings are like a nail-studded stick with which a shepherd drives the sheep.

But, my child, let me give you some further advice: Be careful, for writing books is endless, and much study wears you out.

That's the whole story. Here now is my final conclusion: Fear God and obey his commands, for this is everyone's duty. God will judge us for everything we do, including every secret thing, whether good or bad.

—*from the book of Ecclesiastes*

TALKING TOGETHER:

The consistent message of the Bible is that each one of us has a place in God's big story. What we do matters. Even when we can't see the bigger picture or know how it's all going to work out, God does. In the end, all the futility and craziness in the world will come to an end. God will bring everything in heaven and on earth together when he restores all things.

How frustrating is it for you not knowing if all the things you care about will work out? Have you ever had big projects that you worked on not come together in the end? Do you ever think about how all the big challenges and problems in the world will work out? Do you ever think about God seeing everything and knowing exactly what's going on?

DAY 28

God, His People, and Their Story

(from *Poets*, pages 125-126)

The Bible is a collection of books that revolves around God and his people. They were chosen to be a light to the world and were meant to be a showcase for what it looks like to worship and follow God well. Those who live into this calling are part of God's mission to the world. They themselves follow God's good instructions for living, inviting others to follow him also. They generously help others, reflecting God's own love. They worship and praise the Creator God who is worthy of our adoration. All these things are what we were created for. The fifth and final section of the book of Psalms centers on these critical themes of the biblical story.

+

PSALM 111

Praise the LORD!

I will thank the LORD with all my heart
as I meet with his godly people.

How amazing are the deeds of the LORD!

All who delight in him should ponder them.

Everything he does reveals his glory and majesty.

His righteousness never fails.

He causes us to remember his wonderful works.
 How gracious and merciful is our LORD!
 He gives food to those who fear him;
 he always remembers his covenant.
 He has shown his great power to his people
 by giving them the lands of other nations.
 All he does is just and good,
 and all his commandments are trustworthy.
 They are forever true,
 to be obeyed faithfully and with integrity.
 He has paid a full ransom for his people.
 He has guaranteed his covenant with them
 forever.
 What a holy, awe-inspiring name he has!
 Fear of the LORD is the foundation of true wisdom.
 All who obey his commandments will grow in wisdom.
 Praise him forever!

PSALM 112

Praise the LORD!
 How joyful are those who fear the LORD
 and delight in obeying his commands.
 Their children will be successful everywhere;
 an entire generation of godly people will be blessed.
 They themselves will be wealthy,
 and their good deeds will last forever.
 Light shines in the darkness for the godly.
 They are generous, compassionate, and righteous.
 Good comes to those who lend money generously
 and conduct their business fairly.
 Such people will not be overcome by evil.
 Those who are righteous will be long
 remembered.
 They do not fear bad news;
 they confidently trust the LORD to care for them.
 They are confident and fearless
 and can face their foes triumphantly.
 They share freely and give generously to those in need.
 Their good deeds will be remembered forever.
 They will have influence and honor.

The wicked will see this and be infuriated.
 They will grind their teeth in anger;
 they will slink away, their hopes thwarted.

—*from the fifth book of Psalms*

TALKING TOGETHER:

You were created by God and you were made for a purpose. There is a unique place for you in God's family, and there is work for you to do. When the world looks at the people of God, they should see a reflection of who God is—people who are compassionate, caring, fair, and doing what's right. God himself will honor such people, and he has a rich reward for them.

Isn't it amazing that God has paid the full ransom price for his people, setting us free? How do you feel about all this? Are you excited to discover what God's purpose for your life is?

DAY 29

God's Good Instructions

(from *Poets*, pages 131-134)

When God gave his Torah (or instructions) to his people Israel, he was letting them know that they were set apart for a special purpose. He told them to be holy just as God himself is holy. Israel could be a light to the world by following these instructions and giving allegiance to God alone. Psalm 119 sings the praises of God's Torah, thanking God for giving us a light for our path. This psalm is an acrostic, meaning there is one stanza for each of the 22 characters of the Hebrew alphabet. We've chosen the first five stanzas for you to read below.

————— † —————

PSALM 119

Aleph

Joyful are people of integrity,
 who follow the instructions of the LORD.
 Joyful are those who obey his laws
 and search for him with all their hearts.

They do not compromise with evil,
 and they walk only in his paths.
 You have charged us
 to keep your commandments carefully.
 Oh, that my actions would consistently
 reflect your decrees!
 Then I will not be ashamed
 when I compare my life with your commands.
 As I learn your righteous regulations,
 I will thank you by living as I should!
 I will obey your decrees.
 Please don't give up on me!

Beth

How can a young person stay pure?
 By obeying your word.
 I have tried hard to find you—
 don't let me wander from your commands.
 I have hidden your word in my heart,
 that I might not sin against you.
 I praise you, O LORD;
 teach me your decrees.
 I have recited aloud
 all the regulations you have given us.
 I have rejoiced in your laws
 as much as in riches.
 I will study your commandments
 and reflect on your ways.
 I will delight in your decrees
 and not forget your word.

Gimel

Be good to your servant,
 that I may live and obey your word.
 Open my eyes to see
 the wonderful truths in your instructions.
 I am only a foreigner in the land.
 Don't hide your commands from me!
 I am always overwhelmed
 with a desire for your regulations.
 You rebuke the arrogant;
 those who wander from your commands are cursed.

Don't let them scorn and insult me,
 for I have obeyed your laws.
 Even princes sit and speak against me,
 but I will meditate on your decrees.
 Your laws please me;
 they give me wise advice.

Daleth

I lie in the dust;
 revive me by your word.
 I told you my plans, and you answered.
 Now teach me your decrees.
 Help me understand the meaning of your
 commandments,
 and I will meditate on your wonderful deeds.
 I weep with sorrow;
 encourage me by your word.
 Keep me from lying to myself;
 give me the privilege of knowing your instructions.
 I have chosen to be faithful;
 I have determined to live by your regulations.
 I cling to your laws.
 LORD, don't let me be put to shame!
 I will pursue your commands,
 for you expand my understanding.

He

Teach me your decrees, O LORD;
 I will keep them to the end.
 Give me understanding and I will obey your
 instructions;
 I will put them into practice with all my heart.
 Make me walk along the path of your commands,
 for that is where my happiness is found.
 Give me an eagerness for your laws
 rather than a love for money!
 Turn my eyes from worthless things,
 and give me life through your word.
 Reassure me of your promise,
 made to those who fear you.
 Help me abandon my shameful ways;
 for your regulations are good.

I long to obey your commandments!
Renew my life with your goodness.

—*from the fifth book of Psalms*

TALKING TOGETHER:

At the heart of the human rebellion against God is our tendency to ignore what God says about how we should live. Psalm 119 turns our attention back to God's good instructions for us. Is it unusual for someone to talk about loving laws and commands? How can knowing that God is the Creator make us more willing to listen to his teaching? If God knows you inside and out, does that help you have greater respect for his direction in your life?

DAY 30

The God Who Saves Us

(from *Poets*, pages 141-144)

There is a group of songs in the middle of the last section of the Psalms that promises God's care and concern for his people. Yes, God had to intervene and discipline them when they failed to honor and keep their covenant with him. God sent Israel into exile, away from the land he had given them. But then the LORD had mercy on them and brought them back. When this happened, the people knew for sure that God would stay faithful to them through anything. The three psalms here are examples of the songs travelers would sing as they were going up to Jerusalem to celebrate in God's Temple.



PSALM 121

A song for pilgrims ascending to Jerusalem.

I look up to the mountains—
does my help come from there?
My help comes from the LORD,
who made heaven and earth!

He will not let you stumble;
the one who watches over you will not
slumber.

Indeed, he who watches over Israel
never slumbers or sleeps.

The LORD himself watches over you!
The LORD stands beside you as your protective
shade.

The sun will not harm you by day,
nor the moon at night.

The LORD keeps you from all harm
and watches over your life.

The LORD keeps watch over you as you come and go,
both now and forever.

PSALM 124

A song for pilgrims ascending to Jerusalem. A psalm of David.

What if the LORD had not been on our side?
Let all Israel repeat:

What if the LORD had not been on our side
when people attacked us?

They would have swallowed us alive
in their burning anger.

The waters would have engulfed us;
a torrent would have overwhelmed us.

Yes, the raging waters of their fury
would have overwhelmed our very lives.

Praise the LORD,
who did not let their teeth tear us apart!

We escaped like a bird from a hunter's trap.

The trap is broken, and we are free!

Our help is from the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.

PSALM 126

A song for pilgrims ascending to Jerusalem.

When the LORD brought back his exiles to Jerusalem,
it was like a dream!

We were filled with laughter,
and we sang for joy.
And the other nations said,
“What amazing things the LORD has done for
them.”
Yes, the LORD has done amazing things for us!
What joy!

Restore our fortunes, LORD,
as streams renew the desert.
Those who plant in tears
will harvest with shouts of joy.
They weep as they go to plant their seed,
but they sing as they return with the harvest.

—*from the fifth book of Psalms*

TALKING TOGETHER:

Because God is the maker of heaven and earth, the world’s great Creator, he has the power to rescue his people when they need his help. Because God loves us, he wants to deliver and restore us. Just like ancient Israel, we have hard times of trouble too. But we know for sure that in the end God will do amazing things for us, healing and renewing us. When he does this, we too will be filled with thankfulness and sing for joy.

What can we do when we’re still in the middle of suffering or struggle to remember God’s promise to make things right? Do we have to wait until he actually saves us to praise and thank him?

DAY 31

You Know Everything about Me

(from *Poets*, pages 152-154)

God is great and rules the entire universe. His knowledge of all things is vast and beyond our comprehension. And yet he knows us personally and intimately. His presence is with us wherever we go. It is a wonder to consider that a God of such grandeur still knows and cares for us individually.



PSALM 139

For the choir director: A psalm of David.

O LORD, you have examined my heart
and know everything about me.
You know when I sit down or stand up.
You know my thoughts even when I’m far away.
You see me when I travel
and when I rest at home.
You know everything I do.
You know what I am going to say
even before I say it, LORD.
You go before me and follow me.
You place your hand of blessing on my head.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
too great for me to understand!

I can never escape from your Spirit!
I can never get away from your presence!
If I go up to heaven, you are there;
if I go down to the grave, you are there.
If I ride the wings of the morning,
if I dwell by the farthest oceans,
even there your hand will guide me,
and your strength will support me.
I could ask the darkness to hide me
and the light around me to become night—
but even in darkness I cannot hide from you.
To you the night shines as bright as day.
Darkness and light are the same to you.

You made all the delicate, inner parts of my body
and knit me together in my mother’s womb.
Thank you for making me so wonderfully complex!
Your workmanship is marvelous—how well I know it.
You watched me as I was being formed in utter
seclusion,
as I was woven together in the dark of the womb.
You saw me before I was born.
Every day of my life was recorded in your book.
Every moment was laid out
before a single day had passed.

How precious are your thoughts about me, O God.
 They cannot be numbered!
 I can't even count them;
 they outnumber the grains of sand!
 And when I wake up,
 you are still with me!

O God, if only you would destroy the
 wicked!
 Get out of my life, you murderers!
 They blaspheme you;
 your enemies misuse your name.
 O LORD, shouldn't I hate those who hate you?
 Shouldn't I despise those who oppose you?
 Yes, I hate them with total hatred,
 for your enemies are my enemies.

Search me, O God, and know my heart;
 test me and know my anxious thoughts.
 Point out anything in me that offends you,
 and lead me along the path of everlasting life.

—*from the fifth book of Psalms*

TALKING TOGETHER:

God our Father is above us and below us, ahead of us and behind us. He surrounds us with his presence, and he knows every single thing about us. His Spirit is everywhere. He knew us before we were even born. His knowledge of you is this personal, this detailed. How comforting is this for you? Does this concern or bother you in any way?

It's important to remember that all this knowledge about us is surrounded by his affection and care. He made us in the first place simply from sheer love for us. He didn't have to do this, but he did it so we could know him and love him in return. He even sent his own Son, Jesus, into the world to demonstrate his love for us. What do you think it means to know God? Is knowing him related to following him?

DAY 32

Let Everyone, and All Things, Praise the Lord

(from *Poets*, pages 159-163)

If it is true that God is the Creator of everything, then everything exists to give him glory and honor. God deserves our love, our loyalty, and our praise. We exist to serve and love him, and we find our purpose in finding and following his will for our lives. But it's not just us! The entire universe exists to give God praise. All the wonders of his surprising and glorious creation exist to praise him. All people great and small owe him thanks—from kings and rulers to poor people and distressed foreigners. From the skies to the seas, and everything in-between, all things were created to give glory to God.



PSALM 146

Praise the LORD!

Let all that I am praise the LORD.

I will praise the LORD as long as I live.

I will sing praises to my God with my dying breath.

Don't put your confidence in powerful people;
 there is no help for you there.

When they breathe their last, they return to the earth,
 and all their plans die with them.

But joyful are those who have the God of Israel as their
 helper,

whose hope is in the LORD their God.

He made heaven and earth,
 the sea, and everything in them.

He keeps every promise forever.

He gives justice to the oppressed
 and food to the hungry.

The LORD frees the prisoners.

The LORD opens the eyes of the blind.

The LORD lifts up those who are weighed down.
 The LORD loves the godly.
 The LORD protects the foreigners among us.
 He cares for the orphans and widows,
 but he frustrates the plans of the wicked.

The LORD will reign forever.
 He will be your God, O Jerusalem, throughout the generations.

Praise the LORD!

PSALM 148

Praise the LORD!

Praise the LORD from the heavens!
 Praise him from the skies!
 Praise him, all his angels!
 Praise him, all the armies of heaven!
 Praise him, sun and moon!
 Praise him, all you twinkling stars!
 Praise him, skies above!
 Praise him, vapors high above the clouds!
 Let every created thing give praise to the LORD,
 for he issued his command, and they came into being.
 He set them in place forever and ever.
 His decree will never be revoked.

Praise the LORD from the earth,
 you creatures of the ocean depths,
 fire and hail, snow and clouds,
 wind and weather that obey him,
 mountains and all hills,
 fruit trees and all cedars,
 wild animals and all livestock,
 small scurrying animals and birds,
 kings of the earth and all people,
 rulers and judges of the earth,
 young men and young women,
 old men and children.

Let them all praise the name of the LORD.
 For his name is very great;
 his glory towers over the earth and heaven!

He has made his people strong,
 honoring his faithful ones—
 the people of Israel who are close to him.

Praise the LORD!

PSALM 150

Praise the LORD!

Praise God in his sanctuary;
 praise him in his mighty heaven!
 Praise him for his mighty works;
 praise his unequalled greatness!
 Praise him with a blast of the ram's horn;
 praise him with the lyre and harp!
 Praise him with the tambourine and
 dancing;
 praise him with strings and flutes!
 Praise him with a clash of cymbals;
 praise him with loud clanging cymbals.
 Let everything that breathes sing praises to the LORD!

Praise the LORD!

—*from the fifth book of Psalms*

TALKING TOGETHER:

There are lots of ways to praise and honor God. Singing beautiful songs of worship is certainly a key one. But we shouldn't forget that perhaps the greatest way to praise God is by how we live. God is honored when we follow his teachings and reflect his own character of justice and love. What are some of the ways you can praise God? Do you play a musical instrument? Do you enjoy singing? How can you live out a life of praise for God?

DAY 33

A Story of Suffering

(from *Poets*, pages 269-271)

The book of Job is a daring exploration of the deepest questions regarding our faith in God and his role in the world. According to the Bible, wisdom gives us the ability to understand the order God has placed in the world. But what happens when that ability is stretched to its limits? What are we to do when our explanations fail? What if the order in the world itself seems fractured?



There once was a man named Job who lived in the land of Uz. He was blameless—a man of complete integrity. He feared God and stayed away from evil. He had seven sons and three daughters. He owned 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 500 teams of oxen, and 500 female donkeys. He also had many servants. He was, in fact, the richest person in that entire area.

Job's sons would take turns preparing feasts in their homes, and they would also invite their three sisters to celebrate with them. When these celebrations ended—sometimes after several days—Job would purify his children. He would get up early in the morning and offer a burnt offering for each of them. For Job said to himself, "Perhaps my children have sinned and have cursed God in their hearts." This was Job's regular practice.

One day the members of the heavenly court came to present themselves before the LORD, and the Accuser, Satan, came with them. "Where have you come from?" the LORD asked Satan.

Satan answered the LORD, "I have been patrolling the earth, watching everything that's going on."

Then the LORD asked Satan, "Have you noticed my servant Job? He is the finest man in all the earth. He is blameless—a man of complete integrity. He fears God and stays away from evil."

Satan replied to the LORD, "Yes, but Job has good reason to fear God. You have always put a wall of protection around him and his home and his property. You have made him prosper in everything he does. Look how rich he is! But reach out and take away everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face!"

"All right, you may test him," the LORD said to Satan. "Do whatever you want with everything he possesses, but don't harm him physically." So Satan left the LORD's presence.

One day when Job's sons and daughters were feasting at the oldest brother's house, a messenger arrived at Job's home with this news: "Your oxen were plowing, with the donkeys feeding beside them, when the Sabeans raided us. They stole all the animals and killed all the farmhands. I am the only one who escaped to tell you."

While he was still speaking, another messenger arrived with this news: "The fire of God has fallen from heaven and burned up your sheep and all the shepherds. I am the only one who escaped to tell you."

While he was still speaking, a third messenger arrived with this news: "Three bands of Chaldean raiders have stolen your camels and killed your servants. I am the only one who escaped to tell you."

While he was still speaking, another messenger arrived with this news: "Your sons and daughters were feasting in their oldest brother's home. Suddenly, a powerful wind swept in from the wilderness and hit the house on all sides. The house collapsed, and all your children are dead. I am the only one who escaped to tell you."

Job stood up and tore his robe in grief. Then he shaved his head and fell to the ground to worship. He said,

"I came naked from my mother's womb,
and I will be naked when I leave.
The LORD gave me what I had,
and the LORD has taken it away.
Praise the name of the LORD!"

In all of this, Job did not sin by blaming God.

One day the members of the heavenly court came again to present themselves before the LORD, and the Accuser, Satan, came with them. "Where have you come from?" the LORD asked Satan.

Satan answered the LORD, "I have been patrolling the earth, watching everything that's going on."

Then the LORD asked Satan, "Have you noticed my servant Job? He is the finest man in all the earth. He is blameless—a man of complete integrity. He fears God and stays away from evil. And he has maintained his integrity, even though you urged me to harm him without cause."

Satan replied to the LORD, "Skin for skin! A man will give up everything he has to save his life. But reach out and take away his health, and he will surely curse you to your face!"

"All right, do with him as you please," the LORD said to Satan. "But spare

his life.” So Satan left the LORD’s presence, and he struck Job with terrible boils from head to foot.

Job scraped his skin with a piece of broken pottery as he sat among the ashes. His wife said to him, “Are you still trying to maintain your integrity? Curse God and die.”

But Job replied, “You talk like a foolish woman. Should we accept only good things from the hand of God and never anything bad?” So in all this, Job said nothing wrong.

When three of Job’s friends heard of the tragedy he had suffered, they got together and traveled from their homes to comfort and console him. Their names were Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite. When they saw Job from a distance, they scarcely recognized him. Wailing loudly, they tore their robes and threw dust into the air over their heads to show their grief. Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and nights. No one said a word to Job, for they saw that his suffering was too great for words.

—*from the book of Job*

TALKING TOGETHER:

Job has been exactly the kind of person the book of Proverbs envisions when it urges its readers to embrace wisdom. “He was blameless—a man of complete integrity. He feared God and stayed away from evil.” According to Israel’s wisdom tradition, godly character like this should have led to success and prosperity in life. Indeed, Job was very successful at first, but then disaster struck. Why did this happen? Why didn’t God protect Job? Why do bad things happen to good people?

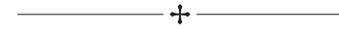
DAY 34

Let the Debate Begin!

(from *Poets*, pages 275-278)

The book of Job opens and closes with brief narrative sections that explain what God is doing. But most of the book is a long dialogue between Job and his three friends who have come to see him. The discussion happens in the form of lengthy poems that creatively (and aggressively!) set out the different positions. Job’s friends strongly claim

that Job must have sinned badly, and that’s why God is punishing him. Job protests just as strongly that he is innocent, that God has made a mistake. And so it begins.



Then Job spoke again:

“If my misery could be weighed
and my troubles be put on the scales,
they would outweigh all the sands of the sea.
That is why I spoke impulsively.
For the Almighty has struck me down with his arrows.
Their poison infects my spirit.
God’s terrors are lined up against me.
Don’t I have a right to complain?
Don’t wild donkeys bray when they find no grass,
and oxen bellow when they have no food?
Don’t people complain about unsalted food?
Does anyone want the tasteless white of an egg?
My appetite disappears when I look at it;
I gag at the thought of eating it!

“Oh, that I might have my request,
that God would grant my desire.
I wish he would crush me.
I wish he would reach out his hand and kill me.
At least I can take comfort in this:
Despite the pain,
I have not denied the words of the Holy One.
But I don’t have the strength to endure.
I have nothing to live for.
Do I have the strength of a stone?
Is my body made of bronze?
No, I am utterly helpless,
without any chance of success.

“One should be kind to a fainting friend,
but you accuse me without any fear of the Almighty.
My brothers, you have proved as unreliable as a seasonal brook
that overflows its banks in the spring
when it is swollen with ice and melting snow.
But when the hot weather arrives, the water disappears.
The brook vanishes in the heat.

The caravans turn aside to be refreshed,
 but there is nothing to drink, so they die.
 The caravans from Tema search for this water;
 the travelers from Sheba hope to find it.
 They count on it but are disappointed.
 When they arrive, their hopes are dashed.
 You, too, have given no help.
 You have seen my calamity, and you are afraid.
 But why? Have I ever asked you for a gift?
 Have I begged for anything of yours for myself?
 Have I asked you to rescue me from my enemies,
 or to save me from ruthless people?
 Teach me, and I will keep quiet.
 Show me what I have done wrong.
 Honest words can be painful,
 but what do your criticisms amount to?
 Do you think your words are convincing
 when you disregard my cry of desperation?
 You would even send an orphan into slavery
 or sell a friend.
 Look at me!
 Would I lie to your face?
 Stop assuming my guilt,
 for I have done no wrong.
 Do you think I am lying?
 Don't I know the difference between right and wrong?" . . .

+

Then Bildad the Shuhite replied to Job:

"How long will you go on like this?
 You sound like a blustering wind.
 Does God twist justice?
 Does the Almighty twist what is right?
 Your children must have sinned against him,
 so their punishment was well deserved.
 But if you pray to God
 and seek the favor of the Almighty,
 and if you are pure and live with integrity,
 he will surely rise up and restore your happy home.
 And though you started with little,
 you will end with much. . . .

"But look, God will not reject a person of integrity,
 nor will he lend a hand to the wicked.
 He will once again fill your mouth with laughter
 and your lips with shouts of joy.
 Those who hate you will be clothed with shame,
 and the home of the wicked will be destroyed."

—*from the book of Job*

TALKING TOGETHER:

Have you ever felt utterly helpless and alone? Has despair ever come over you, convincing you that nothing could ever be right again? This is how Job felt. He'd lost everything—all his possessions and even his children. This was the bottom of the barrel, and it's exactly where Job was. Not many of us have suffered what Job suffered, but we've all known the real pain of loss. What do you do when you feel terrible? Do you talk to God about that pain?

DAY 35

Taking the Case to God Himself

(from *Poets*, pages 283-285, 287-288)

Job and his friends go back and forth, with each friend answering Job in turn. Job sticks to his story that he is not being punished for his own wrongdoing. He knows he's been a man of integrity, following God's instructions completely. But his friends just don't believe him. They are sure that terrible things like this only happen to people who have been terrible themselves. But this debate is not really between Job and his friends. Job answers their accusations, but what he really wants is to present his case directly to God. He trusts God to be honest and to know the truth. If only he could meet with God.

— + —

Then Job spoke again:

"You people really know everything, don't you?
 And when you die, wisdom will die with you!"

Well, I know a few things myself—
 and you're no better than I am.
 Who doesn't know these things you've been saying?
 Yet my friends laugh at me,
 for I call on God and expect an answer.
 I am a just and blameless man,
 yet they laugh at me.
 People who are at ease mock those in trouble.
 They give a push to people who are stumbling.
 But robbers are left in peace,
 and those who provoke God live in safety—
 though God keeps them in his power. . . .

"Look, I have seen all this with my own eyes
 and heard it with my own ears, and now I understand.
 I know as much as you do.
 You are no better than I am.
 As for me, I would speak directly to the Almighty.
 I want to argue my case with God himself.
 As for you, you smear me with lies.
 As physicians, you are worthless quacks.
 If only you could be silent!
 That's the wisest thing you could do.
 Listen to my charge;
 pay attention to my arguments.

"Are you defending God with lies?
 Do you make your dishonest arguments for his sake?
 Will you slant your testimony in his favor?
 Will you argue God's case for him?
 What will happen when he finds out what you are doing?
 Can you fool him as easily as you fool people?
 No, you will be in trouble with him
 if you secretly slant your testimony in his favor.
 Doesn't his majesty terrify you?
 Doesn't your fear of him overwhelm you?
 Your platitudes are as valuable as ashes.
 Your defense is as fragile as a clay pot.

"Be silent now and leave me alone.
 Let me speak, and I will face the consequences.
 Why should I put myself in mortal danger
 and take my life in my own hands?

God might kill me, but I have no other hope.
 I am going to argue my case with him.
 But this is what will save me—I am not godless.
 If I were, I could not stand before him.
 "Listen closely to what I am about to say.
 Hear me out.
 I have prepared my case;
 I will be proved innocent.
 Who can argue with me over this?
 And if you prove me wrong, I will remain silent and die." . . .

+

Then Eliphaz the Temanite replied:

"A wise man wouldn't answer with such empty talk!
 You are nothing but a windbag.
 The wise don't engage in empty chatter.
 What good are such words?
 Have you no fear of God,
 no reverence for him?
 Your sins are telling your mouth what to say.
 Your words are based on clever deception.
 Your own mouth condemns you, not I.
 Your own lips testify against you.

"Were you the first person ever born?
 Were you born before the hills were made?
 Were you listening at God's secret council?
 Do you have a monopoly on wisdom?
 What do you know that we don't?
 What do you understand that we do not?
 On our side are aged, gray-haired men
 much older than your father! . . .

"If you will listen, I will show you.
 I will answer you from my own experience.
 And it is confirmed by the reports of wise men
 who have heard the same thing from their fathers—
 from those to whom the land was given
 long before any foreigners arrived.

"The wicked writhe in pain throughout their lives.
 Years of trouble are stored up for the ruthless.

The sound of terror rings in their ears,
 and even on good days they fear the attack of the destroyer.
 They dare not go out into the darkness
 for fear they will be murdered.
 They wander around, saying, ‘Where can I find bread?’
 They know their day of destruction is near.
 That dark day terrifies them.
 They live in distress and anguish,
 like a king preparing for battle.
 For they shake their fists at God,
 defying the Almighty.
 Holding their strong shields,
 they defiantly charge against him.”

—*from the book of Job*

TALKING TOGETHER:

We can hear Job’s deep frustration with the situation. He’s frustrated with his friends because they’ve turned on him without really knowing the truth. He’s frustrated with God for somehow allowing these horrible things to happen in his life even though Job has been a faithful and just man. What more can Job possibly do? How could he change his friends’ minds? What happens if God remains silent?

DAY 36

Why Is God Tearing Me Apart?

(from *Poets*, pages 289-292)

Now Job turns his attention almost completely to God. Job knows that his deeper struggle is there, not really with his friends. He disagrees with how his friends see the situation, but he also knows they didn’t cause his suffering. Somehow, God allowed all these disasters to happen, so Job focuses on what God is doing to him.

————— † —————

Then Job spoke again:

“I have heard all this before.
 What miserable comforters you are!

Won’t you ever stop blowing hot air?
 What makes you keep on talking?
 I could say the same things if you were in my place.
 I could spout off criticism and shake my head at you.
 But if it were me, I would encourage you.
 I would try to take away your grief.
 Instead, I suffer if I defend myself,
 and I suffer no less if I refuse to speak.
 “O God, you have ground me down
 and devastated my family.
 As if to prove I have sinned, you’ve reduced me to skin and bones.
 My gaunt flesh testifies against me.
 God hates me and angrily tears me apart.
 He snaps his teeth at me
 and pierces me with his eyes.
 People jeer and laugh at me.
 They slap my cheek in contempt.
 A mob gathers against me.
 God has handed me over to sinners.
 He has tossed me into the hands of the wicked.
 “I was living quietly until he shattered me.
 He took me by the neck and broke me in pieces.
 Then he set me up as his target,
 and now his archers surround me.
 His arrows pierce me without mercy.
 The ground is wet with my blood.
 Again and again he smashes against me,
 charging at me like a warrior.
 I wear burlap to show my grief.
 My pride lies in the dust.
 My eyes are red with weeping;
 dark shadows circle my eyes.
 Yet I have done no wrong,
 and my prayer is pure.” . . .

+

Then Bildad the Shuhite replied:

“How long before you stop talking?
 Speak sense if you want us to answer!
 Do you think we are mere animals?
 Do you think we are stupid?

You may tear out your hair in anger,
but will that destroy the earth?
Will it make the rocks tremble?

“Surely the light of the wicked will be snuffed out.
The sparks of their fire will not glow.
The light in their tent will grow dark.
The lamp hanging above them will be quenched.
The confident stride of the wicked will be shortened.
Their own schemes will be their downfall.
The wicked walk into a net.
They fall into a pit.
A trap grabs them by the heel.
A snare holds them tight.
A noose lies hidden on the ground.
A rope is stretched across their path.

“Terrors surround the wicked
and trouble them at every step.
Hunger depletes their strength,
and calamity waits for them to stumble.
Disease eats their skin;
death devours their limbs.
They are torn from the security of their homes
and are brought down to the king of terrors.
The homes of the wicked will burn down;
burning sulfur rains on their houses.
Their roots will dry up,
and their branches will wither.
All memory of their existence will fade from the earth;
no one will remember their names.
They will be thrust from light into darkness,
driven from the world.
They will have neither children nor grandchildren,
nor any survivor in the place where they lived.
People in the west are appalled at their fate;
people in the east are horrified.
They will say, “This was the home of a wicked person,
the place of one who rejected God.”

—*from the book of Job*

TALKING TOGETHER:

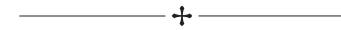
Job is humiliated and suffering deeply. Even his friends have turned on him, blaming Job for all the terrible things that have happened. Bildad tells Job that disasters like this happen only to the wicked, because God always protects righteous people. Job is in pain physically and deeply distressed emotionally. Yet notice this: Job keeps talking to God. Job doesn't understand what is happening, and he's angry about it. But he doesn't shut God out. He takes his frustration and pain to the God he doesn't understand. This is clearly one of the messages of the book of Job for us, too. What do you do with your pain?

DAY 37

The Other Side of the Problem

(from *Poets*, pages 295-298)

It's one thing when terrible events happen to good people. But now Job points out the other side of his issue with God. Why do evil people prosper? Why do those who ignore God and serve only themselves so often do well in life? They are frequently rich and powerful and have everything they want. If God has built his wisdom into the world, and if God himself is in charge, why would this happen?



Then Job spoke again:

“Listen closely to what I am saying.
That's one consolation you can give me.
Bear with me, and let me speak.
After I have spoken, you may resume mocking me.

“My complaint is with God, not with people.
I have good reason to be so impatient.
Look at me and be stunned.
Put your hand over your mouth in shock.
When I think about what I am saying, I shudder.
My body trembles.

“Why do the wicked prosper,
growing old and powerful?

They live to see their children grow up and settle down,
 and they enjoy their grandchildren.
 Their homes are safe from every fear,
 and God does not punish them.
 Their bulls never fail to breed.
 Their cows bear calves and never miscarry.
 They let their children frisk about like lambs.
 Their little ones skip and dance.
 They sing with tambourine and harp.
 They celebrate to the sound of the flute.
 They spend their days in prosperity,
 then go down to the grave in peace.
 And yet they say to God, ‘Go away.
 We want no part of you and your ways.
 Who is the Almighty, and why should we obey him?
 What good will it do us to pray?’
 (They think their prosperity is of their own doing,
 but I will have nothing to do with that kind of thinking.)

“Yet the light of the wicked never seems to be extinguished.
 Do they ever have trouble?
 Does God distribute sorrows to them in anger?
 Are they driven before the wind like straw?
 Are they carried away by the storm like chaff?
 Not at all! . . .

“Look, I know what you’re thinking.
 I know the schemes you plot against me.
 You will tell me of rich and wicked people
 whose houses have vanished because of their sins.
 But ask those who have been around,
 and they will tell you the truth.
 Evil people are spared in times of calamity
 and are allowed to escape disaster.
 No one criticizes them openly
 or pays them back for what they have done.
 When they are carried to the grave,
 an honor guard keeps watch at their tomb.
 A great funeral procession goes to the cemetery.
 Many pay their respects as the body is laid to rest,
 and the earth gives sweet repose.

“How can your empty clichés comfort me?
 All your explanations are lies!”

+

Then Eliphaz the Temanite replied:

“Can a person do anything to help God?
 Can even a wise person be helpful to him?
 Is it any advantage to the Almighty if you are righteous?
 Would it be any gain to him if you were perfect?
 Is it because you’re so pious that he accuses you
 and brings judgment against you?
 No, it’s because of your wickedness!
 There’s no limit to your sins.

“For example, you must have lent money to your friend
 and demanded clothing as security.
 Yes, you stripped him to the bone.
 You must have refused water for the thirsty
 and food for the hungry.
 You probably think the land belongs to the powerful
 and only the privileged have a right to it!
 You must have sent widows away empty-handed
 and crushed the hopes of orphans.
 That is why you are surrounded by traps
 and tremble from sudden fears.
 That is why you cannot see in the darkness,
 and waves of water cover you. . . .

“Submit to God, and you will have peace;
 then things will go well for you.
 Listen to his instructions,
 and store them in your heart.
 If you return to the Almighty, you will be restored—
 so clean up your life.
 If you give up your lust for money
 and throw your precious gold into the river,
 the Almighty himself will be your treasure.
 He will be your precious silver!”

—*from the book of Job*

TALKING TOGETHER:

Another key message in this book is that it’s important for us to learn the difference between what is temporary and what is lasting. When we look at the world right now, we will see much that is wrong, broken, and

unjust. God seems to be allowing evil to thrive and go unpunished. In such a world it can be challenging to continue believing both that God is good and that he is powerful.

What should we do in such a situation? As Job said earlier about himself: "My eyes are red with weeping; dark shadows circle my eyes." The first thing we do is lament the existence of wrongdoing in our world. We should be filled with sadness and grief at so much pain and so much injustice. But the second thing to do is to stubbornly hold on to our hope in God. What is present now will not last forever. God's new world has already been born through the work of Jesus the Messiah. Pray that this new world of God's justice and peace will come to us completely, and soon.

DAY 38

Lost Dreams

(from *Poets*, pages 305-307)

The back and forth between Job and his friends seems endless. They go around and around, but no one is changing anyone else's mind. Finally, Job gives a long poetic speech that lays out his case in depth. He remembers his former life, when all was going well and God was blessing him. He recalls all the good things he used to do, honoring God and serving others. Now he is afraid he will simply die in his dishonor and shame, mocked by his friends, with everyone believing that he is a wicked person.



Job continued speaking:

"I long for the years gone by
 when God took care of me,
 when he lit up the way before me
 and I walked safely through the darkness.
 When I was in my prime,
 God's friendship was felt in my home.
 The Almighty was still with me,
 and my children were around me.
 My steps were awash in cream,
 and the rocks gushed olive oil for me.

"Those were the days when I went to the city gate
 and took my place among the honored leaders.
 The young stepped aside when they saw me,
 and even the aged rose in respect at my coming.
 The princes stood in silence
 and put their hands over their mouths.
 The highest officials of the city stood quietly,
 holding their tongues in respect.

"All who heard me praised me.
 All who saw me spoke well of me.
 For I assisted the poor in their need
 and the orphans who required help.
 I helped those without hope, and they blessed me.
 And I caused the widows' hearts to sing for joy.
 Everything I did was honest.
 Righteousness covered me like a robe,
 and I wore justice like a turban.
 I served as eyes for the blind
 and feet for the lame.

I was a father to the poor
 and assisted strangers who needed help.
 I broke the jaws of godless oppressors
 and plucked their victims from their teeth.

"I thought, 'Surely I will die surrounded by my family
 after a long, good life.
 For I am like a tree whose roots reach the water,
 whose branches are refreshed with the dew.
 New honors are constantly bestowed on me,
 and my strength is continually renewed.' . . .

"And now they mock me with vulgar songs!
 They taunt me!
 They despise me and won't come near me,
 except to spit in my face.
 For God has cut my bowstring.
 He has humbled me,
 so they have thrown off all restraint.
 These outcasts oppose me to my face.
 They send me sprawling
 and lay traps in my path.
 They block my road
 and do everything they can to destroy me.

They know I have no one to help me.
 They come at me from all directions.
 They jump on me when I am down.
 I live in terror now.
 My honor has blown away in the wind,
 and my prosperity has vanished like a cloud.

“And now my life seeps away.
 Depression haunts my days.
 At night my bones are filled with pain,
 which gnaws at me relentlessly.
 With a strong hand, God grabs my shirt.
 He grips me by the collar of my coat.
 He has thrown me into the mud.
 I’m nothing more than dust and ashes.

“I cry to you, O God, but you don’t answer.
 I stand before you, but you don’t even look.
 You have become cruel toward me.
 You use your power to persecute me.
 You throw me into the whirlwind
 and destroy me in the storm.
 And I know you are sending me to my death—
 the destination of all who live.”

—*from the book of Job*

TALKING TOGETHER:

Take note of Job’s description of what a righteous life looks like. Job was recognized for speaking wisely. He helped strangers, the poor, and orphans. He was always honest. As a result, God’s friendship was felt in his home. God walked with him on his journeys. Job and his family were safely under God’s protection. Now Job longs for those days of goodness and blessing.

We can take this all to heart ourselves. We, too, can embrace the good life and follow God faithfully. What will happen to us then? Are we promised that no tragedies will come to us? No matter what happens, we can follow Job’s example all the way through. If you have suffered difficult things in your life, have you been able to continue your relationship with God, pleading with and praying for him to restore what has been lost? Have you remained loyal to him, asking him to finish his work of healing in you and in the world we all live in?

DAY 39

A New Voice

(from *Poets*, pages 310-311, 314-315, 317)

Job’s speech goes on for so long that his friends simply give up and don’t bother responding to him anymore. So the debate between Job and his friends ends in a stalemate. What now? At this point a new voice enters the discussion. For the first time Elihu, a younger man, speaks out. Elihu is passionate about his perspective, and he’s angry with everyone, including Job.



Job’s three friends refused to reply further to him because he kept insisting on his innocence.

Then Elihu son of Barakel the Buzite, of the clan of Ram, became angry. He was angry because Job refused to admit that he had sinned and that God was right in punishing him. He was also angry with Job’s three friends, for they made God appear to be wrong by their inability to answer Job’s arguments. Elihu had waited for the others to speak to Job because they were older than he. But when he saw that they had no further reply, he spoke out angrily. Elihu son of Barakel the Buzite said,

“I am young and you are old,
 so I held back from telling you what I think.
 I thought, ‘Those who are older should speak,
 for wisdom comes with age.’
 But there is a spirit within people,
 the breath of the Almighty within them,
 that makes them intelligent.
 Sometimes the elders are not wise.
 Sometimes the aged do not understand
 justice.
 So listen to me,
 and let me tell you what I think. . . .

“Now listen to me if you are wise.
 Pay attention to what I say.
 Could God govern if he hated justice?”

Are you going to condemn the almighty judge?
 For he says to kings, ‘You are wicked,’
 and to nobles, ‘You are unjust.’
 He doesn’t care how great a person may be,
 and he pays no more attention to the rich than to the poor.
 He made them all.
 In a moment they die.
 In the middle of the night they pass away;
 the mighty are removed without human hand.

“For God watches how people live;
 he sees everything they do.
 No darkness is thick enough
 to hide the wicked from his eyes.
 We don’t set the time
 when we will come before God in judgment.
 He brings the mighty to ruin without asking anyone,
 and he sets up others in their place.
 He knows what they do,
 and in the night he overturns and destroys them.
 He strikes them down because they are wicked,
 doing it openly for all to see.
 For they turned away from following him.
 They have no respect for any of his ways.
 They cause the poor to cry out, catching God’s attention.
 He hears the cries of the needy.
 But if he chooses to remain quiet,
 who can criticize him?
 When he hides his face, no one can find him,
 whether an individual or a nation.
 He prevents the godless from ruling
 so they cannot be a snare to the people.

“Why don’t people say to God, ‘I have sinned,
 but I will sin no more’?
 Or ‘I don’t know what evil I have done—tell me.
 If I have done wrong, I will stop at once’?

“Must God tailor his justice to your demands?
 But you have rejected him!
 The choice is yours, not mine.
 Go ahead, share your wisdom with us.
 After all, bright people will tell me,

and wise people will hear me say,
 ‘Job speaks out of ignorance;
 his words lack insight.’
 Job, you deserve the maximum penalty
 for the wicked way you have talked.
 For you have added rebellion to your sin;
 you show no respect,
 and you speak many angry words against God. . . .

+

“God is leading you away from danger, Job,
 to a place free from distress.
 He is setting your table with the best food.
 But you are obsessed with whether the godless will be judged.
 Don’t worry, judgment and justice will be upheld.
 But watch out, or you may be seduced by wealth.
 Don’t let yourself be bribed into sin.
 Could all your wealth
 or all your mighty efforts
 keep you from distress?
 Do not long for the cover of night,
 for that is when people will be destroyed.
 Be on guard! Turn back from evil,
 for God sent this suffering
 to keep you from a life of evil.

“Look, God is all-powerful.
 Who is a teacher like him?
 No one can tell him what to do,
 or say to him, ‘You have done wrong.’
 Instead, glorify his mighty works,
 singing songs of praise.
 Everyone has seen these things,
 though only from a distance.

“Look, God is greater than we can understand.
 His years cannot be counted.”

—*from the book of Job*

TALKING TOGETHER:

Elihu claims to be wise and to bring something new to the conversation.
 But it seems he is locked in to the same perspective as Job’s friends. All

of them believed that since God is a God of justice, we can easily figure out for ourselves what he is doing in the world. Their easy formula was that if someone suffers, God must be punishing them. When everything is going well and people prosper, God must be blessing them for their righteousness.

Do you think God can be reduced to this formula? Does God have to do what we think he should do?

DAY 40

And Then God Speaks

(from *Poets*, pages 319-320, 323, 326-327)

It is not until the very end of this book that we finally hear from God himself. He has allowed Job and his friends to have their conversation, and he has not intervened. But now the LORD has decided to speak, and it is clear from the start that he speaks with an authority that none of the others have. God's position and perspective is higher and greater than anything humans can have. Now the roles are reversed, and God is the one asking the questions.



Then the LORD answered Job from the whirlwind:

“Who is this that questions my wisdom
with such ignorant words?
Brace yourself like a man,
because I have some questions for you,
and you must answer them.

“Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?
Tell me, if you know so much.
Who determined its dimensions
and stretched out the surveying line?
What supports its foundations,
and who laid its cornerstone
as the morning stars sang together
and all the angels shouted for joy?

“Who kept the sea inside its boundaries

as it burst from the womb,
and as I clothed it with clouds
and wrapped it in thick darkness?
For I locked it behind barred gates,
limiting its shores.

I said, ‘This far and no farther will you come.
Here your proud waves must stop!’

“Have you ever commanded the morning to appear
and caused the dawn to rise in the east?
Have you made daylight spread to the ends of the earth,
to bring an end to the night's wickedness?

As the light approaches,
the earth takes shape like clay pressed beneath a seal;
it is robed in brilliant colors.

The light disturbs the wicked
and stops the arm that is raised in violence.

“Have you explored the springs from which the seas come?
Have you explored their depths?
Do you know where the gates of death are located?
Have you seen the gates of utter gloom?
Do you realize the extent of the earth?
Tell me about it if you know!

“Where does light come from,
and where does darkness go?
Can you take each to its home?
Do you know how to get there?
But of course you know all this!
For you were born before it was all created,
and you are so very experienced!” . . .

Then the LORD said to Job,

“Do you still want to argue with the Almighty?
You are God's critic, but do you have the answers?” . . .



Then Job replied to the LORD:

“I know that you can do anything,
and no one can stop you.
You asked, ‘Who is this that questions my wisdom with such
ignorance?’

It is I—and I was talking about things I knew nothing about,
 things far too wonderful for me.
 You said, ‘Listen and I will speak!
 I have some questions for you,
 and you must answer them.’
 I had only heard about you before,
 but now I have seen you with my own eyes.
 I take back everything I said,
 and I sit in dust and ashes to show my repentance.”

+ + +

After the LORD had finished speaking to Job, he said to Eliphaz the Temanite: “I am angry with you and your two friends, for you have not spoken accurately about me, as my servant Job has. So take seven bulls and seven rams and go to my servant Job and offer a burnt offering for yourselves. My servant Job will pray for you, and I will accept his prayer on your behalf. I will not treat you as you deserve, for you have not spoken accurately about me, as my servant Job has.” So Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite did as the LORD commanded them, and the LORD accepted Job’s prayer.

When Job prayed for his friends, the LORD restored his fortunes. In fact, the LORD gave him twice as much as before! Then all his brothers, sisters, and former friends came and feasted with him in his home. And they consoled him and comforted him because of all the trials the LORD had brought against him. And each of them brought him a gift of money and a gold ring.

So the LORD blessed Job in the second half of his life even more than in the beginning. For now he had 14,000 sheep, 6,000 camels, 1,000 teams of oxen, and 1,000 female donkeys. He also gave Job seven more sons and three more daughters. He named his first daughter Jemimah, the second Keziah, and the third Keren-happuch. In all the land no women were as lovely as the daughters of Job. And their father put them into his will along with their brothers.

Job lived 140 years after that, living to see four generations of his children and grandchildren. Then he died, an old man who had lived a long, full life.

—*from the book of Job*

TALKING TOGETHER:

The LORD’s magnificent speech declares his creative power and mastery over the entire creation. God has intimate knowledge and oversight of all things. In contrast, we see only from our small perspective and limited

grasp of the bigger picture. Specifically, God says Job’s friends were deeply mistaken. We never know the full story of those who suffer, and it was wrong to claim that Job’s ordeal was a punishment from God. God is above and beyond us, doing things we know nothing about. We are to find no easy comfort or blame in our formulas about God.

If God alone sees all things, what does this mean for our life with him? How can we increase our faith in God when we see or experience things we don’t like? If God is a God of justice, how do we know he will make things right in the end?