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Honest to God

Psalms for Scribblers, Scrawlers, and Sketchers

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Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Contents

Preface	5
Knowing Myself	11
Knowing God	49
Knowing How to Live	103
Knowing Where We're Going	137

Preface

I'm no theologian—let's get that on the table right away. I don't know Greek or Hebrew. I never took a seminary class, and I don't know much at all about the conventions of Hebrew poetry. What's more, if I were to walk two blocks east to the college library, I could find a shelf full of books on the Psalms, more than you or I could ever read. I'm no expert, and this book of meditations is not the last word on the Bible's most celebrated poetry.

Hanging on the wall just above my computer, a framed diploma documents the fact that I have a graduate degree in the study of literature, but I'm not sure a degree helps all that much. I'm quite confident, in fact, that God, in his infinite wisdom, doesn't believe literary scholars are any better at reading his Word than the butcher, the baker, or the candlestick maker. After all, look what Jesus said about kids and their faith.

But I am a child of the Protestant Reformation, enough, at least, to believe that the Scriptures belong to all of us, and especially to those who have ears to hear and who love the Lord God Almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth—the God who has given us what Eugene Peterson calls “The Message.” Once upon a time the open Bible was positioned in church sanctuaries in such a way that only

priests had access to its contents. The Reformation—and Johannes Gutenberg—changed all that. Some congregations keep an open Bible at the front of the church, facing not the clergy but the people. The Reformation made life for believers decidedly more democratic. Power to the people.

Way back in grade school, Christian grade school, this Protestant kid was taught that reading the Word and studying it was both a joy and a way of life. That massive book, I came to believe, offers precious truths central to living a joyful, blessed life.

I'm older now, and not quite so sure that understanding God's Word is as easy as I was once told or thought. Oh, the truth is still there, the truth once summarized for me by an old friend who said that the whole story of the Bible is quite simple: we continually mess up, but God somehow loves us anyway. As a rule book for life, the Bible offers guidance all right, but not as propositionally—"Do this, don't do that"—as I once thought.

I've remained a kid who believes in the Word. I believe that reading it, studying it, thinking about it is not only eternally beneficial but very much a blessing here and now. That is to say, reading the Bible will not only help you and me gather some strong sense of our eternal destinies, it will also help us steer our way through the abundant and sometimes perplexing creation the Creator loves so much and gave us for our joy and his praise. This world is a vale of tears all right, but it's also a wonderland.

The Bible—and the Psalms—are instructive. No doubt. But it seems to me we're fooling ourselves if we believe we'll ever

understand it or them fully (whatever *fully* means). When I was a kid—say, sixth grade or so—my favorite biblical passage was the one where Christ beckons us: “Come to me. . . . Take my yoke upon you and learn from me” (Matthew 11:28-29). Honestly I didn’t have a clue what that meant when I was twelve. I think I know better today. The Bible hasn’t changed but—trust me on this—from six to sixty, I have.

But then, understanding what the Bible says is not a one-time moment. Understanding both God’s Word and our response to it is a pilgrimage that reaches its ordained destination at the Celestial City some day, and not here on *terra firma*. So let’s be clear: nothing I say in these meditations is authoritative or scholarly, certainly not definitive. What I say is what these absolutely precious lines of holy poetry make me envision.

Throughout my life I’ve found that writing out what I think is a powerfully healthy exercise. A man named Abraham Kuyper taught me some things about writing devotions. I didn’t know him, of course; he was dead long before I was born. He was once Prime Minister of the Netherlands, a prolific writer and journalist in addition to being a politician and a clergyman. Thousands of people of my tribe—the Dutch Calvinists—came to North America as immigrants in the last century toting books by Kuyper.

One of those books, *To Be Near Unto God*, was a much-beloved favorite among my ancestors. Years ago, I started reading that book and then decided to revise it to make it more “contemporary.” When I did, I learned something about the way Abraham Kuyper operated

as a devotional writer. To me Kuyper seemed to be something of a jazz musician when it came to meditation. Comparing nineteenth-century Dutch Calvinists to jazz musicians is a stretch, I know—worth a hearty giggle, in fact. But I swear it's true. When Kuyper took hold of a text, he took off on a riff the way a blues saxophonist might do. He let loose. He let himself go, let himself think, let himself dream. He ambled around the scriptural territory, finding his way eventually to real meaning.

That's what I'm doing in these meditations, and that's what I'm asking you to do—just riff.

One more thing. I've been teaching writing for my whole professional life, while doing a good bit of it myself—writing, that is. Southern writer Flannery O'Connor once claimed that she really didn't know what she thought about things until she put pen to paper. "I don't know so well what I think until I see what I say," she once wrote to a friend. "Then I have to say it over again." To most of the writers I know, that makes perfect sense. It's a kind of creed. In all truth, writing is—for me and for many others—a way of knowing.

Now listen to the teacher. Read the passage, read the meditation, and then scribble down whatever that prompts from your heart and head and soul. Doing that will help you make sense of things. Trust me. Better yet, trust Flannery O'Connor.

Have fun. Be real. This isn't Bible study, and you don't have to bounce things off someone else or wonder whether your thoughts pass muster. You don't have to listen to some other fool's prattle. Neither did David the king, David the poet. I believe that one of the

reasons God Almighty claimed that David was a man close to his heart was because David was always in conversation with his Lord, no matter what his mood. Sometimes he raised his hands in praise; other times he raised his fists in anger. The psalms teach us that God Almighty has really thick skin. So trust God's largesse and love, and just write.

Let 'er riff!

Blessings,

James Calvin Schaap

Knowing Myself

All men should strive to learn before they die
what they are running from, and to, and why.

—James Thurber

‡

There is no one on earth who is righteous,
no one who does what is right and never sins.

—Ecclesiastes 7:20

‡

Stronghold

The salvation of the righteous comes from the LORD;
he is their stronghold in time of trouble.

—Psalm 37:39



I admit it. I've never taken much of a shine to the praise team phenomenon—four or five people from the congregation standing up and leading the singing. It's no burning issue with me, and I get along just fine every Sunday when a new praise team stands up and does its thing. I'm just saying I could easily do without.

Last night in a bigger auditorium the praise team was greatly enlarged, maybe twenty folks strong. I liked that, perhaps because with more of them singing they were a forest, not just trees—if that makes any sense.

Several of them were kids, two or three of them too young to know the words to most of the music. But they knew one song,

an old children's song I hadn't heard for a bunch of decades. I don't know if the song has a title, but it's about the parable of the house built upon a rock: "The wise man built his house upon a rock (*repeat three times*) . . . and the house upon the rock stood firm." Boom. End of verse. That kind of firm.

In case you don't know it, the next verse compares the efforts of the foolish man who built his house upon the sand: once the rains fell, his sad shack went "splat." I didn't remember a "splat" when I was a kid—the song's been updated these days for more oomph. There are actions too—lots of pounding because there's lots of building.

The final chorus made *me* go "splat": "The blessings come down as the prayers go up (*repeat three times*) . . . so build your life upon the Lord."

It's so blasted easy, so childlike. It's like first-grade math, when everything still makes sense: the more we pray, the more we're blessed. Need more goodies, just bow your head. Prosperity is guaranteed for those who supplicate.

Honestly, the spiritual transaction the song offers as verifiable, biblical truth simply isn't as easy to buy as it is to sing. And it certainly wasn't yesterday.

Those of us who know depression know that blessings just don't descend or arise that simply. If I could tally the prayers we've given in the last several years—and I know others who have suffered far longer—my closet would overflow, I swear. But yesterday, while we were singing that little children's ditty, some people I know and

love were off very much on their own, still looking frantically for themselves in what seems to be utter darkness, and I don't have the strength to build a house. What's more, I shouldn't, because sure as anything I'm standing on sand.

Years ago, in the Superstition Mountains of Arizona, I remember hiking to a place called "Cochise's Cave," a stronghold the old Apache chief used more than a century ago. Standing there, I had a very clear sense of what it meant to think of God Almighty as a fortress, a stronghold, even a rock—all of that real psalm language. From Cochise's Cave, you could see for miles, and nobody could sneak up. Trust me, any fugitive could get some great shut-eye in Cochise's Cave. So often in the psalms, that's where David says he is—at home in the rock that is the Lord.

I know a stronghold when I see it, when I'm in one.

But it's just not as easy as 1-2-3 or as fun as a praise team.

How does the line go? "I believe, Lord; help my unbelief."

Prayer

The truth is, Lord, there are times when the darkness simply doesn't admit much light, even though we beg and beg and beg. Don't hide from us. Please don't turn away. Be that brilliant porch light shining on our path. Keep us in your hand, your stronghold, especially when it seems as if we've been so terribly left behind. Amen.

Riff

Just exactly what don't you believe? Or when don't you believe?