

A SOMERSET PSALTER

BOOK I

The Journey Begins

PARAPHRASE AND DESIGN
BY JON THURLOW

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PREFACE

Finding fresh words to pray

Prayer has always been part of my life. As a child, it was bedtime prayers; later, it became a way of navigating the joys and challenges of daily living.

But there came a time when the words dried up. A few years ago, I journeyed through a season when I no longer knew how to pray. I didn't know what to say or how to connect with God. The silence felt heavy, overwhelming.

I remember one morning in particular, while house-sitting for friends. I opened a Bible for the first time in months, almost hesitantly, and began to take a few lines from the Psalms and turn them into my own words, words which spoke of my own situation.

It was at that moment that I rediscovered something I had always known but had somehow forgotten: when I cannot find my own words, I can borrow the words of others.

The Psalms gave me prayers when I was unable to articulate my own. They held before God the pain, sorrow, anger, hope, and gratitude that I was unable to voice.

My hope is that they will become for you what they became for me — words to lean on, prayers to carry when your own words run dry, a spring of life to draw from again and again.



THE JOURNEY BEGINS

The journey begins with two paths,
two ways of walking, two selves often at war within us.

Amid the chaos and instability of modern life, many of us long to be rooted, to flourish.

In my own landscape, the willow has become a living parable of that longing, rooted deeply beside the waters,
quietly flourishing,
bearing fruit in season.

We begin with that intention,
that through prayer, through silence,
through turning towards the God present in our innermost being,
we might become more fully the people we were created to be.

It is a life-long journey,
a path open to all,
a path we never walk alone.



PSALM 1

The Two Paths

Happy are those who do not
walk in the counsel of the crooked,
stand in the way of the wicked,
or sit in the seat of the scornful.

Their pleasure is in the Teachings of the ETERNAL,
they murmur over it, day and night.

They are like a willow,
rooted where the waters run,
offering its fruit when the time is ripe.
Their leaves will not fade or fall;
everything they do will flourish.

Not so for the wicked ones!
They are like chaff,
scattered far by gusts of wind.
No standing for them when the verdict falls,
no place in the assembly of the righteous.

The ETERNAL tends the paths of the upright,
but the way of the wicked will come to nothing.



PSALM 2

Why Such Chaos?

Why such chaos amongst the nations?
Why all this pointless plotting and scheming?
The kings of the earth stand together
and the politicians conspire against the ETERNAL's anointed one.

They say,
'Let's tear off these chains
and throw off these ropes that hold us.'

The one who sits as ruler of heaven shall laugh;
yes, the ETERNAL will mock from on high,
confronting them in anger saying,
'I have placed my king on Zion, my holy hill.'

The king says,
'I will declare what the ETERNAL has revealed to me.
You are my son,
today I declare I am your father.
Ask, and I will give you the nations as your inheritance.
I will give you the whole earth.
You will rule them with a rod of iron,
you will shatter their power,
like the broken shards of a potter's jar.'

Now, a word for kings — rule wisely.
Be warned, those who govern the earth:
work for the ETERNAL with honour and awe.
Rejoice with trembling, kiss the son,
or you may provoke anger,
and take the road to destruction.
God's anger ignites for an instant,
but all who take shelter in the ETERNAL are truly happy!



PSALM 3

You are My Shield

A Psalm of David.
When David fled from his son Absalom.

ETERNAL One, my enemies are multiplying!
There are many who stand against me;
so many who say,
'God cannot help you now.'

Silence

But you, the ETERNAL, are my shield, my glory,
you lift up my head.

I cry out to the ETERNAL,
and an answer comes from God's holy hill.

Silence

I lie down and sleep and wake refreshed,
confident in the ETERNAL who sustains me.

Even if thousands come against me,
surrounding me on every side,
I will not be afraid.

Stand up, ETERNAL One,
rescue me, my God.
Slap the cheek of my enemies:
smash the teeth of the ungodly.

Salvation belongs to the ETERNAL.
May your blessing be upon your people.

Silence



PSALM 4

You Led Me to Wide-Open Spaces

For the leader of worship, with stringed instruments.
A Psalm of David.

When I cry out, hear me in my distress,
God who upholds my cause.
I was overwhelmed, but you brought relief.
You led me to wide-open spaces.
Show kindness once again,
hear my prayer.

How long will you people turn my honour into shame?
How long will you love worthless things and chase after lies?

Silence

Be sure of this,
the ETERNAL marks out a people who are faithful.
The ETERNAL hears when I cry out in prayer.

Tremble in awe, don't wander from the path.
When you lie down to sleep meditate in your heart,
find stillness.

Silence

Offer acceptable sacrifices and rest secure in the ETERNAL.
There are many who say,
'Is there anything good you can show us?'
May the light of your presence shine on us, ETERNAL One.

You have brought me happiness,
joy greater than when grain and wine abound.
I can sleep peacefully, for you alone keep me safe.



PSALM 8

Human Dignity in Creation

For the leader of worship.
To be sung according to 'The Gittith.'
A Psalm of David.

ETERNAL One,
your name echoes in every land!
You have set your splendour in the highest heavens,
your glory shines across the skies above.

Even the songs of infants become your stronghold,
their voices silencing your enemies
and those who stand against you.

When I contemplate the cosmos,
your artistry revealed in the night sky —
the moon's silver glow,
the jewelled stars scattered across the dark —
what are we beneath such skies?
What are humans that you should draw near,
walking with us, dwelling amongst us?

We are a little lower than the angels,
yet you have encircled us with glory and honour.

You have commissioned us as caretakers,
custodians of your creation —
the livestock in the pastures,
the skylarks ascending into blue,
the fish that fill the oceans.

ETERNAL One, your name resounds in every land,
and your glory fills all creation!



PSALM 13

How Long

For the Leader of Worship.
A Psalm of David.

How long ETERNAL One, how long?
How much longer my God?
Will you forget me forever?
How long will you remain hidden from me?
How long will the chaos of my thoughts overwhelm me?
Will my heart always ache with sorrow?
How long will my enemies exalt themselves over me?

Pay attention to me!
Answer me, ETERNAL One!
May my eyes see your light.
Save me from the sleep of death.

Don't let my enemies boast,
‘we have overpowered him.’
Or those who cause me distress
celebrate my demise.

I have confidence in your loyal-love.
My heart will celebrate when you rescue me.
Yes, I will sing to you, the ETERNAL,
because of your loyal-love to me.



PSALM 19

The Two Books of God

For the Leader of Worship.
A Psalm of David.

God's glory is always on display in the skies;
the Sculptor's handiwork proclaimed in the arc of the heavens.
The days speak and each night imparts its knowledge.

Though they cannot speak —
have no words, no sound is heard —
their voice echoes across the earth,
their message to the ends of the earth.

A tent for the sun has been placed there.
It rises across the Levels like a bridegroom,
emerging from the bridal chamber, rejoicing;
like a warrior running the race.

From one end of the heavens to the other
it makes its journey;
nothing escapes its heat.

The Teaching of the ETERNAL is complete,
reviving every part.
The testimony of the ETERNAL is certain,
offering wisdom to the naive.

The guidance of the ETERNAL is just,
bringing joy to the heart.
The commands of the ETERNAL are pure,
illuminating the eyes.

Awe of the ETERNAL is untainted,
standing forever.
The judgements of the ETERNAL are sure,
righteous in every way.

They are more desirable than gold,
than the purest gold.
They are sweeter than honey,
than the honey that flows from the comb.

By them, your servant is kept on the path.
Following them brings great reward.

Who is able to discern their mistakes?
Cleanse me from the things I cannot see.
May you preserve me from pride,
that it will not rule over me.
Then I shall be complete,
cleansed from a multitude of sins.

May my words find favour,
and the murmurings of my heart
reach your presence, ETERNAL One,
my rock, my kinsman-redeemer.



PSALM 23

The Good Shepherd

A Psalm of David.

The ETERNAL is my Shepherd.
With you alongside there's nothing else I need.
You encourage me to rest in wild-flower meadows
and guide me beside silent rhynes,
refreshing my innermost being.

You lead me on safe paths
so that your name is honoured.
Even when I descend through dark wooded valleys,
edge close to evil,
I am not afraid, for You walk beside me.
Your rod and staff bring comfort and security.

You arrange a lavish feast for me
right before the eyes of my enemies.
You anoint me as your honoured guest,
and fill my cup until it overflows.

Your goodness and loyal-love will pursue me every day of my life,
and I will dwell in your house from this day and forevermore.



PSALM 24

Entering the Sanctuary

A Psalm of David.

The earth belongs to the ETERNAL,
and all its abundance,
the world and all who dwell there.
For God founded it upon the oceans,
established it upon the rivers.

Who can ascend the hill of the ETERNAL?
Who can stand in the holy place?
Those with clean hands
and pure hearts,
who do not give themselves to worthless things,
nor make false promises.
They will receive a blessing from the ETERNAL
and righteousness from the God who saves.

This is the generation of those who seek God,
who long for the presence of the God of Jacob.

Silence

Lift up your heads, O gates,
rise up, you ancient doors,
so the King of Glory may come in.

Who is this King of Glory?
The ETERNAL,
strong and mighty,
the ETERNAL,
mighty in battle.

Lift up your heads, O gates,
lift them high you ancient doors,
so the King of Glory may come in.

Who is this King of Glory?
The ETERNAL of Hosts
is the King of Glory.

Silence.



PSALM 30:1–5, 11–12

Dancing after Tears

A song used at the dedication of God's House.
A Psalm of David.

I will celebrate you ETERNAL One!
You lifted me up, put me back on my feet,
so that my adversaries weren't able to rejoice over my suffering.

I cried out in prayer to you,
and you reached down and lifted me up.

ETERNAL One, you brought me up
from the place of the dead.
You gave me life when I was slipping towards the grave.

Sing praise to the ETERNAL,
all God's faithful people!

God's displeasure lasts for a moment,
but God's delight is lavished on us for a lifetime.
We may have nights when tears fall,
but by morning we will be celebrating,
a song in our heart!

You've turned my tears into dancing!
You've lifted the weight of mourning and filled me with joy!
I can't contain the song inside me!
I will celebrate you, the ETERNAL One, forever!



FIELD NOTES

Psalm 1

Teachings: many versions use "Law" to highlight this is likely to be referring to the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures. The Psalms themselves are divided into five books and perhaps build on the wisdom and guidance of the Torah for living, for God's people.

When I read this psalm I often think of the deep rooted willow trees that grow close to the rhynes, streams and rivers in my part of the world.

The gift, or 'fruit' of the willow, is its pliable stems, used in basket making and other creations. In the original Hebrew the tree is one that fruits when the time is ripe.

For an explanation of the choice of 'the ETERNAL,' rather than Lord see About the Paraphrases.

Psalm 3

To pray, 'Strike my enemies on the cheek,' can seem out of step with the way of Jesus, who taught his followers to love their enemies, pray for those who persecute them, and turn the other cheek.

Yet these prayers are not calls to violence. They are acts of honesty — ways of bringing before God the thoughts and emotions that arise within us when we are wounded, afraid, or overwhelmed.

The Psalms remind us that nothing needs to be hidden from God. Even our anger, fear, and longing can become prayer.

Psalm 8

'Yes, we are a little lower than the angels.' Some versions translate the Hebrew here as 'little less or lower than God' NLT, RSV, NRSV.

'You have commissioned us as caretakers, custodians of your creation.' Whilst the Hebrew word speaks of authority over or to rule, I've tried to highlight that the role we have is one of nurture and care or custodianship.

Psalm 13

The Hebrew word hesed, I've paraphrased here, and throughout this book, as 'loyal-love.' It is one of the richest words in the Hebrew Scriptures and carries the sense of faithful, covenant love that does not abandon the recipients of this love. No single English word captures it fully. Other terms often used by translators are lovingkindness, faithful love, steadfast love.

Psalm 19

Many Christians have spoken of two ways in which God is revealed: through both the 'book' of creation and the 'book' of Scripture. The first half of Psalm 19 celebrates the way the natural world speaks of God; the second celebrates God's teaching. Both invite us into wonder and wisdom.

'The Sculptor's handiwork proclaimed in the arc of the heavens.' The Hebrew simply speaks of 'the work of God's hands.' I have chosen 'the Sculptor's handiwork' to evoke the artistry and intentional beauty of creation.

'It rises across the Levels like a bridegroom.' The Hebrew speaks of the sun crossing the heavens. Here the image has been rooted in the landscape of the Somerset Levels, where dawn light slowly floods the wetlands and wide skies.

Psalm 23

In Somerset, my walks are often on the Somerset Levels, where the pasture land has been reclaimed from flooding by rhynes, water-filled drainage channels often flourishing with aquatic and bird life.

Most of us will be familiar with 'the valley of the shadow of death.' The Hebrew tsalmaveth literally means deep darkness or shadow. The image of a dark wooded valley captured for me that darkness while rooting it in my local landscape.

The concept of the honoured guest is implied in the text. My paraphrase has added this interpretation to bring clarity in a world where pouring oil on the head may feel unfamiliar.



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