

FOREWORD BY  
EUGENE PETERSON

# Speak, Lord

*Hearing Psalms  
in the First Person*

Vic Black

“Since all Scripture is breathed out by God, I find it helpful to restate a verse about God as if God Himself is speaking about Himself. Vic Black has taken this concept to a new and deeper level in his treatment of entire Psalms as if God Himself is speaking. This book will encourage anyone who wants to develop a more personal relationship with God.”

JERRY BRIDGES

Bestselling author

“Follow Vic Black into the Psalms as he fleshes out an exercise to slow you down. Ponder a psalm with fresh eyes; engage a sanctified imagination and an upturned ear—listening for God’s voice, listening for how Jesus might personalize the Psalms to you.”

JEAN FLEMING

Author of *Pursue the Intentional Life*

“Vic Black has been a friend and a mentor in prayer for me for many years. He is a man who lives what he teaches. The concept of Psalms in the first person is one that will accelerate every person’s prayer life and their engagement with the Lord Jesus. Grab a copy—it will put a fresh wind in your prayer life.”

DOUG NUENKE

President of The Navigators

“Every now and then you meet someone who you sense really knows Jesus—who doesn’t just know *about* Jesus but has really experienced Him intimately. Vic Black is one of those people. As he walks us through the Psalms, I sense being in the presence of the Lord. Join Vic as you walk closely together in God’s presence!”

LAUREN LIBBY

International president/CEO of TWR International (Trans World Radio)

“God spoke His Word; God speaks through His Word. Yet in a very loud world, it can be hard to hear His voice. Vic Black wants to change that. Here he offers a fresh new method of engaging with God through the Scriptures. Join Vic on a very special journey into a variety of psalms—reading each one, waiting upon the Lord, listening for His voice, expecting to hear from Him. Enjoy the Lord and His Word and go ever deeper with the God who still speaks.”

DEAN RIDINGS

Author of *The Pray! Prayer Journal*

“Through personalizing the Psalms, Vic lays out a path to engage God that breathes new understanding into the Word of God being living and active. The Scriptures were written to encourage us so that we have hope (Romans 15:4), and this book makes that encouragement and hope accessible. Vic offers us a means of regaining a sense of wonder as we hear the Father speak into our lives and circumstances. Whether you struggle with the feeling that God is distant and only tolerates you or you delight in an increasing hunger for Him, this book will shake your foundations.”

THE RT. REV. KEN ROSS

Missionary Bishop with the Anglican Church of Rwanda

“Prayer starts not when we speak to God but when God speaks to us. Prayer is His initiative. When we respond, we join a conversation that is eternal. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, ‘The richness of the Word of God ought to determine our prayer, not the poverty of our heart.’ Vic Black has harnessed

the power of these ideas in *Speak, Lord*. Placing selected psalms in first person and teaching us to do the same, this book is a sharpened tool for personal devotions, small-group prayer, and leadership training.”

**CHIP JACKSON**

Teaching pastor at Fellowship Bible Church in northwest Arkansas

“The most authentic words ever written are those that originate from God. Vic had been praying for new insights in Psalm 23 when the thought was given him to see this psalm as though it were written in first person . . . as though God Himself were speaking these words to him. The question may arise: ‘How can I trust that these thoughts came from God to Vic?’ Several of us who know Vic have testified that he is trustworthy. Vic’s life is evidence of his deep relationship with God. You can trust what Vic has written. He is passing on to us what God gave him. As the psalms have come alive for Vic, they can come alive for you. I highly endorse this book.”

**LEE BRASE**

Founder of The Navigators Prayer Ministry and author of *Praying from God’s Heart* and *Approaching God*.

“I have always started my daily devotions reading a psalm. But Vic Black has stirred me to a deeper experience with the Psalms. This book is not a theology but a practicum on how to worship with the worship book of all time, the Psalms. He shows us how and leads us in doing it, not just thinking about it. This is powerful and life changing.”

**JERRY WHITE, PhD**

Major General, USAF, retired; The Navigators International President Emeritus; and coauthor of *To Be a Friend* and *Honesty, Morality, and Conscience*

*Speak, Lord*

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*Hearing Psalms in the First Person*

Vic Black

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# Foreword

EVERYONE PRAYS—KIND OF. It is our most human action. At the deep center of our lives, we are connected somehow or other to God. That deep center often gets buried under everyday debris of routine and distraction and chatter, while we shuffle about, out of touch and unaware of our true selves. Then a sudden jolt opens a crevasse, exposing for a moment our bedrock self: spontaneously we pray. We pray because it is our most human response. We are made by and for the voice of God—listening to and answering that voice is our most characteristic act. We are most ourselves when we pray.

The jolt comes variously—a stab of pain, a rush of beauty, an encore of joy; we exclaim, “God!” The cry can be complaint or curse or praise; no matter, it is prayer. When that deep, deep center of our lives is exposed—our core humanity, which biblical writers so vigorously designate as “heart”—we unthinkingly revert to our first language: we pray.

The Psalms are the prayerbook of the Bible. When people ask their fellow Christian, “Teach me to pray,” the traditional response has been to introduce them to the Psalms. Jesus prayed the Psalms; how can we improve on Jesus? Vic Black, who heads up the prayer ministry of The Navigators, in that

capacity, has been praying the Psalms for much of his life. But at one point he ventured out in a fresh way, by praying the Psalms in the first person. He got his start in Psalm 23, one of the most familiar of the Psalms. We are used to reading “The Lord is my shepherd . . .” Vic Black personalizes it into the first person: “I, the LORD—I am your Shepherd. You have no need of anything because I am all you need . . .”

Vic Black’s counsel to pray the Psalms in the first person, listening to God address us in the first person has its precedence early in the biblical story in Moses. God became present to Moses as he was tending his flock in the Midian wilderness. A burning bush that didn’t burn up caught Moses’ attention; he approached the bush to see what was going on. God spoke Moses’ name from the flames of the bush: “Moses, Moses.” Conversation between God and Moses developed. God announced his intention to deliver his people from Egyptian slavery and told Moses that he wanted him to lead them out to “a good and broad land.” Moses was reluctant but after a lengthy back-and-forth exchange agreed. He received his instructions, and the action was launched (Exodus 3–4).

Then Moses asked God to identify Himself: “When my people ask me Your name, what shall I tell them? There are a lot of gods out there—what is *Your* name?”

God said to Moses, “I AM THAT I AM. Tell them, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’ . . . That is My name forever” (Exodus 3:13-15, author’s paraphrase).

I AM THAT I AM—God’s name for Himself—tells Moses that God is alive, present to him, and ready to enact salvation. This God-revealed name—and the understandings that developed as it was used in prayer and obedience by the Hebrew

people—marks the deconstruction of every kind and sort of impersonal, magical, manipulative, abstract, coercive way of understanding God. Listening to and answering I AM THAT I AM placed the Hebrew people as participating witnesses in the grand historical drama of salvation that challenges and brings about the eventual dissolution of every counter way of life, the world principalities and powers against which Paul would later issue a call to arms (Ephesians 6:10-20), “all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor” that Jesus refused to bargain for with the devil (Matt. 4:8-10, NIV). Worshiping I AM THAT I AM developed into a way of life in Israel in which love defined relationship—all of them, no exceptions: God, neighbor, stranger, enemy, family. Serving and obeying I AM THAT I AM became an exploration in all the dimensions of freedom: freedom from sin and oppression and damnation.

I AM THAT I AM—this verb-dominated, relational, emphatic sentence by which God willed to be understood—was shortened to a verbal noun of four letters, YHWH, probably pronounced Yahweh (and usually translated LORD in English). It became the primary term among the Hebrews for address and reference to the self-revealing God of Israel, used 6,700 times in the Old Testament as compared to the 2,500 occurrences of the generic Semitic term for divinity, *Elohim* (translated into English simply as “God”).

The name spoken from the burning bush marked the definitive revelation of God as present to us and personal with us—God here among us, a living God in relation with us. No more gods of sticks and stones. No more gods to be appeased or bribed or courted. No more gods decked out in abstractions for

philosophical speculation. No more gods cast as major players in cosmic war and sex myth dramas.

A millennium plus a couple of centuries later, Jesus continued and then completed the event at the bush; He took these very words, these I AM words on His lips, and fleshed them out in salvation meetings and salvation conversations with lost and dying, confused and bedeviled, sick and guilty slaves of sin, and led them into a new life. Famously, the seven Jesus I AM self-identifications in John's Gospel (bread of life—6:35; light of the world—8:12; gate for the sheep—10:7; good shepherd—10:11; the resurrection and the life—11:25; the way the truth and the life—14:6; the vine—15:1) place God's personal, first-person voice into our lives.

I find it energizing to place myself alongside Moses at the burning bush and alongside Jesus in Galilee and Jerusalem as I listen to God speaking to me in the first person from the Psalms.

Eugene H. Peterson

Translator of *The Message*

Professor Emeritus of Spiritual Theology, Regent College, BC

# Introduction

*I speak to thirsty hearts whose longings have been awakened by the touch of God within them, and such as they need no reasoned proof. Their restless hearts furnish all the proof they need. . . . I am addressing the thirsting souls who are determined to follow God. . . . The urge of God within them will assure their continuing pursuit.*

A. W. TOZER, *The Pursuit of God*

WHY DO YOU READ THE PSALMS? Do you expect to hear God speak? Are you listening?

I once met a young businessman who had not been raised in a family that valued the Bible or Christianity—his dad was an atheist, and his mom was a non-practicing Jew. But one day his workplace mentor suggested, “You should read the Bible. Everyone needs to read the Bible sometime.” So he went to Costco and bought his first Bible—and read half of it! *If this stuff is reliable and believable*, he thought, *I’m going to have to make some adjustments*. He did sufficient research to satisfy himself that the Bible was in fact reliable and believable. And he believed!

“What’s your Bible reading like today?” I asked him.

“I don’t read the Bible,” he replied, then paused. “I listen to it.” When he engages with the words on the pages of Scripture, he is listening, expecting to hear from God.

Listening to God is at the heart of this book. In the Psalms, God captures the essence of the complex human experience,

the extensive drama of mankind—from the depths of despair and frustration to the heights of elation. Most of us find comfort and courage from the psalmists' intimate engagement with the Only True Living God, but I have found that the more I read the Psalms, the more I am drawn into the heart of God with a childlike declaration: "I want some of that!" I want to taste the relationship I see demonstrated between David and his God. I want to soar to the heights. I want to find God in the depths.

Through my years of probing the Psalms, God has been incredibly generous, fulfilling my desire for more of Him. And He extends the same invitation to you. Are you hungry for more of God? Does your heart cry for a deeper, richer taste of Him from the Psalms? I am convinced He is ready to satisfy.

I cannot take credit for the probing question at the heart of this book: "What would it sound like if God spoke this particular psalm to me in the first person?" I'm not sure I ever would have come up with such a wonder-filled inquiry on my own. All credit goes to the God who invades our standard, sometimes mundane attempts to know Him, initiating relationship with us. This book is the exposed heart of a God-seeker sharing his vulnerable engagement with his Friend, his Comforter, his Savior, his Mighty Warrior, his Good Shepherd.

### **My Journey into the Psalms**

It was October. We were in the beautiful Adirondack Mountains of New York, where I had been invited to facilitate a prayer retreat for college students. The setting was serene: a big cabin tucked next to a crystal lake, surrounded by trees alive with brilliant colors.

As our retreat group began to focus on God through worship, Scripture, our own prayers, and silence, He led us to the Shepherd/sheep relationship we share with Him. John 10 and Psalm 23 were key passages that we explored slowly and deeply in prayer. Someone pointed out the emphasis on God in Psalm 23: “*He* is my shepherd, *He* makes me lie down, *He* leads me, *He* restores me, *He* guides me, *He* is with me, *His* rod and staff comfort me, *He* prepares a table, *He* anoints my head.” We were all stunned by this clarification and powerful emphasis on the Shepherd. God was pulling back the curtain to show us a glimpse of His heart, letting us know loud and clear that our lives and well-being are completely tied up in Him.

God made it clear in John 10:3-5 that His sheep (that’s us) hear His voice and follow Him: “The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name. . . . The sheep follow him because they know his voice. . . . They do not know the voice of strangers.” As I soaked in John 10, I concluded that perhaps our Shepherd wanted to speak to each of us, and I suggested we all spend some time alone with Him. I soon found my own rock by the lake and settled in to listen to the Shepherd of my soul (1 Peter 2:25).

I am by nature a very optimistic person, but as I gathered my Bible and journal beside the lake in the Adirondacks, I had a slightly pessimistic thought: *I’m probably not going to get anything new out of Psalm 23.* After all, I had spent extensive time exploring the Shepherd Psalm through the years. But in the next few moments, as I stilled my heart and mind before God, something changed. It was as though the Lord, the Shepherd Himself, showed up.

I could sense Him standing there, looking over my shoulder

with a slight smile on His face. “So you don’t think you’re going to get anything new out of Psalm 23, huh?” He asked. I felt a little embarrassed. Then the most amazing thing happened. The Lord began to speak Psalm 23 to me in the first person. The Shepherd, Jesus, was speaking of Himself! I was writing as fast as I could, attempting to capture all He was saying. I can honestly say I was not thinking and processing Psalm 23 on my own. I was simply writing what the Shepherd said. His words flowed like cool water and tasted like the sweetest honey:

PSALM 23 IN THE FIRST PERSON

*I, the LORD—I am your Shepherd. You have no need of anything because I am all you need. I will lead you to green pastures and cause you to lie down. I will lead you to quiet waters, to waters of rest, and cause you to drink your fill. I am very serious about your rest and restoration. I will even restore your soul. I will guide you, not push you, down the particular path of righteousness, for the sake of My name. You will know this is the right path because you will see My tracks, My footprints of righteousness and holiness right in front of you. When I say so, together we will leave this quiet and restful place and go to other places that are not so restful. Some of these places may be scary. Some will be places of deep darkness and even death. But don’t be afraid; I’m with you. My footprints are still right in front of you. My rod and My staff will touch you during those dark and scary times to keep you on the path and to reassure you of My presence. I may even prepare a table before you right in front of your enemies. But remember, I’m right there, too! I will anoint your head with My oil. It’s My oil of authority and recognition as well as My oil of healing for your wounds. Your cup will run over with Me, with My very presence! You will become more and more convinced that My goodness and My lovingkindness will aggressively pursue you for your entire lifetime. You will also become more and more*

*convinced that you will live comfortably in My house for all the length of your days—not only on this earth, but in eternity! I love you. You are that little lamb on My shoulders.*

I was stunned. Had God really spoken this to me? Had He invaded my quiet spot in the Adirondacks to introduce a beautiful new method of engaging with Him in the Psalms?

### The Process

Right away I started a special journal dedicated to experiencing psalms in the first person with the Lord. As I began to experiment receiving other psalms in this fashion, several principles soon fell into place.

#### *Listening*

Receiving psalms in the first person is much more a listening exercise than a writing exercise. In most cases, I don't write anything for a while. But there are other times when I start writing right away. There certainly is no exact formula to follow, and there are no grades given here. Enjoying the relationship is more important than doing something right or wrong. Learn to rest and relax in the presence of God, engaging your heart with His heart, receiving from Him words of love, affirmation, strength, and identity. So please, if you do anything in learning this process, enjoy the Lord. And believe that you are being enjoyed by Him.

All you currently know to be true about God supports your experience of listening to Him speak the psalm to you personally. Remember, we are not rewriting Scripture. There is only

one infallible Word of God. This exercise of personalizing psalms is intended to open our hearts to hear His voice from Scripture. As you listen to the Lord, I encourage you to examine what you believe you are hearing against Scripture and in the context of a trusted community of friends. What you think you are hearing from the Psalms should line up with the strong truth of Scripture.

As you enter this meditative exercise, I would suggest praying something like, “Lord, I don’t want to put words in Your mouth. I don’t want my imagination to run away with me either. But I do want to engage my imagination, as well as my heart, my soul, my mind, and all of my faculties. What I want more than anything is to truly hear Your voice. Would You give me ears to hear? Would You block out all distractions?”

### *Studying*

If possible, I would encourage you to have several Bible translations available and open. One reason for this is that wonderful and extensive work has gone into each translation to expand the original meaning of every verse. Observe the footnotes, definitions, and cross references that further unlock the meaning of the passage. In verse 3 of Psalm 23, my New American Standard Bible gives a footnote for the phrase “paths of righteousness.” For the word *path*, the footnote is, “Literally, ‘track.’” This word really piqued my curiosity.

A path through the woods is normally created from many people traveling the same trail. When the path is first being established, the trail may be faint, hard to discern and follow. But as more and more people travel the path, adding their footprints—their “tracks”—to the trail, the path becomes clearer and more

distinct. The grass and other foliage have difficulty growing due to the foot traffic. When I thought about this in the context of Psalm 23, I considered who had left these “tracks,” these footprints of righteousness. It had to be the Holy One, the Shepherd Himself. Hence, I rendered this phrase, “You will know this is the right path because you will see My tracks, My footprints of righteousness and holiness right in front of you.” So even through the footnotes of our Bibles, God extends Himself to us for deeper relationship.

Often when I ask the question, “Lord, what would it sound like if You spoke this psalm to me personally?” God begins to bring other Scripture into focus, adding color and dimension to the psalm I’m examining. Certain phrases from Scripture begin to come to life: “Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you” (Colossians 3:16); “If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you” (John 15:7); “For the word of God is living and active” (Hebrews 4:12). The Holy Spirit weaves Scripture tucked away in your heart to reveal deeper meaning in the psalm you are currently living in. So if you hope for this to be more than a literary exercise, it’s essential that you live a life saturated with God’s Word. God will pull phrases and verses from your heart to enhance the psalm you are working on.

### *Waiting*

There is freedom and peace in waiting, listening, and soaking in a psalm. Allow God to speak. Trust Him. Give yourself permission to listen and not put words in God’s mouth. He doesn’t need our help to speak. If God moved men by the power of the Holy Spirit, causing them to write what He wanted them to write (2 Peter 1:21), then He certainly can speak to us creatively

from the Psalms. Since one of His preferred names is the Word (John 1:1), I would expect Him to present Himself as the God who continues to speak to His people, drawing us into increasing conversation and intimacy.

Picture the Lord with you in the context of your time alone with Him as you ask this question. Wait for His answer. You may be in a coffee shop. Can you envision Him sitting next to you as you read? You may be walking in the woods. Can you sense Him walking with you, joining your thoughts as you reflect on a psalm? You may be in a foxhole or some other stressful and potentially dangerous environment. Experience the Lord right there with you, speaking words of comfort, protection, and perspective. In any and every case, listen to Him. The truth is, He really is with you all the time! He makes this promise to you over and over in Scripture: “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you” (Hebrews 13:5, NIV; see also Deuteronomy 31:6); “Surely I am with you always [literally “all the days”], to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:20, NIV). Nothing can snatch you out of God’s hand (John 10:27-30). Nothing—absolutely nothing—can separate you from God’s love (Romans 8:38, 39).

I would encourage you to live in one psalm for a period of time. The objective is not speed. I would not encourage you to try to do one psalm a day. Take a slower approach and stay in a psalm for a week or two. The Psalms flowed out of David’s life (as well as the lives of Moses, Asaph, Solomon, and the sons of Korah). As you seek to let the Psalms to flow out of your Bible and into your life, you may spend hours or even days reflecting, meditating, soaking, and marinating in a favorite psalm. Let the psalm live. Let it breathe. Let it live in you. Let God speak. Then write your impressions.

Here are some thoughts to keep in mind as you experiment with receiving psalms in the first person:

- » Relax. Enjoy the experience. This is much more a heart exercise than a head exercise. View your practice as fun and relational time with God.
  
- » Your question is simply, “Lord, what would it sound like if You spoke this psalm to me personally?” You may be more comfortable with the question, “Lord, what *might* it sound like if You spoke this psalm to me personally?” *Might* may help you not think in terms of a right and wrong way of doing it. Remember, what you “think” you are hearing from the Psalms should line up with His Word.
  
- » Read meditatively in several translations. Allow the footnotes and cross references to add color and meaning to the psalm.
  
- » Soak in one psalm. Allow fresh, new phrases to form in your heart and mind. Allow your sanctified imagination to soar and expand the psalm.
  
- » Work on one complete thought at a time. Don’t force it.
  
- » Allow God to take your pen and add His personalized phrases. Listen to the Lord speak these thoughts to your heart.

» Compare what you have heard to what you know of God from Scripture. Discuss your psalm in the first person with your friends. Once you have finished the psalm, read it over and over. Hear it and receive it as the Lord's blessing to you.

### The Process in Action

To illustrate some of the ways God works in this process, I want to give two examples of psalms in the first person from my journal. Psalm 24 has grown to be quite special to me because God took me way outside the box and entered dramatically into my real-life circumstances. Psalm 18 expresses God's passionate heart of protection for His kids when they cry out for help. May these two psalms help to provide a foundation as you further explore this book.

#### *Let God Take the Pen*

Occasionally, as I'm listening to the Lord and writing, God seems to take my pen and add a few lines outside my box, invading my psalm exercise to add color, truth, and deeper relational experience.

As I meditated on some of the phrases in Psalm 24, questions for clarification and deeper probing began to enter my thoughts. Verse 7: "Lift up your heads, O you gates, and be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in!" Where has He been? Why is the King of glory outside the gates, returning to the protective environments of the city walls? Perhaps the answer is in verse 8: "The LORD strong and mighty, the LORD mighty in battle." He's been out fighting a recent battle!

Meditating further on this spectacle of the King of glory returning from His latest battle, my sanctified imagination began to paint a picture. I could see Jesus riding a great white horse at the front of a celebratory parade. His mighty warriors followed close behind, rejoicing with those inside the gate over their victory. I saw myself eagerly watching at the edge of the street as the King and His fighting force triumphantly rode back into the city. Confetti was flying! Horns were blaring! Everyone was shouting and rejoicing because our King had won a new battle. I craned my neck to get a better view as the King approached.

When the King was right in front of me, He stopped. He pulled up His royal steed and looked right at me. It was as though the entire parade and celebration faded into the background because the King was focusing on me. He leaned down from His stamping stallion and spoke to me quietly, so no one else could hear.

“It was your battle,” He said.

“M-m-my battle?” I stammered. “I didn’t know I had a battle.”

He replied with a smile, “I know. The enemy had set an ambush for you. They may have finally defeated you with their strategy this time. But I destroyed their snare. You’re safe now. Enjoy the celebration.”

I was stunned. Could it be that I have battles I know nothing about? Certainly I am very aware of those battles I’m in the midst of, fighting furiously against the enemy, fully clothed in the armor of God. But could there be battles, ambushes, strategies set for me that God goes before me to demolish and dismantle? I was safe inside the city walls, and the King of glory was outside fighting my battle for me. I was humbled, but I was very glad.

## PSALM 24 IN THE FIRST PERSON

Look around you. Do you see the earth and everything in the earth? It's all Mine. Everyone who lives here, they're Mine too. I founded the earth. I built it. I established the land and the waters. Who in the world can come up My holy mountain? Who would dare ascend My holy hill? Who could possibly stand in My holy place? I'll tell you who. The one whose hands are not defiled. The one whose heart is open and examined by Me. The one who has Me high and lifted up, and nothing else and no one else shares that place with Me. The one who does not manipulate others to get their own way. The one who responds with humility and sorrow when I bring conviction for their sin. This kind of person will receive a blessing from Me. I will look eyes with them and smile full in their face. They will receive right standing with Me, the one who saves them.

Do you want to know what the God-seeker generation looks like? I'll tell you. God-seekers desire to gaze into the face of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob! The same face that Moses longed to look into.

Listen! An announcement is made: "Lift up your heads, O gates! Be lifted up, O ancient doors! The King of Glory is coming in!" And who is this King of Glory? It's Me, the Lord, strong and mighty! I am the Lord, mighty in battle! You may wonder where I've been. I've been at war! This is a parade of celebration because once again, I'm returning victorious. I rein in My horse beside you as the parade pauses behind Me. I speak to you privately: "It was your battle. The enemy had set an ambush for your destruction. But I defeated the ambush and routed the enemy. Relax now. Enjoy the parade. You're safe." The parade continues while you stare, stunned, dumbfounded, your mouth agape. You were unaware you even had a battle. "Lift up your heads, O gates! Lift them up, O ancient doors, so I can come in from the latest battle on your behalf! I am the Commander of the mighty hosts of heaven! I am the King of Glory!"

*The Unfamiliar Psalm*

Sometimes I approach a psalm with enthusiasm and great expectation because of my history with God in that particular psalm. Other times, I simply sit down and set my mind to hear from God in a psalm I'm largely unfamiliar with. After probing Psalm 18 with a dear friend one day, I was compelled to ask God the question, "What would it sound like if You spoke this psalm of rescue to me personally?"

Psalm 18 is quite long. I'll process only the first nineteen verses here. But you are certainly invited to explore the entire psalm from the first-person perspective. In this psalm we encounter graphic language of God coming down from heaven to rescue His children.

Once again a picture began to form as I meditated on the psalm. I was facing a particularly difficult period of enemy attack in my life. As I soaked in Psalm 18, I saw myself in an epic battle much like a scene from *Braveheart* or *The Lord of the Rings*. The enemy was everywhere. I controlled my little hill, valiantly swinging my sword against the onslaught of the enemy. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Jesus flashing a mighty sword, taking out four and five of the enemy with one blow. It was comforting to know we were fighting the same battle.

However, the enemy began to multiply their efforts against me! I could hold off two, maybe three of them. But when the fourth enemy warrior engaged me, I was surrounded by snarls and clashing swords. I fought for all I was worth, but to no avail. It seemed as though I was engulfed by a living, breathing, coiling evil serpent. When I could hardly see a crack of daylight from the snake-like mass entangling me, I screamed,

“Jesus!” Instantly, He was on my little hill. He stepped in front of me, His devastating sword obliterating my foes. He checked to make sure I was okay. Then we both reengaged in the raging battle all around.

Another perspective running parallel to this magnificent illustration of war was that of my cry penetrating the throne room of God. My cries for help were distinct and piercing in heaven. Those angels regularly dispatched to my aid were quivering at the portal of heaven, one eye on me, the other on God where He was seated on His throne. They were saying, “Send me! Please send me! I’ll rescue him!” Another would declare even louder, “No! Send me! Send me!” These mighty warring angels were so eager to come to my rescue. Then all of the angels recoiled and gasped, because God Himself stood up. He stepped to the portal and said, “No, I’ll go Myself!” Even as I write this memory, my flesh tingles with the power and love of God on behalf of His children. God summoned the mightiest angels and stepped onto their backs. He rode the mighty angels to rescue me!

You’ve probably heard the expression “When all hell breaks loose.” Well, when all heaven breaks loose, it’s much, much worse! All heaven broke loose when God came to my rescue.

#### PSALM 18 IN THE FIRST PERSON

*I hear you say, “I love You!” It’s music to My ears. I love to hear you say it. I especially love to see you demonstrate your love for Me. I am progressively becoming your strength. You are relying more and more on Me and less on your strength. That’s good. Now My power can reside in your weakness!*

*I am your Rock, your safe place, and your refuge. But I am not only your stationary Rock. I reach out and rescue you. I deliver you and pull you into*

*My safety. I am the shield that blocks the blows designed to destroy you. I am the horn that sounds, announcing My location and presence so you can simply run toward the sound. I am your stronghold. You call upon me because I am worthy of your praise! When you call upon Me, I respond and save you from your enemies.*

*I was not unaware . . . I was watching as the cords of death entangled you and began to tie you up and choke you. Your terror mounted, your fear overwhelmed you as the torrents of destruction and ungodliness rained down on you! The cords of the grave were reaching up for you, coiling around you like a living snake. The traps and snares of death were in your face, confronting you, reaching out for you. You couldn't see the light because these aggressive cords of evil had completely wrapped you up in darkness.*

*Then you cried out to Me for help! In your distress you called out in desperation for deliverance. And I heard you! From the depth of your entangled mess, your cries for help reached My ears. Your scream was heard in My throne room. Then all heaven broke loose! I didn't send My warring angels to your rescue—I came Myself. My response to your cry caused earthquakes—the very foundations of mountains trembled at My anger. Smoke poured from My nostrils, fire shot from My mouth, devouring everything in My path. I threw back the curtain of heaven, and I came down! Dark clouds were under My feet. I mounted the cherubim and rode them. I flew upon the mighty angels. I soared to your rescue on the wings of the wind. I covered Myself with thick darkness. The clouds boiled in advance before Me as the brilliance of My presence pushed them. Hail and bolts of lightning poured from the clouds. I thundered from the heavens. My voice echoed through the skies.*

*I shot My arrows and scattered your enemies. Great bolts of lightning confused and routed them. When My rebuke was heard, the valleys of the sea were exposed, the foundations of the earth laid bare. Everything was*

*revealed! My fingers wrapped around you securely. I lifted you out of deep waters. I rescued you from your powerful enemy, from those who hated you, from those too mighty for you, from those bent on killing you.*

I ended with verse 19. If you choose to write the rest of Psalm 18 in the first person, don't force the following verses to connect with these verses from my rewrite of verses 1-19. This seems to be a major paragraph shift. Enjoy the exercise.

### How to Use This Book

Psalms 23, 24, and 18 are deeply personal and touched my soul uniquely as God launched me on this adventure of receiving psalms in the first person. However, while listening to God is never mundane or ordinary, not every psalm exercise is as profound as these. And I have found that returning to a psalm and reengaging God to speak in the first person at a later time results in a whole new experience. The circumstances of my life, the point of my journey with God, and my own emotional and spiritual state come into play, creating an entirely new mystery of hearing God's voice. My prayer is that you can enter into experiences such as these through this book.

Each chapter in *Speak, Lord* is broken into several parts. First, the full text of a psalm is given in a selected translation (various translations are used throughout). Next, we'll briefly explore the main thoughts or theme of this particular psalm before diving into my personal psalm in the first person experience. The rewritten psalm is followed by a Reflection section that captures my thoughts and meditations from writing this psalm in the first person.

The latter part of the chapter helps you personally enter into this experience. The Practice section is broken into Writing Prompts and Devotional Thoughts for you to consider. The writing tips are designed to help you journal this psalm personally in the first person. The thoughts and questions in the Devotional Thoughts are designed to guide you in a devotional experience with this psalm. Each chapter carries the hope of inviting you personally into hearing from God in a fresh and creative approach to the Psalms.

I believe God instructs us through the Psalms to righteously, humbly pour out our hearts to Him in such a way that deeply benefits our souls, our spiritual well-being, and our growth. I count it a privilege and responsibility to learn (from God) how to express myself to Him in ways that actually enhance my relationship with Him. Intimacy has grown significantly in this experiment of receiving psalms in the first person. May God take your pen occasionally as He has at times taken mine, adding powerful words of love, identity, security and significance to the canvas He is painting of you in the Psalms.

My prayer is that you would increasingly enjoy the Psalms—and God Himself. May your relationship with God soar to new heights as you explore the Psalms deeply and vulnerably.

CHAPTER 1

PSALM 1

*Who Is Affecting Whom?*

**Psalm 1**

How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel  
of the wicked,  
Nor stand in the path of sinners,  
Nor sit in the seat of scoffers!  
But his delight is in the law of the LORD,  
And in His law he meditates day and night.  
He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water,  
Which yields its fruit in its season  
And its leaf does not wither;  
And in whatever he does, he prospers.

The wicked are not so,  
But they are like chaff which the wind drives away.  
Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,  
Nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.  
For the LORD knows the way of the righteous,  
But the way of the wicked will perish.

God consistently expresses deep concern about the company we keep. Psalm 1 starts with the phrase “How blessed is the man . . .” *Blessed* can mean “happy, prosperous, fortunate, enviable.” This is the kind of life we dream about! But experiencing the blessing of God does not happen accidentally. Blessing comes through the process of making wise and godly choices. God gives us the option of good and bad choices in Psalm 1. Am I impacting the company I keep, or is the company I keep impacting me too severely? Who is affecting whom? Am I a thermostat (setting the tone and temperature in a context of people), or am I a thermometer (simply interpreting the relational temperature and adjusting myself to it)?

Living in God’s Word and experiencing the Word living in me is the essential factor not only in making wise choices but in orienting my life increasingly toward the thoughts and purposes God has in regard to this amazing relationship He initiated with me. What will I choose?

### **Psalm 1 in the First Person**

*The company you keep is very critical to Me and to your overall success. I really want to bless you. I want you to be happy and prosperous. I want others to look at you and be envious of My goodness evidenced in your life.*

*I will bless you if you do not walk so close as to hear and consider the counsel of the wicked. Why should you consider their advice?*

*I will bless you if you do not stop, stand, and lean against the wall where sinners normally travel, down the path they regularly take.*

*I will bless you if you do not pull up a chair and join the environments where the ungodly scoff and laugh at all that is good and righteous. Don’t indulge their crude humor. You become like the company you keep.*

*The one who avoids these environments, these influences, these people, is the blessed one who finds great delight in what I have written. This blessed one meditates on, soaks in, and marinates in my written Word consistently day and night.*

*This blessed one will be like a beautiful fruitful tree planted by My clear, nourishing stream of water. They will bear fruit at the proper time. Their leaves will not wither. Whatever they put their hand to I will bless and will cause to prosper.*

*But not so for the wicked! Not so for those people I told you to avoid! They will blow away like paper in the wind. They will not be able to stand up in the time of judgment. They certainly will not stand in the gathering of My righteous ones, because I know intimately the way of My righteous ones. But the course of the wicked, the ones you are to avoid, is destruction. That's where their counsel will lead you!*

## Reflections

The first verse shows a progressive engagement with bad company. We can go from bad to worse—from walking, to standing, to sitting! I may choose to walk a path that takes me within the sound of wickedness being discussed. This is not a neighborhood I normally frequent. What's it going to hurt? After all, I'm only catching a few phrases. Tantalized, I consider stopping, perhaps standing in the path they normally travel. Now I'm even more in their company. I'm becoming one of them. Finally, I choose to sit down in the companionship of those who mock and scoff at the values I once held dear. I've become increasingly comfortable with their ungodliness, unrighteousness, and irreverence. This is a slow, subtle movement away from God and into the ways of the world.

“His delight is in the law of the LORD” is perhaps the key phrase that separates these good and bad choices. The word *delight* has often intrigued me. Unless I am a terribly boring person, I must delight in something. I delight in ice cream and popcorn. I delight in mountain climbing and deep relationships. But *delight* as used here has a more powerful, life-course impact. How do I change what I delight in if it is ungodly? Like the tree planted by nourishing water, I must sink my roots deep into God’s Word. I must live in God’s Word, and His Word must live richly in me. The beautiful end result of such a focus on Scripture is nothing short of life transformation.

When I ask a group of people, “Who has read the Bible from cover to cover?” only a few hands go up. But the practices of reading, hearing, studying, memorizing, and meditating on God’s Word are a means to the end of a deeper relationship with God (these are illustrated in the hand illustration; see appendix A). Our attitude toward the Scriptures will have a lot to do with our desire to live in the book that God wrote. How we view the Bible—whether strictly as God’s laws to be obeyed (which is true, but limited), or as God’s letter of invitation to an ultimate, mind-blowing relationship—will determine our motivation to focus our delight, our pleasure, our thrill on hearing from God in His living and active Word (Hebrews 4:12). This is what God intends when He says, “His delight is in the law of the LORD.”

Oftentimes we allow the culture of our day to determine how we relate to God and His Word. We live in a sound-bite age. We want only a little bit at a time. Our attention span will not tolerate larger portions. But as followers of the only true living God, we could choose to allow God and His Word to determine our level of devotion and adjustment to His written

Word. I hope we will not view “delighting in the law of the LORD” as something beyond our grasp.

## Practice

### *Writing Prompts*

- » Always begin by reviewing the question, “Lord, what would it sound like if You spoke this psalm to me personally?”
  
- » Consider verse 1. Read it in several translations until you gain a good sense of God’s heart being expressed. Notice that God starts with those who are not blessed. Try your hand at writing this first verse as though God were speaking it to you personally. Allow me to offer a suggested beginning. Remember, this is God speaking: “I fully intend to bless the person who . . .” Now complete the sentence as you hear God answer the question.
  
- » Reflect on verse 2. Altering the phrase “the law of the LORD” to say “My law” begins to shift the verse into first person. You may prefer the phrase, “My proven instructions for living . . .” The next phrase, “in His law he meditates,” could sound like, “in My instructions for successful living, you meditate.” So verse 2, spoken from God’s point of view, might look something like this: “But your delight is in My proven instructions for living, and in My instructions for successful living you meditate day and night.”
  
- » With a little flair from alternate translations and possible meditation, you may come up with something like this for verse

2: “But in contrast, your sheer joy and deep hunger is for My Word, and in My Word you chew and digest truth, and you are set free day and night.” Here, *delight* is expanded into “sheer joy and deep hunger.” The complex word *meditate* is opened to express “chew” (a literal definition for *meditate*) and “digest” (what happens after you chew and swallow?), and “truth” is substituted for *God’s Word*. From John 8:32, drawing from our possible past experience in God’s Word, the phrase “the truth will set you free” can easily be added to further understand the results of this delight in God’s Word. Hopefully you begin to see the value of living in God’s Word and God’s Word living in you.

» Enjoy rewriting the rest of this psalm in the first person!

### *Devotional Thoughts*

» How might God be extending an invitation to you for deeper relationship through verses 1 and 2? What would His invitation sound like?

» Observe the progression of commitment to evil through the words *walk*, *stand*, and *sit*. How would you expand and embellish this growing engagement with evil in your own words?

» Be vulnerable with the Lord. Where are you in any level of commitment to entertaining the world and its ways that are alien to God and His ways?

» “He will be like the tree . . .” gives us a nice on-ramp for thinking like a tree. Consider the perspective of the tree—*firmly planted*, etc. What is it like to have such a rich environment for growth and development to become all you were intended to be?