

Nearing a Far God

praying
the psalms
with our
whole
selves

Leslie
Leyland
Fields



I struggle with prayer the way that you may struggle with prayer. And yet Leslie Leyland Fields is welcoming us into what she calls “a new place that is not far or hard to get to.” With gentleness, grace, and exquisite language, Leslie is the guide who is leading me, and you, to the One who is near.

MARGOT STARBUCK, author of *Small Things with Great Love*

Leslie Leyland Fields has provided a journey through the Psalms engaging your heart, mind, body, and soul. Slow down and process these ancient words. Your life will be richer for the journey.

CHRIS FABRY, author, host of *Chris Fabry Live*

Leslie Leyland Fields has displayed her extraordinary gifts as a writer in a growing list of publications. In *Nearing a Far God* she turns to the inspired poetry of the Psalms. Here she encourages us, and shows us how, to bring our whole selves to the Psalms and put them before God. She does that very thing in the book, moving from moments in her own life into the rich texts of the Psalms. Sunday school classes, Bible study groups, and individuals will find *Nearing a Far God* to be a wonderful guide into a deep reading of the Psalms, where they may confidently expect to be engaged by God.

BEN C. OLLENBURGER, PhD, emeritus professor,
author of *God the Creator*

What is prayer—really? What is prayer when we let it and our lives be the complicated messes they are? And why wouldn't our emotions—shamed by a previous generation of evangelicals—be part of our prayers? Leslie Leyland Fields demonstrates fierce and authentic praying as she reframes old, limited notions of prayer. Fields avoids easy how-to steps or simple answers and teaches us how to integrate praying the Psalms with being richly and deeply human.

CYNTHIA BEACH, author of *The Surface of Water*

Practical, theologically informed, rich with insight, these personal encounters with the Psalms give readers an imaginative, life-giving way to bring these ancient prayers into the very heart of the lives we live now. Grounded in scenes from her own remarkable life, Leslie leads us step by step through a process of claiming each psalm, making it our own, uniting our cries for help and exuberant thanksgivings to those of all who have prayed them over centuries. This book offers a new way of understanding the Bible as a living word: It lives in those who enter it with faith, hope, and all the particulars of our messy lives, letting it shape our prayers and listening for the voice that calls us by name.

MARILYN McENTYRE, PhD, author of *Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies* and *Word by Word*

I've long been an admirer of Leslie Leyland Fields, her lyrical prose, and her wisdom. This beautiful, honest book does not disappoint. What sets *Nearing a Far God* apart is Fields's masterful ability to blend the timeless wisdom of the Psalms with the practical realities of our lives today. Her words are a source of comfort for those in times of sorrow and a celebration for those experiencing moments of joy. This book is a gentle, trustworthy guide for those yearning to draw nearer to God.

JENNIFER DUKES LEE, author of *Growing Slow* and
It's All Under Control



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NavPress 

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Nearing a Far God: Praying the Psalms with Our Whole Selves

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To all the brave, creative people in my writing community
and to the wondrous Story Leaders,
who prayed and cheered me through these pages.
Here our stories find their true ending.



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introduction

I was eight or nine the first time I prayed.

“Come, everyone—we’re going into the front room,” my mother called out to me and five siblings. I don’t remember what I was doing—maybe playing marbles with my brother on the red-and-blue patterned carpet. It was summer, warm. All six of us were dressed in our hand-me-downs: striped cotton jerseys, baggy cotton shorts.

I looked at my mother’s face, puzzled. We came right away; we never questioned her authority. She had directed us through the long, arduous process of transforming this rambling two-hundred-year-old New Hampshire house back to its colonial integrity. But this didn’t sound like another job.

We spread out nervously, some on the couch, some in the hard-backed rocking chairs, all of us silent, curious. She began: “Remember that family that looked at the house a few days ago?”

By this point, we paid little attention to the stream of people strolling through our house. The house had been for sale for at least a year, maybe two.

“We’re going to bow our heads and think as hard as we can about them buying the house.” There was tension in my mother’s voice. “Just send out those positive thoughts.”

We had never done this before. What was it? Was this prayer? And why would God—or the universe or whatever we were praying to—why would he or she or it listen to six ragged children and their exhausted mother? But I dutifully bowed my head and squinched my eyes and covered my face with my hands. *Let the house sell! Let those people buy the house!* I chanted silently over and over, imagining the words pressing out through my brain and into the clouds and beyond.

My brothers and sisters were quiet as well. I peeked up through a crack in my fingers. Their heads were on their knees or in their laps. Where were their words going? Were we all sending our thoughts into the minds of the other family? Maybe it would work.

These were the days of Norman Vincent Peale and positive thinking. I had seen his book in our house but didn’t know anything beyond the optimism of the title.

That family didn’t buy the house, despite our ardent appeals to the universe. The lesson I took from that day was not that prayer didn’t work, but that prayer was for desperate people. And that God, or whomever we were praying to, was too far away to hear us or too busy to help.

I still believe that prayer is for desperate people. But I have come to believe something different about God: that God, even when he feels far away, is closer than we know. And he longs for us to draw near.

I will be honest—I have resisted such closeness. Despite speaking and teaching and even praying in churches for years, I'm still a novice at prayer.

My friend Roberta doesn't know this about me. I'm on the phone with her now. Over the years, she has lost three children out of six, one by one. "I can hardly pray anymore," she tells me. Her voice is flat. "God doesn't want to hear from me. Why would he take my kids away?"

In the face of such vast suffering, I feel ignorant and helpless. "I'm so sorry, Roberta. I understand," I say. I'm lying. What do I know of loss like this? "Ummm, I'll pray for you." My words are a reflex. I don't know what else to say.

"I know you pray a lot," she says. "You pray to God like he's right there with you."

I wince. I want to set her right, but she is old and we're on the phone, and I don't want to start an argument or sound falsely humble. If only she knew that any humility I feel is closer to humiliation. Yes, I know how to speak pious words, especially with a mic at my throat—but I have objections and doubts. I'm well versed in theology, but it often stays stuck in my head. Sometimes I forget God is here. I don't always believe God wants to hear from me. I struggle to believe I'm accepted and forgiven. My heart goes cold and numb way too often. Sometimes I just want to run my own life.

Do you feel that way too? You likely have more to add to this list of objections and struggles. Maybe God feels far away, even oblivious to your existence. Maybe you've never prayed because you're not sure God is even there. Or maybe

you believe he is there, but you're sure he isn't listening. Maybe you've lived a messy life, and you're pretty sure no God could be interested in you after all you've done. Or perhaps you think, *If he really is God of the whole universe, why would he care about stumbling, tiny us?*

Maybe, like Roberta, you've suffered so much loss that you cannot believe in or bring yourself to try to talk to a God who says he loves you. Maybe you can't trust your own father, so why would you trust a heavenly Father? Or maybe you've tried the religious route, followed the rules, done everything right—and God feels further away than ever. And then what if you do pray, and pray fervently, and yet God doesn't seem to answer? Or the answer is the opposite of what you ask for?

We have so many good reasons to stay silent and distant from whoever God is. And, we think, he has even more reasons to dwell far from us.

But surely we want and hope for more? Yes, God is mysterious, invisible, and unfathomable, but most of us have also heard that God loves us and wants a relationship with us. How do we find this? How do we experience that love in a real and lasting way?

Let me invite you, dear fellow weary traveler, into these pages, into a new place that is not far or hard to get to. We can ditch our fears and our failures and come before God as we are right now—with all that we are and all that we are not. We're going to learn how to bring our whole selves before God, no matter what we're thinking and feeling, even when

we have no words. And we're going to hear God speak back to us through his Word.

Don't worry. I'm not promising you ten simple steps to a foolproof prayer life or some kind of fake hack to intimacy with God. Instead, we're going to learn how our own stories and voices can lead us to a lasting attachment to the God who loves us. And to do this, we'll be embarking on a pathway to God that is ancient, yet we'll see and experience it anew.

We're not the first to struggle with prayer, with reaching out to this mysterious God. Listen to these cries:

Why, LORD, do you stand far off?¹

Why do you hide your face?²

Why are you so far from helping me?³

How long, LORD?⁴

I get nothing but trouble all day long.⁵

Turn, O LORD, and deliver my soul.⁶

Have mercy on me, O God. . . . Wash me clean from my guilt.⁷

These words are, of course, from the Psalms. The psalmists felt distance, desperation, and doubt too. But they didn't remain there. So many times they landed somewhere else:

in a pasture, on the safety of a rock. They found the way to rest and trust:

The LORD is my shepherd.⁸

God is our refuge and strength.⁹

He set my feet on solid ground.¹⁰

Cast your burden on the LORD, and he will sustain you.¹¹

This book of Scripture has been the prayer and song book of God's people for millennia. In my early years of faith, I knew bits and pieces of these 150 songs—mostly the well-known passages (“He makes me lie down in green pastures”¹²) and the choruses we sang in church each Sunday (“I Will Enter His Courts with Thanksgiving,” “I Will Exalt Thee,” “As a Deer Panteth for the Water”). I knew the Psalms were also Jesus’ prayers and songs, that he quoted the Psalms more than any other book in the Old Testament. And I knew they were unique in the Bible for their poetic form and range of emotions and intimate window into the writers’ innermost hearts—and these things both attracted and repelled me.

I came of age at a Christian college during a time when many in my faith context viewed emotions as suspect, as the saboteurs of right knowledge. The Christian life was about

“knowing God,” which meant endless Bible studies, word studies, contextual studies, sentence diagrams, biblical book outlines. Accurate theology was paramount. For someone like me, who truly wanted to know God, the course was clear: Get a minor in Greek and take as many Bible classes as possible. (I did both.)

But the Psalms were poetry, which was hard to outline. And they were full of emotion. Though I had studied and composed poetry most of my life, prizing its beauty and economy of language, I dismissed these poem-prayers in God’s Word as sentimental and theologically inconsequential. Give me Romans!

But as my life grew more complicated over the years, cracks and gaps began to show in my knowledge-only faith. By midlife, my husband and I had four kids, then were surprised by two more. I was teaching. We were commercial fishing in the Alaskan wilderness every summer. Our marriage was strained.

Then came the sixtieth straight day of being trapped in a house on a roadless island. The rain kept falling, the kids kept squabbling, and my husband and I had a fight. I couldn’t sleep. I couldn’t pray. All my knowledge and theology were little help. I needed more.

Exhausted, I turned to the Psalms on a whim, paging through one after another. And here, at the end of myself, when I felt like I couldn’t even whisper my own words—I was riveted.

I cried out to God to hear me.¹³

By your words I can see where I'm going.¹⁴

I pray to you, O LORD, my rock.¹⁵

I will praise you, Lord my God, with all my heart.¹⁶

Give ear to my words, O LORD.¹⁷

That day, a realization hit me. Surely I “knew” it in the knowledge corner of my brain, but I suddenly felt the force of these words as never before. Within God’s great story in Scripture—all the narratives of failure and victory, rebellion, intimacy with God—God draws near and speaks again and again. God thunders and weeps. God warns and woos. He speaks from fire and clouds, from mountains, through donkeys and children, and in the voices of men thought mad. Then Jesus arrives, and sometimes he speaks plainly, other times in riddles and stories. But always—God speaks.

Then—in the middle of all these words from God—here’s a book of God’s people speaking back. And what words these are! Not careful words, not words whispered fearfully to a far-distant God, not sedate or prim words of religious posturing—but words of anger, agony, despair, abandonment, anxiety; words of fierce hope, rejoicing, confidence.

I found myself stunned by an extraordinary reality: that the Holy Spirit inspired these writers to compose these yowls, doubts, and shouts; to sing these honest and unflinching, very human songs back to him. Yes, of course! Isn't this the heart of the whole enterprise of redemption: God's desire to be Immanuel, God-with-us? From the start in the garden taking long walks with his beloved friends, God revealed his heart to Eve and Adam and listened to theirs in response. What father does not wish to hear his children's hearts? God speaks to his people, his children, and the Psalms show us that he invites and even inspires us to speak back.

I had to try it myself. I found a quiet room, picked up a pen and a yellow legal pad, and, tremulously, began paging through the Psalms until I hit Psalm 13, a short psalm of lament by King David. It begins,

LORD, how long will You forget me?
 Forever?
 How long will You hide Your face from me?
 How long will I store up anxious concerns within me,
 agony in my mind every day?¹⁸

I couldn't believe how much David's words echoed my own emotions and experience. But reading silently on the page wasn't enough. In this moment of lack and longing, could these words be showing me the way?

I slowly wrote out David's verses in my journal. This simple step of slowing down and writing out each line of the

psalm enabled me to hear it more clearly. But I found myself drawn deeper, needing to do more than repeat his words. I sensed an invitation to conversation. In between the verses, following his pattern, I began to write my own questions, my own circumstances, my own pleas to God.

I was tentative at first. I didn't want to twist the Psalms into an exercise of egocentric spirituality, nor did I want to remake God in my own image. But as I wrote, David's words from the midst of his life gave me language to break my silence, to bring my own circumstances and my own sagging heart into God's presence. I realized that this fuller engagement with the Psalms could help move God from my head into my present reality.

When I was done, I read my words aloud to my Father God. I was astounded. My words opened my ears wider to God's words. This was not a monologue, then; this was a holy dialogue with the living God. I felt it immediately: relief. The joy of reconnection. I understood in a deeper way that God was with me, and that he had spoken into my heart through his Word.

How I needed this! Over the course of my life, a knowledge-only approach has made it hard for me to attach myself to God with the connection and intimacy I long for. Yes, I revel in studying his attributes, in exploring points of doctrine and theology. Yet for most of my life I have struggled to believe he loves me. I have struggled to fully trust. Many of us do.

Researchers in the field of neurotheology¹⁹ help us

understand why we experience such a profound gap between our knowledge of God and his Word and our ability to believe and actually live in and out of what we know. In *The Other Half of Church*, spiritual-formation pastor Michael Hendricks and neurotheologian Jim Wilder reveal that the left-brained, knowledge-only pursuit of spiritual growth—through Bible studies and sermons—engages the rational portion of our brains but ignores the right side, the relational half—which specializes in emotions, memories, and connectedness.²⁰ We usually ignore the body as well, creating a neck-up theology of prayer rather than bringing our integrated selves before God. Jessie Cruickshank, a minister and Harvard-trained expert in neuroscience and spiritual formation, urges us toward a holistic faith: “We must approach Scripture with our whole selves, whole stories, and whole bodies as a means by which we can encounter the author of all life, rather than as facts to retain or truth to know.”²¹

I stumbled upon these insights and the unique power of the Psalms on my own. That day, while I was trapped on that roadless island, the Psalms began to teach me a profound lesson: We are not meant to stay distant, mere observers or passive listeners to stories and information about God. The Psalms invite us into holy conversation with a Father who longs to dwell as near to us as our next breath.

It’s no accident that these prayer-songs are written in poetic form. Poetry accesses a part of us that arguments and

theological treatises cannot touch. Its verses, images, metaphors, rhythms, and wordplays move us through illumination rather than argument. When both sides of our brains are lighting up—both the rational cells in one half, and the images, feelings, and senses in the other—we experience deeper engagement and real change.

If we long to connect with God, then, we need to pursue him with the whole brain—right side and left—as well as with our bodies, which is another way that we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.²²

What does this kind of relationship with God look and sound like? The Psalms show us. As we read them, they usher us into intimate conversations between God and his (ancient) people. But what if they are intended as more? What if the psalmists' prayer-songs not only give us the language for prayer but also model how to pray? What if we can do more than repeat these expressions of lament and praise? What if we can learn from them how to name our own emotions and bring our own laments and praises to God?

Six times in the Psalms the psalmists write exultantly about singing a “new song!”²³ This book of Scripture contains more than just one prayer of praise, or one song of repentance, or a single cry of lament to God. David alone penned more than seventy psalms, each in response to specific events in his life and the state of his heart. This man who was after God's own heart²⁴ called out to his loving Father,

through the psalms, from the depths and heights of his days. Can we not do the same?

I've been writing and speaking to my Father, using the pathway of the Psalms, for almost twenty years now. I have written and prayed through a faith crisis; through difficult pregnancies; through a son's fury, a parent's death, another parent's rejection; through loneliness and hopelessness. I have not stopped, and I've led others into this powerful practice as well. I have seen this journey of prayer transform again and again—in my life, and in the lives of many others.

Here, in these pages, we'll explore seven different forms of the Psalms. In each one, we'll learn new but ancient ways to pray:

- lament
- wisdom
- trust
- confession
- creation
- thanksgiving
- praise

In each chapter, we'll learn about the fascinating approaches of these psalms, the movement and intentionality in their prayers. We'll learn how to listen closely to the verses and the psalmists' hearts. We'll follow Israel's story through the Psalms. And where the Psalms invite us in,

we'll enter. At the end of each chapter, we'll **Draw Near**, learning a practice of writing and praying into these words. As we do, we'll find ourselves getting closer to the heart of God.

We won't just stay in our heads with this practice. Judy Mandeville, a dancer who has spent a lifetime practicing and teaching sacred movement, will help us rediscover what the ancient Hebrews knew about prayer, praise, and worship. They worshiped God holistically, using bodily postures and movements as well as their voices. Judy will offer movement suggestions and postures that will provide a fresh yet ancient way of encountering God, helping us bring not only our minds and emotions to prayer but our bodies as well.

As we pursue this practice of praying and writing into the Psalms, we follow those who have gone before us—those who have stumbled and fallen and despaired and danced and triumphed on the long path from far away to nearly and dearly beloved. God himself, who does not dwell far from us but is as close as our next breath, invites us on this journey. Will we follow?

■ draw near

In my time using and teaching the Psalms as a path into prayer, I've found seven powerful ways to enter, engage, and draw near to God. Here's a simple acronym that captures these activities:

NEARING

- **Notate** (Write out the original psalm by hand, an action that uses both sides of the brain.)
- **Express** (Use your voice and body gestures/movements to give full expression to the psalm.)
- **Amplify** (Add your response/circumstance/witness to the psalm.)
- **Read** (Understand the original psalm in its context, reading different versions if desired.)
- **Identify** (Personalize the psalm to you and/or to your faith community.)
- **New Testament Fulfillment** (Add relevant New Testament verses that augment and fulfill the message of the psalm.)
- **Gather** (Share psalm-prayers in worship with your faith community.)

In the **Draw Near** section of each chapter of this book, I'll lead us through one or more of these holistic activities with chosen psalms.

As we go through this process of praying through the Psalms, I want to be clear about what we're doing. We're not rewriting Scripture. We're not standing over God's Word as editors, tweaking and twisting as we choose. The Psalms cannot rewrite us if we are rewriting the Psalms. Instead, we are allowing the Psalms to teach us to pray, to guide our own words and emotions as we seek God's face, and to lead us to listen more closely to the response of his Word.

How will we do that? As we write into and out of the

Psalms, we'll keep in mind some hermeneutical guidelines to follow along the way:

- Before we write into a psalm, we'll seek to understand it first in its historical and theological context.
- We'll stay within the central subject and intent of the psalm.
- We will preserve the theology of the psalm: what it says about God's character, his nature, his acts in history, his attributes.
- We will write and speak into and out of the psalm to illustrate, witness, and respond to the truths of God's Word, not to alter them. We're not adding to the Word of God; we're allowing the Word of God to shape our own conversations with him.

To begin, you'll need a journal or some paper. If you have a journal that you write in regularly, you can use that, or you may start a new journal dedicated to this practice of communing with God.

After years of this practice, I now have a small stack of these journals. I open them often. I read and catch my breath each time: I am standing on holy ground—again. I see all the ways God met me through the Psalms in those moments and all the ways his responses brought freedom, joy, and closeness to him even in the darkest times. I am certain you will experience the same.

entering through the open gate

Psalm 1

¹Oh, the joys of those who do not
follow the advice of the wicked,
or stand around with sinners,
or join in with mockers.

²But they delight in the law of the LORD,
meditating on it day and night.

³They are like trees planted along the riverbank,
bearing fruit each season.

Their leaves never wither,
and they prosper in all they do.

⁴But not the wicked!
They are like worthless chaff, scattered by the wind.

⁵They will be condemned at the time of judgment.
Sinners will have no place among the godly.

⁶For the Lord watches over the path of the godly,
but the path of the wicked leads to destruction.

I have just turned thirteen. And now, because I've reached this magnificent age, I'm invited to a sledding party. A friend of my older sister's, a girl named Cheryl who lives in another town and goes to a church almost an hour away, has invited me. I have no idea what she means by youth group, but a party? That I understand. Parties are rare—and now I can go.

I don't know any of these other kids, and they're all older than me. I'm wearing the only cool pants I own: mustard-yellow-and-blue-pinstriped bell-bottoms. I try to have fun, but I'm deeply self-conscious.

When the ninth run down the long hill is not as fun as the second and third, we retreat. Our hands red with cold, we follow a young man that everyone calls pastor into a little white church. I sit next to Cheryl in a pew, and the man begins to talk. What is this? I've never heard of someone giving a talk at a party. But his face is kind, his voice gentle. He's telling us about Jesus. How Jesus came to take away our sins—all the ways we disobey God. I think of a lie I told last month. And my stealing. I've been stealing candy from the Peterson's Store and the A&P for a while now. I stole a pair of fingernail clippers from Mary's house last week. A pair of shorts from Kmart last month. I take things because I don't know how else to get them, but it weighs on me.

I listen to his words. *He came here for you. Jesus came for you and died for you. Because God wants you. God wants you to be his sons and daughters. He loves you, and he has a wonderful plan for your life.*

I cannot move. Every word hits me at my core. How does

this man know? I have been looking for this all my life. Yes, my short life—but it's been a long life for me so far.

That moment in that tiny country church was decades ago, but I remember it so clearly. I shot my hand up and walked down the aisle that day. I saw a path there, a path I had never known before. All my time in the beautiful woods around my house had shown me a force that loved the world, and I also knew I didn't know that force, whatever it was. But I wanted to.

I knew other things, though. I knew parents couldn't be trusted. I knew *I* couldn't be trusted. I knew that anger and hate were contagious and destructive and almost impossible to overcome. That the world was split into the lucky and the unlucky, and that nothing could breach that divide.

I had hoped a God was there. Many nights I tried to pray, but I felt my words bouncing off the walls of my room. But that day in the church, I finally believed he was real and close and . . . he wanted me? I prayed tremulously, and for the first time, I felt like God heard me.

I knew very little about the Bible then. I had not even heard of the Psalms. But I understood the choice before me: Go this way, or go the other way. Go toward God, or go away from God. Choose God, or choose yourself. And here's where those choices take you: God is with you every step, or you're separated from God and destruction awaits.

The Psalms and our journey of prayer begin here too.

One hundred fifty psalms were mostly composed over a six-hundred-year period, and as a general rule, no one knows what psalms were written when. But the editors who later

compiled and ordered the psalms chose this prayer-song as the first. No wonder. Psalm 1 gestures forward to all the psalms that follow. It's a wisdom psalm, showing us the way to a wise and prosperous life.

This psalm is for all of us who feel an ache for the kind of flourishing life it describes. For we are a special kind of weary, are we not? We're now years into a culture hostile and divided, into toxic politics, the church shrinking and divided, disruption from the pandemic, war in Ukraine, so much sickness, death, and destruction. And we bear our own individual challenges, each of us. After thirty-four years of raising children, I saw my last son leave home. My house is empty. All my children live thousands of miles away. Our fishing business is threatened. Winter has wrapped its dark, icy fingers around our island in Alaska. A sense of isolation hangs over me like a shroud. And I struggle to break free from the ache of estrangement from a parent. Some days I feel like an exile. Some days I have neither words nor even a desire to pray.

Do you feel this weariness too? Psalm 1 reminds us of what we ache for, leading us all the way back to Genesis, to that perfect, paradisaical garden when the world was new and man's and woman's hearts and path were undivided. They ate from the trees in the garden and walked and conversed face-to-face with their loving Creator.

But we know what happened. They turned away, stopped trusting their Father. They listened to the wrong voice, choosing to believe the serpent's words rather than their Father's.

They went their own way, on the path that led outside the garden. The path to separation and death. They became exiles.

Psalm 1 shows us this path too. The gate before us invites us into this grand book of green pastures, of God's sheltering wings, of stars shouting God's glory, trees clapping their hands, and so many cries and rescues from the pit and the miry clay. But before us we also see another choice: the path that leads in the opposite direction, to futility and finally ruin.

This same choice is offered to God's people in the book of Joshua. Moses has just died. Joshua is about to lead the whole motley crew of a vast multitude of Hebrews into the land God promised generations earlier. But before they set a single foot into the land, God speaks these words:

Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.¹

Do you hear how these words are echoed in Psalm 1? Gordon J. Wenham, author of *Psalms as Torah*, writes,

From the very first psalm, the Psalter presents itself as a second Torah, divided into five books like the Pentateuch, and it invites its readers to meditate

on them day and night, just as Joshua was told to meditate on the law of Moses.²

These words, this invitation to choose the path to life, were not just for ancient Israel. Are we not Eve and Adam as well? Are we not wanderers in the wilderness? Don't we all keep choosing to walk our own way?

But here we stand at the gate, our exiled hearts longing for God—and look! We're invited back. We can return to the garden God fashioned for us. We can so delight in God's words and presence that we're dripping with fruit, our leaves green through every season, prosperity blossoming around us.

But we've got to take the first step inside. If we want to draw nearer to this God who invites, we can't simply gaze through the gate. We've got to bring our whole selves through the gate—our bodies, minds, hearts, souls, spirits. We do want to grow in knowledge, but we have to do more than “know God.” We're here to *meet* God. If we are to find him, to draw nearer to this God who says he is here with us, then let us try to meet him on his terms rather than ours.

I know no better way to do this than through the words of Scripture. I've come to believe that God's Word is what it says it is: authoritative, holy, and inspired by God himself. That means these words are alive. I've studied language and literature for most of my life, but I've discovered nothing that moves, inspires, pierces, empowers, shakes, and shapes as God's Word does.

But maybe you have doubts. Maybe you've not read the

Bible much. Maybe you don't trust the Bible much. Maybe you feel like an outsider to all this. That's okay. I felt like that for a long time as well. It's okay to begin with questions instead of answers. I've led people into the Psalms who were unsure about the Bible, yet they shared the ache, the longing, the search for the good path; they decided to experiment and experience it for themselves. That's a good start. Who knows where it can lead?

The Psalms themselves give us this stunning image of who we can be: "I run in the path of your commandments, for you have set my heart free."³ This path of relearning prayer is a journey into deeper love, into deeper attachment to God. And we're not walking, we're running! We're running free and fast because we're running on the path that leads to the God who made us, who loves us, who longs for us to come near.

Are we ready to take that first step? Let's begin!

■ draw near

The open gate is our first invitation to explore this new yet old pathway to prayer. If you are struggling with doubt or uncertainty as you begin, let me encourage you with this perspective from Heidi, a fellow God-seeker who has written into and out of the Psalms with me:

What could I add to these ancient words? My experiences today? I feel strangely common, just a tiny voice in the cacophony of millions who cried the same human tears, sang the same sad songs. I feel

like a raindrop in a torrential rain. A snowflake in an avalanche. A single note in a symphony. How can my words matter? But then, as I continue to read and write, I hear the Voice between the lines, the Voice who chose the writers, those heralds, called to weave humanity and God together. I can feel the Heart of the One who says, “Pay attention! This is for you!” I hear an almighty, all-knowing call: “I SEE YOU. I KNOW YOU. I LOVE YOU.”⁴

Remember, our simple acronym will guide our psalm-prayers:

NEARING

- **N**otate (Write out the original psalm by hand, an action that uses both sides of the brain.)
- **E**xpress (Use your voice and body gestures/movements to give full expression to the psalm.)
- **A**mplify (Add your response/circumstance/witness to the psalm.)
- **R**ead (Understand the original psalm in its context, reading different versions if desired.)
- **I**dentify (Personalize the psalm to you and/or to your faith community.)
- **N**ew Testament Fulfillment (Add relevant New Testament verses that augment and fulfill the message of the psalm.)
- **G**ather (Share psalm-prayers in worship with your faith community.)

As we take our first steps and **Draw Near** in psalm-praying, writing into and out of the Psalms, let's keep in mind our hermeneutical guidelines:

- Before we write into a psalm, we'll seek to understand it first in its historical and theological context.
- We'll stay within the central subject and intent of the psalm.
- We will preserve the theology of the psalm: what it says about God's character, his nature, his acts in history, his attributes.
- We will write and speak into and out of the Psalms to illustrate, witness, and respond to the truths of God's Word, not to alter them. We're not adding to the Word of God; we're allowing the Word of God to shape our own conversations with him.

Pull out your chosen journal or paper.

In this first psalm and in this first chapter, we'll start with four simple but powerful exercises:

1. **Read** and understand the original psalm in its context, in different versions if desired.
2. **Notate** the psalm (write it out by hand).
3. **Identify** with the psalm (personalize the psalm to you).

4. **Express** the psalm. You may wish to do this silently. However, reading aloud also engages the larynx, diaphragm, and ears; the more of ourselves we employ, the greater our attention to our psalm-prayer.

Read

It might seem obvious, but this first step is crucial. God inspired these words within the Israelites' own story and particular historical context. Paradoxically and wonderfully, the more we sit with and grasp the original story, the more we're able to engage with the psalm and apply it to our own story. To help with this process, I like to read several different translations.

I'm including two of my favorites here for you to consider. Because I don't know Hebrew, I like to start with a literal translation, to get as close as possible to the original language, before moving on to a more contemporary translation.

Psalm 1 (YOUNG'S LITERAL TRANSLATION)

- ¹O the happiness of that one, who
Hath not walked in the counsel of the wicked.
And in the way of sinners hath not stood,
And in the seat of scorners hath not sat;
- ²But—in the law of Jehovah [is] his delight,
And in His law he doth meditate by day and by night:
- ³And he hath been as a tree,
Planted by rivulets of water,
That giveth its fruit in its season,

And its leaf doth not wither,

And all that he doth he causeth to prosper.

⁴Not so the wicked:

But—as chaff that wind driveth away!

⁵Therefore the wicked rise not in judgment,

Nor sinners in the company of the righteous,

⁶For Jehovah is knowing the way of the righteous,

And the way of the wicked is lost!

Psalm 1 (NLT)

¹Oh, the joys of those who do not

follow the advice of the wicked,

or stand around with sinners,

or join in with mockers.

²But they delight in the law of the LORD,

meditating on it day and night.

³They are like trees planted along the riverbank,

bearing fruit each season.

Their leaves never wither,

and they prosper in all they do.

⁴But not the wicked!

They are like worthless chaff, scattered by the wind.

⁵They will be condemned at the time of judgment.

Sinners will have no place among the godly.

⁶For the LORD watches over the path of the godly,

but the path of the wicked leads to destruction.

Notate

Our next step is choosing a version (either from the ones given here or another translation you prefer) and then hand-writing the psalm. Taking pen in hand helps us slow down to soak in the Word of God. Our eyes translate the words into impulses that move our hands deliberately across the journal paper. Our body is giving shape to God's words. We're listening to God, understanding the sense and movement of the psalm from beginning to end.

In this practice of notating, we're already "meditating" on his law. The root of the Hebrew word translated *meditate* means "to murmur," suggesting intense and outwardly expressed concentration. As we write the psalm by hand, we must ponder each word in much the same way as if we were speaking it aloud. Neuroscience tells us that writing by hand calls on both sides of the brain: the language mode of the left brain and the visuospatial and nonverbal, memory-rich modes of the right brain. Also, writing by hand (as opposed to writing on a keyboard) increases understanding and recall.⁵ In this simple exercise of writing God's Word by hand, we are integrating body, mind, memory, and spirit.

1. As you **Notate** the verses, leave two or three lines of space between each verse to make room for the next activity.
2. Be intentional with your handwriting (print, cursive, calligraphy, etc.), considering what style feels fitting to the psalm.
3. Carefully consider the meaning of each verse as you write.

Identify

These words of wisdom and admonition are written for all people, which means each of us as well. When we step into the verses personally, using the first-person *I*, the psalm comes closer, drawing us into the “story” and nearer to God’s heart. As we engage Psalm 1, we will also discover that God is not inviting us simply to consider two paths of life—he’s asking us which path we will choose.

In the space you left beneath each line of the psalm, write the verses again, this time identifying yourself directly as the audience.

Leslie’s Psalm 1 prayer

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

*Oh, the joys I, Leslie, will know when I don’t
follow the advice of the wicked,
or stand around with sinners;
when I don’t join in with mockers.*

Express

Your final step, when you’ve finished notating, is to **Express** your psalm-prayer. This could be a silent exercise, but reading aloud engages the body and senses. Consider as well adding a gesture or a posture that expresses your words. The

more of ourselves we employ, the greater our attention to our psalm-prayer as we enact it before our Father. Here are some possible movements:

- Verses 1-2: Head up, arms down and palms open to the side
- Verses 2-3: Lifting arms slowly overhead (pausing to feel the expanse of the tree imagery)
- Verses 4-6: Head down and hands crossed sharply over your face

Or create your own physical expression as you read your psalm-prayer to God. He is listening!