



The Recovery
of Joy

Finding the
path from rootlessness
to returning home

Naomi
Starkey

The Bible Reading Fellowship

15 The Chambers, Vineyard
Abingdon OX14 3FE
brf.org.uk

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This book was a long time in development, so thanks to all who listened to me, supported me and helped me clarify what I wanted to say. Special thanks to Richard J., who gave me the idea of 'islands', without which the narrative would never have reached its final shape.

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Introduction

To be a pilgrim is commonly assumed to have some sense of purpose. To be a pilgrim usually means setting off, after due planning and provision, careful forecasting and budgeting. To be a pilgrim means anticipating some kind of holy encounter, if not along the way – and possibly not through our fellow pilgrims – then certainly when we reach our destination, the sacred, thin place that is reputed to be a likely spot for connecting with God. And to be a pilgrim means setting off in the happy confidence that home awaits our return.

In a number of spiritual traditions, both Christianity and other faiths, there has also been another kind of pilgrim, more of a wanderer than a traveller, a seeker rather than one who is intent on a particular destination. Celtic monks of the fifth and sixth centuries sometimes chose such wandering as a form of martyrdom, in the absence of active persecution. They would literally push off (so the stories tell) from the shore in tiny boats, oar-less, and trust to heaven's mercy to direct their way over the water. And (so the stories tell) heaven was usually gracious and brought them through mishap and adventure to a place of final rest. Theirs was a different, reckless purpose, abandoning themselves to God's purposes, as mediated through wind and current and tide. They did not ask to see a map; they did not worry about losing the way, because they had moved beyond the notion of 'lost'.

Then again, some may set out on a journey, not as a kind of martyrdom, nor even as purposeful travellers, but as those who are going into exile. They leave behind pretty much everything known as home – through choice, through force of circumstance, whatever – and then just carry on, taking a turning here, a sidetrack there,

simply to do something. Movement is one of the signs of life – and so they move and keep on moving, empty of purpose, empty of agenda or timetable, perhaps empty even of the search for any kind of meaning. Keeping going, even if mechanically, even if randomly and pointlessly, can keep you one step ahead of remorse, recrimination, regret, and one step can be enough.

Such a journey is not a pilgrimage but it can become one. This book shares a story of exile and rootless wandering that, through unlooked-for grace, finds purpose and becomes pilgrimage. Starting at a point where purpose has collapsed to a point of near-paralysis, a wanderer chooses to drift across a sea in a small boat that unexpectedly turns out to be a vessel of salvation, of redemption. This sea hides islands, those little worlds so beloved of pilgrims and travellers of every kind because they apparently offer safety and seclusion from the trials and complexities of the rest of life. Appearances are only part of the truth, however, as we shall discover.

The islands that we will discover in this book turn out to be places of encounter, challenge and eventual transformation. Brokenness is stitched together, painfully, to make a new, beautiful whole. The conclusive discovery is realising the way to the recovery of joy – that transfiguring sense of wholeness, rootedness, delight and peace that can catch us unawares, breaking through a seemingly chance convergence of time, place and self, and calling us to respond. The way to that recovery, that joy, emerges as we find ourselves caught up in the creator's working. It comes to clarity through knowing, beyond doubt, that this here and now is the only place we should be, what we were born for. However far we fall, we cannot fall beyond the reach of God's loving arms if we shout for rescue. We cannot run so far or so long that his loving gaze will cease scanning the horizon in the hope of glimpsing our return.

As the events of the story unfold, each chapter will pause for reflection on selected passages from the Psalms, the ancient prayer book of God's people. The Psalms are one of the parts of scripture

that most reverberate with human passions – despair, longing, hope, joy – as the people who first composed those prayers struggled to hold together their belief in God’s loving providence with the strains of living in a baffling and at times frightening world. Almost without exception, they found renewed assurance by the closing verses. Like a flashlight on the darkest and stormiest of nights, the central message of the Psalms lights up a trustworthy path to follow: ‘This is not the end that it seems. Don’t give up. God is here – promise.’

Part 1

Rootlessness

1

On the road

Here we are at a crossroads once again. Here we are, standing in a thin drizzle under a grey sky, staring at a white fingerpost pointing in four different directions to places that mean nothing to us.

How did we end up here – and which way to go now?

It had seemed a good idea at first – throwing away the rule book of a good life, tearing up the old maps. It felt adventurous, a more sophisticated way of carrying on than dutifully following the ways trodden by parents, grandparents, mentors, vicars, teachers, the law-abiding and unremittingly respectable. We were going to strike out on our own, break new ground, making a better, more free and authentic way for ourselves, a way that would bring fulfilment, excitement, gloriously boosted self-esteem. Choices were made, ultimatums delivered, promises broken, and then somehow or other it all turned into the most horrible mess. Instead of ascending the heights, we have found ourselves falling into a pit – a pit of our own digging.

And now we find ourselves here, wandering an apparently endless maze of small, muddy lanes. They are no doubt attractive to jaded city-dwellers visiting on a sunny day, but under this grey sky, the drizzle driven against the face by the fretful wind, they sap the soul's energy. When we started off, longer ago than we care to remember, we found a virtue in taking the alternative route, the one that none of our friends was following. We always assumed there would be a route back (a shortcut, if possible) to life's highway, where we would

rejoin the rest of the traffic, pick up on relationships temporarily suspended, get back to normal (albeit a different kind of normal).

Sure, we had fun along the way, some unplanned stopovers and unexpected discoveries, while the rest of the traffic filed dutifully along the dual carriageway, nose to tail. We have a truckload of entertaining anecdotes to share, which show us in the best possible light, despite the arguable un-wisdom of our choices. Now, though, we don't have anybody to share them with. We are utterly alone and have been for some time.

Even yesterday, we could still tell ourselves that the only way is forward, that tomorrow is another day – and while there is life, there is hope. And so on. Now, today, that feels like ridiculous optimism.

Until today we still hoped that the sun would break through the clouds. We hoped that the wind would drop, that (getting desperate) a voice would thunder from the skies and tell us which direction to take. Some say that an instinct of the heart kicks in to let us know the right path to take – that we sense a welling up of dread if we are about to go the wrong way, or a sudden flood of peace if we are making a good choice – but what does a pervasive numbness of the heart signify? How do we cope with a growing paralysis of will that begins to make every direction look to be leading to the wrong destination? The trouble is (or part of the trouble is) that we are so far from home, so removed from all familiar landmarks.

We are lost.

For a while we pretended that we were on a kind of pilgrimage – but we were fooling ourselves. We have not been seeking divine connection (quite the opposite, in fact); neither have we been consciously heading in search of some place or other where the cosmic 'heavenly dimension' is said to be particularly accessible. We have lacked fellow pilgrims to support us with tea and sympathy when the journey grew burdensome. Now we have no one around

to remind us not to worry, that God is bigger than we know... and so on.

What we have been doing was not pilgrimage, but just aimless wandering – and, today, wandering in circles. And now we are lost.

The thin drizzle is turning into solid rods of rain and the pointy tops of the surrounding hills have disappeared into a blanket of fog. And so it's both a surprise and a relief when a muddy pickup truck pulls up alongside, towing a trailer full of sheep. The window winds down and a smiling wind-beaten face suggests that we might like a lift as it looks as if we are heading down the same road... and the weather is dismal, isn't it?

The kindness of strangers can be heartbreaking, offered (as it can be) without obligation, and with casual generosity. It's probably best not to disintegrate at this point, though. Who knows what further emotional assault course lies ahead for us?

But we can accept a lift and climb in, as crumpled government forms, empty crisp packets, chocolate wrappers and a copy of last week's local newspaper (folded open at the classified ads for livestock) are knocked off the front seat. The radio offers wry commentary on celebrity entanglements that sound like dispatches from another universe.

Some claim to have received heaven's guidance through a random song popping up on a DJ's playlist, or in a passing comment on a TV show that includes exactly the words or image needed to direct their decision-making. An omnipotent God can surely manipulate media chat to deliver appropriate help for his hapless children, yet then the challenge is to know where guidance ends and delusion takes over. Maybe the truth is found in the outcome – whether the apparent guidance produces sound or sour fruit in the lives of those affected. It's all rather hypothetical for us, though, in the utter absence of any such help, any guidance as to where to go next.

Thankfully, our driver seems happy to carry on mostly in easy silence, offering a few comments on the rain and the road but a merciful lack of probing questions. Given that we have no destination in mind, given that we are lost (in every sense of the word), it is a relief to be rattled along for a while, delaying the moment when the next choice becomes unavoidable. Our desperate state must be fairly obvious, though, as the next comment indicates:

‘If you’re planning to sleep out tonight, the forecast isn’t good. If you’re going to walk the cliffs, the wind will cut straight through that coat. But if you want a place to stop over, just till the morning, we have spare beds and space at the supper table.’

Just for a moment a door swings open into a parallel world – a world of firelight, food and conviviality, a family circle extended wide enough to include the lost and straying. Just for a moment, we wonder if we could step through that door. We hesitate, with all the irresolution that has been our habit for so long, and the moment slips past.

‘This is the turning to my place here – so...?’

So – thanks, but no thanks. The rain has stopped, for now.

As has become our routine of late, not deciding has led to a decision. We will not take the turning; we will walk away from the spare bed, the place at the table. We will walk on into the low grey afternoon and we will despair.



*I am laid low in the dust; preserve my life according to your word.
I gave an account of my ways and you answered me; teach me
your decrees.
Cause me to understand the way of your precepts,*

that I may meditate on your wonderful deeds.

My soul is weary with sorrow; strengthen me according to your word.

Keep me from deceitful ways; be gracious to me and teach me your law.

I have chosen the way of faithfulness; I have set my heart on your laws.

I hold fast to your statutes, Lord; do not let me be put to shame.

I run in the path of your commands, for you have broadened my understanding.

Teach me, Lord, the way of your decrees, that I may follow it to the end.

Give me understanding, so that I may keep your law and obey it with all my heart.

Direct me in the path of your commands, for there I find delight.

Turn my heart towards your statutes and not towards selfish gain.

PSALM 119:25-36

This is the voice of one clinging to God by the fingertips, as life events crash on top of them, crushing them face down in the dirt. This is the voice of one who has tried to walk God's way, the way of faithfulness, but found it did not deliver what had been hoped. After all, the scriptures abound in promises of fullness of life and overflowing granaries for the righteous, blessings for those who commit themselves, body and soul, to following the law. We may ask, then, why this upright and blameless speaker has been left grovelling in the dust. Since when has that been part of the life script for those seeking to be obedient sons and daughters of the Most High?

What we also hear, however, is the dogged determination not to let go of God, imploring his help to ensure that no error in the speaker's life, even the most innocent of mistakes, is overlooked. 'Keep me from deceitful ways,' is the plea. 'Be gracious to me, don't let me be put to shame. Strengthen me, direct me, teach me.' Oh God, please don't leave me here in bits... I long to long for you, and you alone, with all my heart – but I fear my own weakness, my regrettable

tendency to deceive even myself. I am so easily trapped by my small and selfish desires. Without you, O God, I can only crawl forward, a pathetic specimen. With you, O God, I have the confidence and strength to rise to my feet and not just walk, but run freely along the broad and blessed path of obedience, the path that I know to be the path of life.

Please hear me. Please help me.

We might want to critique such a perspective as infantilising. Surely, as adults, we are supposed to make up our own minds about where to go and how to get there, whether we're talking about what career to pursue, what person to marry – or what car to buy or how to spend our day off. We don't need downloaded route plans, no matter how sanctified and scriptural, because surely we have made enough journeys by now to have a pretty good idea of possible outcomes. Pity the poor religious obsessive who cannot take a step forward without the say-so of the big Santa in the sky...

But what about the times when our choices – whether carefully weighed decisions or momentary and perhaps regrettable impulses – take us into a maze of uncertainty where the only exit leads to what feels like the very end of the road? In these verses we hear the near-despair of one gripping with fading strength to the statutes of God as their last chance of guidance, of a sense of perspective, a means of orientation in the dizzy confusion of what to do. Note, however, that faith somehow turns that near-despair to an impulse of hope. God is good – that is a given – and God's way is good – another given – and so when God reveals to us the right way to go, we can walk on in trust.

And whatever helps us on the journey from despair to hope can only be beneficial for the soul, whether or not we find it easy to admit the finitude of our personal resources, and bring ourselves to ask for help; whether or not we choose to walk with God or to wander away altogether.



The afternoon light gets lower and greyer by the minute as we trudge the narrowing lanes, although by now it's more of a shuffle than anything so determined as a trudge. Our feet are hurting badly. These lanes are only the width of an average car now... perhaps in another turning or two we will come to the end.

What then?

It's easier not to ask that. It's easier just to trudge – to shuffle on – because when the days are as empty as ours have become, movement brings a crumb of meaning. As we breathe, as we move, we know that time is passing which is, in a way, a good thing. Time passing will bring closer the final ending of all choice, the conclusive shutting down of options, and that will come as a relief, to be honest. We have had enough.

‘Recovering joy involves more than following our social codes and conventions. It involves walking with God at our right hand, step by step in the radiant light of his presence. It involves remembering that we have already arrived at our destination – the safety of our Father’s house – even as we continue on the pilgrim road that takes us through life.’

The Recovery of Joy weaves imaginative story and profound reflections on a selection of psalms to trace a journey that many of us will relate to. The narrative begins in rootlessness and despair and takes a wanderer across the sea to a series of islands. These are the setting for a succession of events and encounters through which emerges a progression from that initial rootlessness, through healing, to a rediscovery of the joy of feeling at the centre of God’s loving purpose for our lives.

Naomi Starkey is a priest in the Church in Wales, currently living and working on the Llyn Peninsula. She was previously a commissioning editor for BRF, and edited and contributed to *New Daylight* and *Quiet Spaces*. Her other books include *The Recovery of Hope*, *The Recovery of Love*, *Pilgrims to the Manger* and *Good Enough Mother*.



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