



Foreword by Dr John Inge,
Bishop of Worcester

Alison Morgan

WORLD TURNED UPSIDE DOWN

THE PSALMS
AND THE SPIRITUALITY OF PAIN
FINDING A WAY THROUGH

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Foreword

‘The Psalms take us on a journey; and they take us on foot... in a sense walking is the dominant theme of the entire Psalter.’ So writes Alison Morgan in her highly perceptive, reflective and personal exploration of this great repository of timeless wisdom. Alison is the ideal walking companion and guide, walking not racing, never charging on ahead, always taking time to stop, to absorb the view and to ponder. She shares her personal experiences – of pregnancy, of rejection, of confusion, of bereavement, of times when her world has been turned upside down – in such a gentle manner as to invite the reader to call to mind the highs and lows they have similarly experienced, endured or enjoyed. As well as being intimately familiar with the landmarks, Alison is the kind of guide who inspires confidence: she has trodden this path before, she reads the map, she knows the direction, she is not daunted by difficult terrain, scree or scramble, not held back by headwind, storm or fog.

At each stage, Alison’s method is to draw attention to a particular feature of the Psalmist’s landscape, then, as readers and author together rest their gaze on that aspect, readers come to see how the Psalmist’s hard-won insights into the human condition can be a source of understanding, perseverance, faith, and hope in their own lives. In the process they come to know themselves more fully; they also come to know God more fully, the God who has ‘searched me out and known me’. The best guides, of course, do more than show people the way; they also enable them to find their own way. Anyone who follows Alison’s guidance will be better equipped to return to the Psalms again and again and discover fresh insights of their own – and become a guide to others.

From the very outset of this book, it becomes clear to the reader that this walk is not an amiable, aimless ramble. Rather, the journey on

which Alison is the guide is a pilgrimage; indeed, as she points out, several psalms were themselves composed to accompany the pilgrim. As a disciple of the one who called himself the Way, the Truth and the Life, Alison discerns the presence of Jesus every step of the way. What Alison offers the reader here is a *camino* through the Psalms. It is telling that the heading of the final chapter is 'Coming home'.

I hope you will enjoy your pilgrim walk with Alison, that you will marvel at the beauty along the way, and marvel even more at the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of it all; I wish you a rewarding journey and a safe homecoming.

Dr John Inge, Bishop of Worcester

Preface

When I was a child I used to go with my friends to our local swimming pool. It was an outdoor lido, and the water was shockingly cold. Each time, I was faced with a question: would I simply sit on the edge in the sunshine, or would I have the courage to dive in? Many years later, I find the Psalms asking me that same question. It is easy to recite a psalm without thinking too much – enjoying the rise and fall of the words, pausing over a particular image, scooping something off the surface here and there. Satisfied, we move on – touched, perhaps, but not changed. But a psalm makes exactly the same demand as a swimming pool: it invites us to dive in, to explore what we find beneath the water, to abandon our landlocked competence and accept that we cannot move through it as we move through other, more familiar texts; that we may have to change the way we see things. As we immerse ourselves in each psalm, we begin to look and feel differently. We may worry that the water is cold and the pool deep; we may find things we do not expect. It takes courage to dive into an ancient text, but if we don't take the plunge, if we are not willing to grapple with the psalmists' rich, unexpected words and learn to make them our own, we will never receive what they have to offer us.

I hope that as you read this book you will accept my invitation to take that plunge. We live in a complicated world, and life throws up challenges we may feel ill-equipped to meet. For centuries the Psalms have served as the primary spiritual resource for both Jewish and Christian believers. Until the Middle Ages, if you owned one book, it would be the Book of Psalms; a few centuries later the Psalter would become the first book to be printed in North America. Embedded in the lives of ordinary people in both private prayer and public worship, the Psalms have shaped and sustained whole generations. Today the Psalms have lost much of their former pre-eminence, and yet as I have prayed them

myself I have discovered that when we are at our weakest, when we feel we most need God and yet have no idea how to talk to him, it is the Psalms which leap to our rescue. With the psalmists as our guides, we learn to draw closer to God, to hear his voice in fresh ways, and to identify what it is that troubles us. Borrowing their words, we find that we are able to articulate our most painful feelings and walk through suffering with honesty, hope, and confidence in the God who travels beside us. Here is an opportunity to read the Psalms differently: an invitation to embark on a new journey.

Books on the Psalms tend to fall into three main categories. Specialist works written by academic theologians offer detailed analyses of individual psalms and their contexts. General introductions, often written by these same scholars, provide us with the background information we need if we are to engage with the Psalms meaningfully today. Finally, devotional books written by a wide range of people offer personal readings of selected psalms, encouraging us to adopt them as part of our own pattern of prayer. My aim in *World Turned Upside Down* is to produce something which draws on all three of these genres; something which is at the same time critically rigorous, helpfully informative and personally meaningful. In order to enable the reader to engage fully and personally with the Psalms, a series of pointers for further reflection are placed at the end of the book.

My background lies not in theology but in literature, which inclines me to treat individual psalms as poetic rather than doctrinal texts, and to take a thematic and narrative approach to the collection as a whole – I read the Psalter not simply as a collection of works to be taken in isolation, but as a book which tells the story of a people. Many years of ministry to others, combined with my own experience as an ordinary human being living in a complicated world, have persuaded me that this story is also our story: that the things which provoked the psalmists to pour their feelings into these ancient songs are the very same things which fill our hearts and minds today. This has led me to take an approach to the Psalms which is unashamedly personal. I have come to believe that it is in making connections between our own experience and that

of the original authors that we will best enable these ancient texts to fulfil their potential in our own lives, and the primary experience available to me is my own; the Psalms have transformed my ability to cope with the ups and downs of my particular circumstances. But I have also been hugely helped by the many people who have shared their own life stories with me, and their experiences too have enabled me to engage more deeply with the Psalms – although none of them appear here under their real names.

I would like to express my particular gratitude to Andrew, Brigid, John, Katy, Mike, Rodney and Stanley, who have in different ways offered me their encouragement, advice and support during the years in which I have been living and writing this book. And I would like to thank Olivia Warburton and her team at BRF for believing in the book and for their skill in preparing it for publication. It goes without saying that any errors or infelicities are mine alone.

Lastly, I would like to thank my husband Roger, who has walked beside me on the path of life for 40 years: I dedicate this book to him.

Alison Morgan



Making sense of life

**The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
 He makes me lie down in green pastures;
 he leads me beside still waters;
 he restores my soul.
 He leads me in right paths
 for his name's sake.
 Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
 I fear no evil;
 for you are with me;
 your rod and your staff – they comfort me.
 You prepare a table before me
 in the presence of my enemies;
 you anoint my head with oil;
 my cup overflows.
 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
 all the days of my life,
 and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
 my whole life long.**

PSALM 23

In the beginning

When I was a child I had a friend named Sarah. Sarah lived next door, and she was a couple of years older than me. Sarah had a way of asking questions. 'If you had one wish for your life,' she enquired one day, 'what would it be?' 'To be happy,' I said. 'And if you were going to be run over,' Sarah continued, 'what would you choose to be run over by?' I frowned. It dawned on me that life might not be as simple

or straightforward as I had anticipated. Even as I yearned for happiness, there must be a real possibility that things could go suddenly and disastrously wrong. ‘An ambulance,’ I said.

When things do indeed go wrong, it is to Psalm 23, probably the best known and loved of all the psalms, that we often turn. David begins with a lyrical description of human happiness, and he does it not by articulating a feeling, but by evoking an ancient pastoral landscape: ‘The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.’ Happiness, the psalm suggests, is wandering free of care through green pastures, pausing to sit beside the cool waters of slow-moving streams, relaxing among memories which take us back not just to our own childhood, but to that of the human race as a whole – this is the archetypal landscape of human well-being. As we read the opening words, we find ourselves at peace.

And yet David, like Sarah, knows that life is more complicated than this. Sometimes, he goes on to say, we find ourselves walking through much darker valleys, places where clouds of evil shut out the sunlight and where people who wish to harm us lurk in the shadows. Sunshine or darkness, peace or anguish, refreshing water or menacing rock – these are images which will echo through the Psalter, laid out here for us in the simplest of terms. And as David paints his canvas of light and darkness, I learn something which Sarah did not tell me. I realise that David is drawing our attention to the *order* in which these experiences come. Your wish is to be happy, he says, to find yourself wandering beside the clear streams which trickle gently through lush meadows. But this experience comes not by having the good fortune to avoid things going wrong, but by knowing where to turn when they do. The essential thing to take on board is that when your path does lead through dark valleys, you will not walk alone. You will have a guide, a shepherd, someone who will bring you to a place of safety, someone who will spread out the sunlit picnic from which those who sought to harm you will be very specifically excluded.

True happiness, David is suggesting, comes not before things go wrong, but after they have been put right.

The elephant in the room

Each place and time has its own set of values, its own way of doing things – its own invisible philosophy of life, if you like, a philosophy which among other things determines how we seek happiness and how we handle pain. We live in a very particular place and time – a postwar consumer society founded on the quest for growth and prosperity; a society which has persuaded itself that things can only get better, that money and technology will usher in a bright new world. We wrap ourselves in these promises and try not to notice that what is promised is not necessarily what is delivered. Pain, suffering and death remain persistently stubborn; although we do of course need food and shelter, human happiness does not appear to be related to material prosperity. If anything, the reverse is true: it seems that the wealthier and more technologically advanced the society, the higher the rates of depression found within it. In England, more than 83 million prescriptions for antidepressant medication were issued in the year 2021–22 alone; more than a quarter of us now depend on long-term prescriptions for antidepressants, opioids or sleeping pills.¹ The psalmist would not have been surprised: ‘The days of our life are three score years and ten; yet the sum of them is but labour and sorrow,’ he said.²

One of my favourite contemporary authors is Alain de Botton, a philosopher who writes engagingly and thoughtfully about the undercurrents of modern society. An ideology of optimism, he notes, is released into the air we breathe like a colourless, odourless gas. Embedded in newspapers, adverts and TV, underpinning everything from business

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- 1 Data published by the NHS Business Services Authority, ‘Medicines used in mental health – England 2015/16 to 2012/22’, 7 July 2022. See also the 2019 Public Health England report, [gov.uk/government/publications/prescribed-medicines-review-report](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/prescribed-medicines-review-report).
 - 2 Psalm 90:10, attributed to Moses. Please note that whereas the Psalms are equally relevant to women and men, I shall follow historical probability with regards to their authorship, and refer to the psalmist as ‘he’.

practice to government policy, it claims to assert age-old truths, but in reality offers us a set of values which turn out to bring neither peace nor happiness. ‘The single greatest enemy of contemporary satisfaction,’ de Botton suggests, ‘may be the belief in human perfectibility. We have been driven to collective rage through the apparently generous yet in reality devastating idea that it might be within our natural remit to be completely and enduringly happy.’³

For 25 years I served alongside my husband in parish churches, first in a former steel town, then in a growing multicultural city. And for 25 years I listened to people pour out their pain, as the happiness which once had beckoned crumbled into realities of broken dreams. Wives abandoned by their husbands. Children abused by their parents. Chronic illnesses, unexpected redundancies, heart-breaking bereavements. Betrayals, bullying, career-shattering accusations, petty jealousies. Mental ill health, powerful addictions, self-harming hatred. All these things and more – often ordinary things: ingratitude, selfishness, hurtful criticisms, poor decisions. ‘The truth of the matter is that all we have to do is live long enough, and we will suffer,’ theologian D.A. Carson observes.⁴ It’s a truth which, however hard we try to dispel it, echoes throughout history and reasserts itself stubbornly in our own experience.

So there is an elephant in the room. Perhaps we should not be surprised. After all, this bright new world of ours was created by a generation of thinkers who wished to confine the pain of the human condition to the past, and at the same time to suggest that we no longer had any need for God. That, they proclaimed, was yesterday; it doesn’t have to be like that. Really, we said – how so? Well, we can just start again. Rewrite the story. Think more positively. The 18th-century philosopher Rousseau, the symbolic architect of this new environment of hope, dealt with the inconvenience of pain by rejecting it as the unnatural consequence of an oppressive social and political order. Shining his

3 *The School of Life* (Hamish Hamilton, 2019), p. 16; for a more detailed exploration see his *Status Anxiety* (Penguin, 2005).

4 *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on suffering and evil*, second edition (IVP, 2006), p. 16.

philosophical shoes, he consigned his children to an orphanage and got on with creating his progressive new world. In old age he was left lamenting everything he had lost and complaining about the unfairness of it all.⁵ We have, in one way or another, been pursuing his dream ever since – often with the same outcome.

Perhaps, as Rousseau's dream begins to crumble, we are gradually becoming more open to the idea that it's time to face up to the reality of suffering – to recognise not only that we need to pay more attention to the pain which rattles around inside us, but also that we are not, after all, immune from the suffering which remains so alarmingly obvious in so many parts of the world. Wars in distant places propel waves of frightened, hungry people onto our affluent shores; a warming planet subjects us to increasing insecurity as storms, fires and floods sweep through places which don't expect them; a new virus cages half the population of the world and unleashes a tide of anxiety among us. It is becoming increasingly apparent that our world is more fragile than we had thought; that pain is not just the unfortunate experience of an unlucky few, but a global reality which affects us all.

When, as an atheist with a firm belief in self-determination, I left an uneventful childhood in a London suburb for a period of study in an ancient university, I was following Rousseau, of whom I had never heard. At university I met the Italian poet Dante, who began one of the greatest works ever written with an acknowledgement that his life had, at the peak of his career, gone pear-shaped. Dante did not put his children in an orphanage. He faced up to reality and travelled through the valley of shadow and death in his search for a truer world, one which would not deny suffering and pain but seek to integrate it into a bigger and more stable vision of reality. Dante, like the writer of Psalm 23, found comfort not in the false promises of a pain-free world but in the discovery that there is another dimension to life, a spiritual dimension, which does not paper over the cracks or close the door on

5 Rousseau wrote about his disappointments in his final work, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, trans. Peter France (Penguin, 1979).

the elephant crashing around in the crockery, but nonetheless finds the peace which comes only through recognising and embracing pain. The psalmists knew this; and with their help I have come to know it too.

The elephant in the church

Living in a world which has long sought to dull and deny pain, it seems natural, when we find ourselves nonetheless assailed by the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, to turn to the church for help and support. And yet all too often we find that it isn't only our culture which urges us to believe that all is well; we bring our collective inclination to retreat into denial into the church as well. Gathering in beautiful buildings on Sundays, we sing heart-warming songs and uplifting hymns; we repeat comforting liturgical words and remind ourselves what we believe through the taking of bread and wine; we listen to a short talk and pray for those who suffer in distant places. Then we go home, taking our own doubts and difficulties with us. As biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann remarks, it's as if we believe that having faith means a refusal to acknowledge and embrace negativity; as if that would be some kind of failure.⁶ So we sing brightly and sometimes beautifully, offer one another coffee and biscuits, and go home slightly more cheerful, hoping that by pretending all is well it will become so.

And yet two things are true. The first is that one of our responsibilities as the church is to help people navigate life, not as we would like it to be, but as it actually is. And the second is that pain lies at the very heart of our faith: in encountering Jesus, we encounter a man who gathered the suffering of the world into his own suffering, who forged a path from death to life, and who through it all earned the right to offer the uniquely powerful invitation 'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.' Pain is the inescapable thorn in the flesh of the human condition, and an essential element in the journey of every single one of us towards God. Without pain, we cannot grow;

6 *Spirituality of the Psalms* (Fortress Press, 2002), p. 26.

pain is the tunnel through which we must pass if we are to reach the light at the other end. Everything depends on how we respond, and how we help others to respond. Many, at the very point when they most need to connect with God, give up on their faith altogether. Overcome by the darkness of the valley, they never reach the green pastures or rest by the refreshing waters. 'What are you going to write about?' asked an old and wise friend. 'Pain,' I replied. 'Thank God,' she said.

Every morning I read the biblical passages set for the day in the Anglican lectionary, and for the past few years I have focused on the Psalms. And in the Psalms too I have found elephants – not the grey, invisible elephants which mope their way silently through our 21st-century world and hide behind the pillars of our churches, but attention-seeking, violently coloured, lambastingly noisy ones. These elephants cannot be ignored; their trumpeting and bellowing echoes from the first psalm to the last, and they rampage with the energy of animals unrestrained in their expression of pain, of anger, of lament and finally of joy. It's said that an elephant can be heard at a distance of six miles; there is so much sheer power wrapped up in the vocalisation of an elephant that I began to pick up my Bible with a newly cautious reverence. Few people know that the elephants are there, lumbering about inside.

And yet so often we don't pray the very psalms which could most help us. 'Which psalms do I know best?', I asked myself as I began to pray my way through them. The 'nice' ones, of course. Psalm 139 probably tops the list – God made me and knows me. Psalm 46, perhaps – 'Be still, and know that I am God.' Psalm 23, of course, with its first-impression promise of green pastures. And the summer cheerfulness of Psalm 104, which sees God stretching out the heavens like a tent, renewing the face of the earth. In these psalms the elephants graze peacefully in a sunlit savannah, and all is well with the world. And yet closer examination reveals that even in these uplifting verses there is an undercurrent of anger and fear. Psalm 139 ends with a trumpeting imprecation – Oh, that you would kill the wicked, for I hate them! The stillness promised in Psalm 46 comes in the midst of mountain-shaking turmoil. In Psalm 23 the sunlit pastures lie on the other side of a dangerous

valley. And Psalm 104 concludes with the fervent wish that sinners be consumed from the earth. What do we do with these uncomfortable parts of our favourite psalms when we read or preach them? On the whole we smile apologetically, and leave them out.

For three years I prayed the psalms set for each day. I crossed them off as I prayed them. Many became familiar as they echoed repeatedly through the months; but at the end I was left with a short list of psalms that had been excluded from the lectionary, in whole or in part. I looked them up. They were the ones that howled in agony, the ones that called down unremitting disaster on those who had harmed the psalmist, the ones that found startlingly vivid ways to explain what he would like to see happen to them. Any painful psalms which did feature in the daily readings were often accompanied by commentaries which completely failed to recognise the reality of the ways in which human beings sometimes treat one another. Yes, the commentators acknowledged as they considered the unseemly behaviour of the rampaging elephants, we may feel this way – not in our own lives, of course, not here in the context of our stable democracies and our polite churchgoing, but as we watch atrocities *in other places* on our televisions. Furthermore, the commentators suggested from their comfortable, book-lined studies (as the distressed elephants set about uprooting trees and tusking competitors), we may helpfully remind ourselves that these lines are about spiritual battles, not real-life experiences; or about the pernicious influence of advertising; or about the enemies within our own heads; or about the fact that we really do need to confess our own vengeful feelings. For we are nice, we are progressive, we don't have enemies, do we? And if we do, it's probably all a misunderstanding.

Of the 150 psalms in the Psalter, over a third contain anguished and urgent pleas for rescue and deliverance, and many others are framed as thanksgiving for God's saving response.⁷ Many of these pleas are

7 Carleen Mandolfo identifies 42 psalms as laments: 'Language of lament in the Psalms' in William P. Brown (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Psalms* (Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 115. Walter Brueggemann and William H. Bellinger list 66: *Psalms*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 9–12. Commentators agree that many psalms usually classed under other headings also contain elements of lament.

preceded by sharply worded complaints, aimed not just at those who oppress the psalmist and his people, but, alarmingly, at God himself. For readers who have the courage to admit to the emotions they express, these psalms open up a conversation with God, forcing us to acknowledge thoughts and feelings that we prefer to suppress, and pointing to a healing based not on polite surrender but on real, visceral engagement with God. 'I am here,' trumpet the furious elephants in the traditional African greeting, 'and I have something to say.' 'I am here,' I cry as I borrow the words of the psalmist to make my anguished complaint. 'I see you,' says God simply, in the traditional response. And in those words, my healing begins.

A new language of prayer

Following the insights of Walter Brueggemann, the Psalms are often divided into three types which reflect three distinct movements in the life of faith – although these types are not grouped together.⁸ First come psalms of orientation, which celebrate the goodness and stability of life in a world created and ordered by God. Then come psalms of disorientation, which express the screaming agony of the discovery that this bountiful order has crumbled, that evil is triumphing over good, that the world is upside down, and that the psalmist feels angry, afraid, abandoned and lost. And finally come psalms of reorientation, in which the psalmist, after a period of conversation and reflection, emerges to a place of renewed security and thankfulness.⁹

The unique value of the Psalms is found in their ability to help us navigate from disorientation back to orientation – not simply by pointing to the promise of eventual deliverance, but by showing us that God is present in the pain itself. The way through our difficulties is to be found not in denial, or by looking on the bright side, but in being willing

8 'The Psalms and the life of faith: a suggested typology of function', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 17 (1980), reprinted in *From Whom No Secrets are Hid* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2014).

9 A more detailed analysis will be given in chapter 10.

to engage in a full and frank conversation with God. Through their startling willingness to share their own pain, the psalmists teach us a new language which enables us to articulate our most private prayers and to listen to the voice of God as he responds. It's a language of imagery and rhythm, in which the created world provides the words for a new conversation, and in which repetitions and patterns serve as vehicles for our most powerful emotions. As we learn, psalm by psalm, to speak this language, we begin to find that God conveys his all-powerful presence to us in the heaving of the earth and the tossing of the sea; that he whispers to us through the song of birds and smiles at us in the upturned faces of flowers. We discover that he teaches us by reminding us of the history of those who have gone before us, that he wraps us in a cloak of guidance as we stumble through our days, and that he surrounds us with promises of salvation. Sometimes, he remains silent, and invites us to examine the realities of our own hearts.

As we listen to God, we discover that suffering and death have the potential to bring life. We begin to glimpse what the mystics have called the treasures of darkness, after the prophet Isaiah, and to understand that the sadness of the world is tinged with beauty, and that it can be transformed into something deeper and stronger than can be found in the illusory comfort of an easy life.¹⁰ By the time we have finished our journey through the Psalms, we feel that perhaps at last we are at peace with ourselves and with others; looking back, we are thankful for the huge strides we have made. We hold up our heads again; we smile; we are ready to walk onwards through this muddled and complicated world, knowing that we are not alone.

Before we start

There used to be a pub on London's Old Kent Road called The World Turned Upside Down. Opened in 1822 by John Offer, it served the people of Southwark for nearly 200 years. It was still there in the 1970s, and

¹⁰ Isaiah 45:3–7.

we drove past it whenever we ventured into town. The World Turned Upside Down and its sign became a fixed part of the landscape of my imagination. The world is a curious place, I thought, and making sense of it is surely one of the main things we have to do. It was as if the pub were asking me another question: which way up, exactly, does the world go, and why? The question is an old one, and it's explored with wry humour in the 14th-century manuscript copies of the Psalms. Created at a time when the Psalter was the book most likely to be owned by lay Christians, these bear witness to a society seeking for answers to the chaos which lapped at the margins of village life. As barons rebelled against kings, riots and storms swept the country, harvests failed and the Black Death loomed, the English illustrators adorned the cries of the psalmists with surreal images of a topsy-turvy world in which men ride ducks and defend themselves from marauding snails, rabbits fire bows and arrows and conduct funeral processions, and monkeys act as physicians to bed-ridden bears, play organs, or joust with spears – and all of them intertwined with fantastical images of devils, demons and grotesques.¹¹ The images had left their legacy in the sign outside the pub, which showed a huge, grinning fish hauling up a bedraggled fisherman in a tiny net.

John Offer was almost certainly unaware of these manuscripts. But the concept had winkled its way into the popular imagination. In the 19th century the world upside down was a popular genre of children's literature. In the 18th it had been both a common theme of the penny chapbooks hawked around the country by travelling salesmen, and a society art form in which participants of all social classes could mingle in disguise at masquerade balls. A century before that the world upside down had emerged as a ballad, published in 1646 as a protest against Parliament's decision to ban traditional Christmas festivities, and pointedly sung to a royalist tune. Popular throughout the turmoil of the Civil War years, it is said to have been played by the defeated British Army in the American War of Independence, and a song of the

11 Images in the Ormesby, Macclesfield and Luttrell Psalters. See Frederica Law-Turner, *The Ormesby Psalter* (Bodleian Library, 2017), p. 7. Illustrations from the original manuscripts are available online.

same name features today in the 2015 Broadway musical *Hamilton*. The pub on the Old Kent Road closed its doors for the last time in 2009, but the question remains: what do you do when things are no longer as you have always known and expected them to be?

It turns out that this is a supremely biblical question. The source of the phrase is found not in the topsy-turvy world of the English Civil War, but in the New Testament, and more specifically in the shockwaves which had begun to ripple across the Roman empire following the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In AD50, or thereabouts, Paul and his companion Silas visited the Greek city of Thessalonica, where, as was their wont, they went to the Jewish synagogue and explained that the long-awaited Messiah had come, that his name was Jesus, and that he had been crucified and then raised from the dead in Jerusalem. Many of those who heard the news responded with enthusiasm – but the religious leaders did not. Recognising it for the revolutionary message that it was, they instigated a riot, seized Paul and Silas' hapless host Jason, and dragged him before the civil authorities. 'These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also,' they protested, 'and Jason has entertained them as his guests!' And they spelt out the charge: 'They are all acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus.'¹² Paul and Silas were forced to flee. In reality, of course, they had been attempting, in declaring that Jesus had been raised from the dead, to turn an already upside down world the right way up.

When something momentous happens which threatens the settled order, which unleashes the possibility that from now on things are going to be different, we have to ask ourselves which way up we want the world to be. Jesus had made it abundantly clear that something new was on offer, something which paid scant regard to established social conventions and political realities, something which would indeed, as the religious leaders of Thessalonica had instinctively realised, turn their way of doing things upside down. It wasn't just the extraordinary

¹² Acts 17:6–7.

ways in which he behaved – making friends with women, shaking hands with lepers, eating with sinners and living like a vagabond. It was what he said. Jesus had taught not in the schoolroom manner of the rabbis, but in beatitude and parable, subversive in both form and intention. The beatitudes invite us into a topsy-turvy world in which received values are turned on their heads. The winners, said Jesus, are not the rich, the successful, the men of high status and worth. The winners in this new upside-down kingdom are the poor, the grieving, the overlooked, the victims of injustice, the persecuted. More often he taught in parable, weaving nonsensical stories out of common sights or situations, telling tales in which subversive conclusions burst like dynamite out of a coal bunker. We have been inclined to reduce both beatitude and parable to moral fables, teaching which will tidy us all up a bit and improve the way we do things. In fact they are early announcements of the bombshell which was to come: that through the resurrection of Jesus, death, mourning, crying and pain have been conquered, and we are invited to live now in a world which is in the process of being turned not upside down, but the right way up.¹³

When I was ordained, I was given a leather-bound copy of the New Testament and Psalms. It's such a familiar combination that I tucked it happily under my arm and thought no more about it. But the more I read the Psalms, the more I realise that psalms and gospels go together. It's not just that the Psalms speak of the coming of the Messiah in words which find direct fulfilment in the life of Jesus – although they do. And it's not just that Jesus himself prayed the Psalms and quoted from them – although he did. It's that in both form and content, the Psalms articulate the story of the gospel itself. With their three-part movement of orientation, disorientation and reorientation, the Psalms foreshadow the path taken by Jesus, the path through life, death and resurrection.¹⁴ They invite us to see our own journey of faith not just in the wider context of the whole story of the people of God (which

13 See Matthew 5:1–9; Revelation 21:3–4. For the subversive nature of Jesus' teaching, see Alison Morgan, *The Wild Gospel* (Monarch, 2004), ch. 3.

14 Clearly expressed in, for example, Philippians 2:6–11, and reflected in our own baptism. See Brueggemann, *Spirituality of the Psalms*, pp. viii–x.

we notice follows the same movement from stability to exile to restoration) but in the story of Jesus himself. In so doing they open up a pathway for each one of us to navigate the triumphs and disasters of our own lives, lending us the words we so desperately need as we move from a place of oppression, through a process of liberation, to a final destination of redemption. They open a door through which we may walk, stumbling with raw emotion, no longer seeking to hide our hurts and flaws, into the presence of God himself. Imbued with the spiritual energy which tore through the temple curtain at the moment of Jesus' death, the Psalms burst into the broken reality of our lives and propel us into the upside-down world of the kingdom of heaven.

Over the past few years I have learned to relive my experiences through those of the psalmists. I have limped from the darkest places through to a newfound peace and security in the company of the Lord who is my shepherd; I have found that, when you are run over, the ambulance does come. I hope, as you read this book, that you will make the journey your own; and I promise that the psalmists will guide you gently, step by step, never asking more of you than you are able to give.



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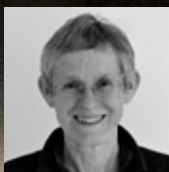
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'For centuries the Psalms have served as the primary spiritual resource for both Jewish and Christian believers. Until the Middle Ages, if you owned one book, it would be the Book of Psalms; a few centuries later the Psalter would become the first book to be printed in North America. Embedded in the lives of ordinary people in both private prayer and public worship, the Psalms have shaped and sustained whole generations.

Today the Psalms have lost much of their former pre-eminence, and yet as I have prayed them myself I have discovered that when we are at our weakest, when we feel we most need God and yet have no idea how to talk to him, it is the Psalms which leap to our rescue. With the psalmists as our guides, we learn to draw closer to God, to hear his voice in fresh ways, and to identify what it is that troubles us. Borrowing their words, we find that we are able to articulate our most painful feelings and walk through suffering with honesty, hope, and confidence in the God who travels beside us. Here is an opportunity to read the Psalms differently: an invitation to embark on a new journey.'



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