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Psalm 100: A Million Pieces

JOSH GRAVES

A PSALM OF THANKSGIVING

*Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth.
Worship the LORD with gladness;
come into his presence with singing.*

*Know that the LORD is God.
It is he that made us, and we are his;
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.*

*Enter his gates with thanksgiving,
and his courts with praise.
Give thanks to him, bless his name.*

*For the LORD is good;
his steadfast love endures forever,
and his faithfulness to all generations. (Ps 100)*

Perhaps she'd endured a great tragedy, so she penned a psalm counterintuitive in hopes that she could become the song she desperately wanted to be true.

Maybe he'd spent time reflecting on a life of loss and gain, promise and deceit. Maybe five verses was all the faith he could muster.

Psalm 100 is set within a particular context. It's part of Book 4, which focuses, with laser precision, the faithfulness of God despite the evidence suggesting otherwise. This isn't a triumphant, victory-in-all-things psalm.

This is a psalm with teeth. It's got the remnants of scars and wounds.

Psalm 100 is a praise psalm for sure. To be accurate, it's a doxology. It is five verses of unadulterated praise in response to the presence and work of God in the shadow-lands of life.

If we only sing Psalm 100 (and other doxologies) from the peak and not the valley, that says more about us than the author of this hymn, who writes from the vantage point of one who's endured and survived.

Doxology wants to go everywhere. Doxology wants to play in ten thousand places. Psalm 100 wants to know this: Can you sing it from the dark places? Can you sing it from the shadow-lands?

The King family has been living in hell. Jeremy King was serving as the interim worship minister for the Rochester Church in Rochester Hills, Michigan. Jeremy was a man's man. A tough but gentle Canadian, Jeremy loved worship but he also loved the outdoors: hunting and hockey.

Tuesday, November 9, 2010. Jeremy took his family to lunch on his break from work. As he picked up his wife, Veronica, he said, "I swear, this is the best part of my day." The family laughed, enjoyed each other's company during lunch at KFC. He took a picture of one of his children with his new iPhone.

It was the last picture he'd ever take.

As was his custom, Jeremy went straight from work to hunt. At 4:34 p.m. Jeremy sent a text to one of his best friends, Mark. At the exact same time, his wife sent him a text that read, "I love you." Veronica didn't hear anything back. At 6:30 p.m. Veronica sent another text to Jeremy. No response. Veronica began to get worried so she called her husband. Nothing. Then she sent a text to some of his hunting buddies. They wrote back and said not to worry; Jeremy probably got a deer and was consumed with prepping it for eating.

Veronica, with two friends by her side, put her kids to bed and watched *Glee*. By 9:00 p.m. Veronica (and Jeremy's friends) became extremely concerned. Alarmed. Thinking the worst. Soon, Veronica's world fell apart.

Two of Jeremy's friends went looking for Jeremy in the popular hunting spot they all used. Veronica's words:

10:46 p.m.: I sent a text to Jon to see what was going on. No one was answering their phones and I was getting worried.

10:48 p.m.: Jon called me. The next few seconds are a blur. I remember Jon saying that Mark found Jer and thought he was dead. I was screaming at him saying it couldn't be happening and it wasn't funny. He told me the paramedics were there and working, so I was sure he'd be fine. But he'd been out there so long already. Next thing I know, Sarah and I were driving as fast as possible up to the spot twenty minutes away. I remember hyperventilating, but no tears had come yet. I wouldn't let myself believe that my thirty-one-year-old, six-foot tall, 225-pound husband would be dead at the bottom of a tree stand. It wasn't possible. Eventually, the phone was handed to Mark who could only repeat, "I'm sorry."

My heart broke into a million pieces. I could literally feel my heart shatter.

It hurts to write this. To relive this. But I keep reliving it in my head every hour and I needed a place to write it all down. I'm not sure where to go from here; I'm still suffocating with pain. I don't know where to go, what to do, and what to even ask for.

Most people don't know what they have until they lose it. I knew what I had, and I loved every minute of it. If you couldn't tell from my blog, my husband was an incredible man. And I'm terrified of figuring out life without him.

Veronica has three children, all under the age of five. How does a girl in her late twenties possibly return to life as normal, let alone understand God's mysterious hand? How do you even gather the strength to get out of bed? How do you eat? How do you breathe again? What do you do with a heart that's been shattered into a million little pieces? How in the world do you let doxology ever creep back into your heart?

Last year, I flew to Dallas/Fort Worth to attend the funeral of the sister of one of my best friends: Jenny Bazillion. Jenny, in her early thirties, died of sepsis. Jenny's younger brother, Jonathan, led worship. At one point the entire room sang Leonard Cohen's "It's a cold and it's a broken hallelujah. Hallelujah . . . Hallelujah." I'd woken up in the middle of the night the morning of my early flight with that song in my head. To hear them now leading the song with the casket in plain view was a profoundly spiritual moment. We also sang "There's a stirring deep within me . . . Is He calling me? Is He calling me? I will rise up, and bow down, and lay my crown at his wounded feet."

Jenny's oldest brother Josh Ross gave the eulogy for his big sister: "We're confident that death doesn't have the last word; death doesn't win." Before Rob Bell said it, Josh said it: Love wins! Josh confessed to the church that God had not answered their prayers the way they desired. He did not offer the unfortunate soundbites well-meaning Christians often offer: "God's ways are mysterious." "God needed another angel." "God has a plan."

None of those help in times of crisis and loss. In fact, they only make things worse.

Perhaps the most powerful moment in the worship gathering occurred near the end of the eulogy. Josh addressed each person in his family:

To his parents: You raised us to have faith in difficult situations. All you wanted to do was point us to Christ. She was your princess. She treasured you.

To his brother: We'll find a way. We will get through this.

To his brother-in-law (Jenny's husband): We are family, no matter what. Thanks for loving my sister without conditions. You loved her unconditionally. We are so grateful for you. We're in this together with you for life.

To his niece Malaya (Jenny's daughter): We will fight for your faith. We will fight for you to know Jesus. Your mother wanted your faith to surpass her faith.

Malaya has written a poem in response to a school assignment about imagination. *Out of the mouth of babes . . .*

If Imagination Were Real in Different Ways

by Malaya Bazillion

If angels and spirits could talk . . .

If Mom were here . . .

If clouds were windows and the sun was the entrance to heaven . . .

If no one could leave this earth . . .

If hearts weren't broken . . .

If there were no color . . .

If there were no sin in the world today . . .

If death were defeated . . .

If heaven was earth . . .

If my heart was still full of pride and not broken . . .

If people could keep promises . . .

I can't help but wonder if the psalmist's declaration in Psalm 100 is simply a cry of worship in reflection of all the things God has done in his/her life. That is, I know the truth of my life is this: I feel closest to God when I live in the moments of uncertainty and chaos. If that's true, Psalm 100 is a huge window into the house of mourning and suffering Jesus built in his life and ministry.

MOURNING IN THE KINGDOM

Jesus—who'd been schooled in the honest messiness of the psalms—comes on the scene, knowing the tragedy and death that had consumed the lives of the poor peasants in Israel and, with great chutzpah, declared that those who mourned would be comforted. Jesus had digested the core essence of the psalms.

He understood that faith is always a faith of progressive revelation because God is always putting us in new situations.

The Sermon on the Mount—a resistance document for living in the Roman Empire if there ever was one—cuts to the heart of human experience. At first glance, it seems a little trite. Kind of like telling someone who’s just lost a loved one that “God needed another angel” or “God needed her more than you do.” When one of my best friends lost his sister (barely in her thirties) last year, well-meaning Christians told him: “At least you had her for thirty-one years,” and “Were you really close to her? You rarely mentioned her in your sermons.”

Jesus’ words to the spiritually hungry that day were not a Disney version of saying, “One day it will all make sense.” Jesus is saying that when you are in mourning, God is with you. Many Jews had come to believe that success was a sure sign of God’s favor—it’s one of the ways affluent folks control the poor. The poor had come to believe that their struggle, experience with death, disease and sickness was a sign of God’s judgment. Jesus says, “No, God isn’t like that. God is among those of you in mourning.”

The word for mourning in this passage means to be deeply moved to the point of action. Mourning doesn’t simply mean “sad” or “depressed”—though those are real human emotions we need to acknowledge. Mourning rather means ‘moved deeply in one’s gut to see the world, through your tears, in a new way, longing for things to be different’.

It means longing for lonely people in nursing homes to experience deep community. It means hoping for the end of HIV/AIDS for the world’s poor. It means yearning for the end of the effects of famine. It means having your guts ripped out for those orphans without parents.

But it also means being moved in such a way that *you intend to do something about it*. It means summoning the courage to visit an assisted living facility even if it freaks you out. Mourning doesn’t mean you are overly emotional, a crybaby, or soft. Mourning means you have a deep awareness of just how “off-kilter” things really are from the way things should be. In mourning, you are as close to God as you’ll ever be.

Joyful are those who are deeply saddened to the point of action for they will be comforted. They will be able to sing A True Song—a song that lasts forever—a song about God’s love for God’s creation—*A Psalm 100 Song*. Because of Jesus, people are free to sing praise songs in the midst of all circumstances. Because praise, if only sung when the world’s all as it should be, is not the kind of praise Israel has handed down to her children.

“His love endures forever” should be a song we sing regardless of the circumstances we face. (For instance, Paul must have been radically shaped by the psalms for he believes that his circumstances cannot shake the resurrection power in his heart.) You might even dance to it, creating your own beat. Only this Jesus could turn mourning into dancing, because only Jesus understands the depth of our suffering and the hope that stirs within. Every lament is a love song. Every lament eventually becomes “His love endures forever.”

Ultimately, *lament* and *celebration*—it’s all praise. It’s all doxology.

Death is a dying horse. It might kick and cause havoc, but death knows its days are numbered; time is running out. Jesus grieved death up close and personal: upon the news of the death of his friend Lazarus, and as he entered into the city of Jerusalem and faced the political and religious injustice dominating the day.

Scientists have been able to detect a substantive difference between the tears that come from common experience (onions) and the tears of raw emotion. Literally, tears are cleansing to the soul. What soap does for the body, tears do for the soul. Psalm 56.8 reminds us that God desires to record every tear we shed. Revelation declares not that tears won’t exist in the new age, but that all of our tears will be wiped by God’s hand.

Revelation 21.3–5a: “See the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will dwell

with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more . . . See, I am making all things new.” John 16.20 comforts us: “. . . You will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy.” Why?—because God’s love endures forever.

So, grieve on. Mourn deeply. And watch what God does with your tears. As God wipes them away he will give you new eyes. Heaven and earth are coming together into the form of Jesus’ Open Table. It’s open to those of you who’ve buried your children, painfully aware of the part of your heart that died the day you lost your precious loved one. The table is open for those of you who still are prone to anger and violence, believing that revenge is God’s mandate for you. The table is open for those of you who are facing the threat of losing all of your worldly possessions. The table is open for those of you who barely got out of bed this morning. That table is even open for the hard-hearted whose only real belief is in the power of cynicism.

If the kingdom party thrown by Jesus is already happening in God’s future, the sister, best friend, lover, teacher, child—all of those who’ve gone ahead—are waiting at the table. Waiting for you. Waiting for me. Waiting for God.

Heaven’s song can be heard on earth as it is playing in heaven if our ears are tuned to the melody.

Several years back, my wife’s close friend Mary found out she had serious cancer. All cancer is serious, but this was different. The cancer had been in her body for some time. She battled and fought against the cancer. She was overwhelmed. A few nights before she passed from this world to the next, she slipped into a comatose state. Early the morning of her death, she awoke, sat straight up in bed, and offered a doxology. She sang her favorite songs. Laid down, returning to her comatose state. And she left us as we knew her. She left us with a doxology dripping with the purification that only comes from suffering. *Doxology went with her to the darkest moment. Doxology was with her when everyone else least expected it; when she needed it the most.*

What is true for us individually is also true for us collectively.

Come with me to Cairo, Egypt. Egypt, unlike many countries in the Middle East, has a “historic population of Christians, some 10 percent of the population, who trace their origins back to the apostle Mark.”¹ In fact, scholars believe that the man who carried Jesus’ cross in Mark’s Gospel, Simon of Cyrene, was an African.

On the outer edges of Cairo is a place called *Mokkattam*. Mokkatum is a “sprawling slum” near a large garbage dump. The slum, as you can imagine, smells to high heaven. Out of this unusual place, a vibrant Christian community has emerged. Instead of waging war against their enemies and foes, they are practicing the Jesus Blessing of making peace and reconciliation their highest calling. Listen to what God is doing with their faithful gesture:

Led by a priest in the Coptic Orthodox church, the community built houses, schools, a sports field, and a clinic at the foot of a mountain in an abandoned quarry. Around thirty years ago one of the slum dwellers stumbled across a large cave, and over time Coptic Christians moved one hundred forty thousand tons of rock out of the cave to form a three-thousand seat auditorium. They worked mostly at night during Muslim fast periods, when the guards who might harass them went home to eat.²

Every week, our churches—black, white, Latino and Asian, as well as Methodist, Baptist, Community, Catholic, Episcopal, Churches of Christ—come together and sing our praises to God. But most weeks, when

1. Philip Yancey, *What Good is God?* (Nashville: Faith Words, 2010), 206–208. Yancey also notes that although the Middle East is the birthplace of Christianity, only 2 percent of Palestinians are Christian. As recently as half a century ago, Palestine boasted a 40 percent Christian population. The United States’ most recent war with Iraq has chased out half of the 1.4 million Christians formerly living there. Yancey calls this place “an oasis of beauty in a desert of poverty.”

2. *Ibid.*, 207–208.

we sing praises, we sing them individually from different places; we sing them from where we are. We've not yet figured out a way to sing them from where we aren't. We sing them from the place of a new job, unexpected pregnancy, or confirmation of God's presence. But we also sing praises from our dark places—the mother who buried her son when he was five, the father of the three whose wife left without the decency of a note, the unexpected divorce in the pillar family—we have to sing from those places too. Because both the peaks and valleys are what make us human.

This Cairo Christian church has grown considerably since the incredible feat I just described. Currently the church now meets in a facility described as a 13,000-seat amphitheatre, also carved out of rock. It is, without any question, the largest Christian community in the entire Middle East.

Out of a garbage pit, *Life*. Out of death, *Resurrection*, *Doxology*.

Can you imagine the worship of 13,000 Egyptian Christians who've known suffering, isolation, marginalization and oppression? As they hunker in their cave, all 13,000 of them sing this song. They don't sing because they've avoided suffering and pain. They sing as we sing, because we experienced it, had it named, and still believe that God is moving in the world, preparing us for the great mystery of God's new heaven and new earth. When all will be well in the kingdom of God, tears will flow but God will wipe them all.

Can you learn to sing Psalm 100 from the shadow-lands? We become the songs that we sing. We still get our praise on because we believe that the king still has one more move.

Bishop Kenneth Ulmer pastors a church at the L.A. Forum—the arena where the Los Angeles Lakers used to play basketball.³ Bishop Ulmer tells the story of two men in a museum who see a painting of a chess game and interpret its details. One of the chess players is a man. The other player, the villain, is the devil. The man is down to his last move. The inscription reads *Checkmate*.

One of the observers in this parable was an international chess champion. He became fixated and fascinated with the painting. He studied every nuance, expression and detail. Something haunted him. He couldn't look away. His friend became annoyed and left. This chess champion looked at the painting closer, and closer and closer.

After some time, the friend of the chess champion returned and asked, "What's wrong with the painting, what's the big deal?"

"It's titled *Checkmate*, but the title is wrong. *The king still has one more move.*"

God calls Abraham and his family to move to an undisclosed location for an undetermined period of time, without giving a purpose. Abraham feels helpless. It looks like checkmate. But the king still has one more move.

A man named David has made a mess of his life. Lies. Plots. Anger. Lust. Jealousy. Adultery. Deceit. Apathy. Cowardice. Conspiracy. Murder. Tragedy. It looks like checkmate. But the king still has one more move.

A woman named Esther is desperate. Her people's health and vitality are on the line. She's a pawn. She's used. The powers seek to kill, steal and destroy. It looks like checkmate. But the king still has one more move.

A man named Moses is chosen to speak for God against the superpower of his day. He has no real authority or strategy. He faces the greatest military and social force in the world, all because God wants to free a group of slaves. It looks like checkmate. But the king still has one more move.

Israel is living under the heel of imperial oppression for what feels like the twentieth time in its history. Rome owns them. Rome tells them to keep their religion to themselves, to shut up and be good citizens. Rome tells them to believe that Caesar has all the power. It looks like checkmate but a baby is born and Herod quakes in his boots. The king still has one more move.

3. I'd heard this story told before but first encountered it in written form in John Ortberg's book, *It All Goes Back in the Box* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 238–239. This entire section inspired by Ortberg.

Jesus is crucified in shame, mockery, isolation and horror. We like to talk about why he died but we don't like to talk about why he was killed. The disciples are depleted. The story seems over. His body rests in a borrowed tomb. Another failed messiah. It looks like checkmate *but the king still has one more move.*

The powers of darkness appeared to be victorious when Jeremy, Jenny, Mary and Jesus died. But the king still had one more move because the king is more for us than we are for ourselves.

If you know, deep in your bones, that the king still has one more move, doxology shaped by Psalm 100 would be welcome in every part of your life. The whole universe is humming this song. Can you feel it? Can you hear it? The generations singing together: *His love endures forever.*

May the God of Power . . .
the Jesus of Justice
the Spirit of Presence
Be in us in all our praise. Amen.

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