

The Psalms are deeply personal, and in this book, Christina encourages us to relish their vivid imagery, see the presence of Jesus, and be assured of God's provision and love. Her vulnerable and genuine storytelling paired with solid scriptural truths and insight encouraged me to read the Psalms out loud and to use them as prayers for my own heart cries and joyful praises. From beginning to end, this book will be a blessing.

—Eden Keefe, president of Lutheran Women in Mission, 2023–27

Everlasting is an emotional guidebook to the Psalms. In addition to providing important historical and literary information, Christina Hergenrader guides readers through this book of the Bible, highlighting various emotions. Do you feel helpless? Stay in Psalm 116 for a while. Confused? Try Psalm 56. Joyful? Park in Psalm 3. *Everlasting* provides a map through the beloved book of Psalms as you navigate the messy emotions of life.

—Sharla Fritz, author of *Measured by Grace: How God Defines Success* and *Waiting: A Bible Study on Patience, Hope, and Trust*

Christina does an incredible job of showing the beauty of the Psalms and expressing our deepest emotions before God. Whether in sorrow, joy, fear, or praise, the Psalms reassure us that we are never alone. Christina reminds us to bring our burdens before the Lord, knowing He hears and comforts us in every season. If you seek peace, hope, or simply a place to rest your weary heart, Psalms is a wellspring of divine comfort and unwavering truth. This is a book that I can already see myself giving to so many of my loved ones as they walk through those hard moments.

—Faith Doerr, author of *God's Encouraging Word: True Comforts When Worldly Advice Fails*

Are you looking for honesty, connection, and encouragement in the struggles and celebrations of life? In this lovely book, author Christina Hergenrader weaves real-life stories with God's care for us today, communicated through the book of Psalms. She connects our humanity—our emotions, experiences, ups and downs—to its ancient, heartfelt words. We are inspired, uplifted, and reminded of His enduring love!

—Martha Van Buskirk, speaker and author of *Ordinary Lives* and *Extraordinary Grace: God's Purpose in Your Every Day*

In a world that often urges us to push through feelings, *Everlasting* encourages us to acknowledge their temporary yet significant importance while reflecting on how Jesus experienced them and walks with us through our own. Through vulnerable storytelling, practical guides, and prayer prompts, Christina reminds us that the Psalms are not just words on a page but emotion-filled messages that speak directly to our hearts. *Everlasting* is a beautiful read, whether reflected on with close friends, studied in a small group, or enjoyed alone with a cup of coffee.

—Elizabeth Cattau, advancement officer, Lutheran South Academy,
Houston, Texas

Christina's writing has always resonated with me, and this book is no exception. Her captivating stories are filled with truth, love, humor, and joy. Her heartfelt descriptions of the Psalms make it easier for me to understand and connect to my emotions. She offers questions that make me stop and ponder, which causes me to grow even closer to the Lord. This book will be extremely powerful on its own but might make a bigger impact if studied with a small group of like-minded people you can share honestly with.

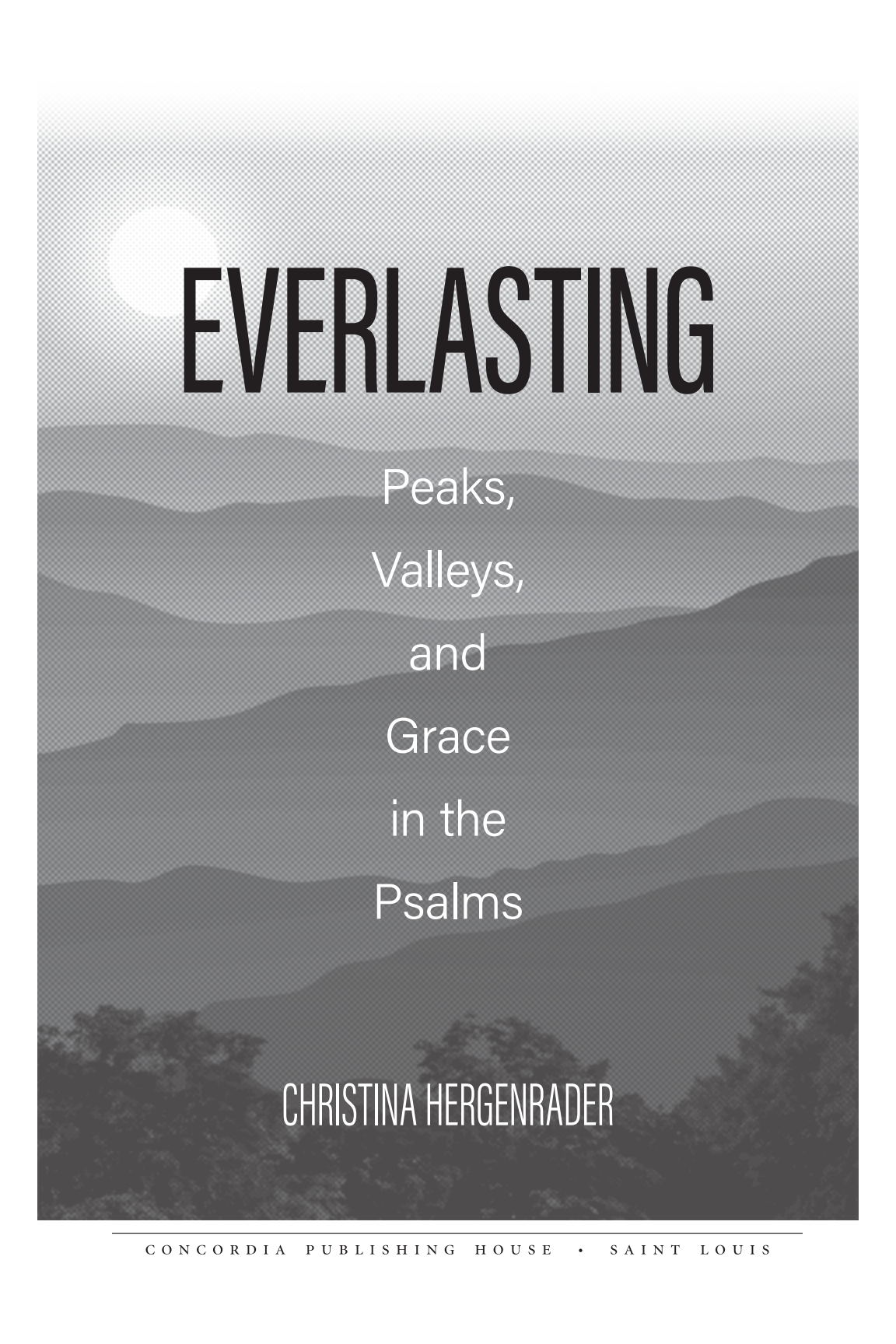
—Sara Leimkuehler, kindergarten teacher, Deep Waters Academy,
Houston, Texas

Christina Hergenrader's *Everlasting: Peaks, Valleys, and Grace in the Psalms* is like having coffee with a wise friend who totally gets it. She brilliantly connects ancient psalms to our messy, modern lives with stories that'll make you laugh, nod in recognition, and occasionally tear up. Her relational style cuts through the noise, offering genuine insight without the churchy jargon. Whether you're feeling anxious, lost, or hopeful, Christina's warm wisdom reminds us we're never alone—God's love is everlasting through every emotion we face.

—Michelle Thompson, MA, MS, PCC, senior director, Townsend Institute
at Concordia University Irvine

Christina shares story after story of present-day needs and human emotions alongside the goodness and faithfulness of God revealed by these psalms of old. Together they paint a beautiful picture of what it is to be human, to have a companion and champion who is constant in life's ups and downs, and to be so dearly loved.

—Jamie Wiechman, cofounder of Breathe Life Ministries



EVERLASTING

Peaks,
Valleys,
and
Grace
in the
Psalms

CHRISTINA HERGENRADER

DEDICATION

For Barb Tanz

Thank you for twenty years of love, support, and listening.
You are an everlasting model of God's love.



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Come and see what God has done:
He is awesome in His deeds.
Psalm 66:5

The Psalter is the book of all saints; and everyone, in whatever situation he may be, finds in that situation psalms and words that fit his case, that suit him as if they were put there just for his sake.
– Martin Luther

Welcome to *Everlasting: Peaks, Valleys, and Grace in the Psalms*

Hi, friend!

Thanks so much for picking up this book. It's been a journey to write it.

Over the past three years, I've been working on these stories from my life, weaving them together with the Psalms. Honestly, I didn't always know where this project was headed. I just kept writing, hoping that somehow the threads would come together into something meaningful.

Psalms has always been one of my favorite books of the Bible, but this time, during this project, I was reading the verses with new eyes. Now that I'm in the middle of my life, the words of these psalms hit me differently. I felt seen—this is exactly what life feels like. Epic highs of seeing God's work in my life and crushing lows of loss and unbelievable pain. Life had introduced me to a new range of emotions, and the laments and praises in the Psalms felt richer than before.

I realized I wanted to feel something again—really feel it. Maybe you know what I mean. We can get so caught up in gathering information, staying busy, and managing the day-to-day that we barely notice we've stopped feeling much of anything. It's like our emotions get buried under a pile of tasks and expectations. I began looking to the Psalms to stir something in me, to help me reconnect with emotions I tucked away.

But, even then, I wasn't quite sure where this was leading.

In the middle of all that uncertainty, I took a detour (middle age is like this, right?). I enrolled in a two-year executive coaching program through Concordia University Irvine in California. It was a time of deep learning about how we process emotions, how they connect us and make life richer, and how they remind us of our shared human frailty.

That experience opened my eyes in so many ways, but even with that insight, something still felt incomplete. I kept asking myself these questions: Why do our emotions matter? Why were the psalmists so comfortable writing about how they felt, but so many of us today are not? As Christians, what do we do with our anger, our shame, our regret?

Here's what I learned: Emotions matter. They matter to God, and they matter in our lives. We're created to feel, to fully experience what is in our hearts. Emotions are as much a part of us as our lungs and brains are. The Psalms show us this—how to praise in the peaks and lament in the valleys.

So, why do we so often avoid our feelings? Are we afraid that feeling ashamed or angry means we don't trust God, that we aren't Christian enough?

Then one day, everything clicked. I was reading Psalm 90 and verse 2 stopped me: "Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever You had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting You are God."

That's the message. Whether you're at the peak of joy or walking through a valley of pain, God's love remains the same. His grace lasts. This is the steadying force we cling to. From the very beginning of creation to the moment you are reading this, through all of eternity, God's love remains steady, unchanging, and everlasting.

This is the truth the psalmists clung to and the reminder we need right now. Kingdoms crumble, pain paralyzes us, joy inspires us, everything we think we know changes—except God's everlasting love for us.

In the peaks and valleys, feelings are important, but they're temporary. We can fully feel the grief, the anger, the awe, the helplessness that are part of life. Why? Because all of it points us to God's everlasting love.

This is why the words in Psalms are so important. These aren't just any words—they're God's words for our emotions, His way of meeting us exactly where we are. In the Psalms, God gives us language for every feeling, reminding us that our emotions are part of being human.

It's so good to feel deeply, to be honest about our struggles, to know that each emotion we feel is an expression of being fully alive. Our emotions pass like waves, but God's love remains steady, anchoring us to Him no matter how we feel or what we face.

So, as we explore these psalms together, I invite you to bring your whole self. Remember both your mountaintop moments and your dark valleys. Be vulnerable. Let yourself feel these emotions, then reflect on your own story. And be honest with God. Secure in His love, you can embrace your emotions, knowing this is healthy.

But let's also remember that His love is what holds us together.

Through every high and low, every moment of joy and struggle, you are never alone. God's love is here, steady and true, ready to nourish your heart and fill you with hope.

Love,
Christina

How to Use *Everlasting*

Because Your steadfast love is better than life,
my lips will praise You.
Psalm 63:3

1. Learn about the psalm type.

Everlasting is divided into five sections named after the five types of psalms: Thanksgiving, Wisdom, Lament, Praise, and Messianic. At the start of each section, read about the type of psalm and look for those characteristics in the stories and psalms that follow.

If you're reading this book with a group, you can study one type of psalm each week.

2. Read the psalm.

Take your time. Read the psalm slowly, savoring the words and images. Let the psalm writer's emotions and vivid language sink in. Feel free to read it more than once, letting it resonate deeply.

3. Find yourself in the story.

As you read the story that accompanies the psalm, think of your own story. What about this experience feels familiar? What have you gone through that echoes the emotions in the psalm?

4. Feel your emotions.

Let yourself truly feel—whether it's sorrow, joy, gratitude, or awe. Notice how your body reacts. Where do you feel tension or release? Take deep breaths and be present with whatever comes up. Emotions are part of being human, and it's okay to experience them fully.

5. Really understand the psalm.

Ask yourself: What does this psalm teach me about life, human nature, or God? How does this connect me to generations of believers who've experienced similar feelings? How do these emotions help me understand God's love?

6. Embrace God's everlasting love.

No matter what emotions you feel, remember they're temporary. God's love is the anchor that holds steady through everything. My hope and my prayer are that the twenty-five psalms discussed in *Everlasting* leave you with a deeper understanding that you are held by God.

7. See Jesus in these words.

These psalms are saturated with the presence of Jesus. They give words to His own prayers, His cries of anguish, and His songs of joy. As we read them, we see glimpses of the grace, peace, and forgiveness that Jesus came to fulfill. He is the Good Shepherd of Psalm 23, the rejected Cornerstone of Psalm 118, and the Suffering Servant of Psalm 22. And He is the source of every comfort, every cry for mercy, and every celebration of salvation in these sacred songs. The more we read the psalms and take them to heart, the more we see Jesus woven into every word, drawing us deeper into His love.

8. Use the discussion questions.

Whether you're journaling alone or discussing with a group, the questions are here to help you apply the psalm's message to your life. Dive in, share your thoughts, and explore how God's Word speaks to you.

9. End in prayer.

You can use the prayer I've provided or speak from your heart. Thank God for His unchanging love, for meeting you in every emotion, every failure, every blessing. He is with you. And His love lasts forever.

JOIN OTHERS ON YOUR PSALMS JOURNEY

Everlasting works beautifully as a personal study or as a group study. Consider adding an accountability partner or forming a small group to walk through these psalms together. When you meet, share how these ancient songs speak into your life today. Let the conversations deepen your connections with God and with one another. One of God's greatest gifts is the community He's given you to help you experience His love more fully.

Thanksgiving Psalms

It is good to give thanks to the LORD, to sing praises
to Your name, O Most High. Psalm 92:1

The Thanksgiving Psalms help you see life differently. They don't ignore your struggles or gloss over your joys but show how God's faithfulness holds everything together. As we've all discovered, life is far from flat—it's full of highs that take your breath away and lows that feel so, so dark. Gratitude points you back to God's steady presence.

As you read these psalms, take a moment to notice God's grace in your life. Where do you see His care in the beauty of nature? How does He provide for you and for the earth? How is He answering your prayers? Instead of focusing on struggles, focus on how God is with you, working even in the hardest or the smallest parts.

Meditate on these psalms and let them awaken a sense of wonder at everything God gives you. The most profound blessing they reveal is the unchanging love of your Savior. As you bring your emotions to the Lord—joys and sorrows alike—see His grace covering every aspect of your life. Thanksgiving is powerful. It shifts your focus from what's lacking to what God provides. It relieves stress and fills your heart with joy.

Make this ancient practice of praying the psalms a part of your faith journey. Use the Thanksgiving Psalms as a new lens to see your life through God's faithfulness. Every morning, let this practice remind you to be grateful in all things, trusting that God's blessings are present even in your ordinary moments.

Pleas for Mercy (Psalm 116)

Psalm 116 shows how thanksgiving rises from helplessness. The

psalmist has walked through the valley and thanks God for His rescue: “I love the LORD, because He has heard my voice and my pleas for mercy” (v. 1). You and I feel this weakness because we’ve been there too. Yet, even in darkness, God’s love breaks through: “For You have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling” (v. 8). The gratitude here is real and raw, showing God’s constant care.

For You Are with Me (Psalm 23)

Psalm 23 shifts us into a quiet, steady trust in our Shepherd’s care. Life’s path will have shadows of sin and doubt, but God walks with us: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me” (v. 4). The gratitude comes from knowing we never face hardship alone. We walk through the valley of the shadow of death to the greener pastures of heaven because of Jesus. David’s response to God’s care is overwhelming thanksgiving, and we join him in resting in God’s love.

Awesome Deeds (Psalm 65)

Psalm 65 takes our gratitude to a place of awe: “By awesome deeds You answer us with righteousness, O God of our salvation” (v. 5). This psalm lifts our eyes to see God’s care over all creation. Verse 6 reminds us of God’s strength: “the one who by His strength established the mountains.” God’s gifts are awe inspiring, especially His gift of Jesus and the forgiveness of our sins (see v. 3).

Near to the Brokenhearted (Psalm 34)

Psalm 34 brings us back to our personal brokenness: “I sought the LORD, and He answered me and delivered me from all my fears” (v. 4). It includes this comforting truth: “The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit” (v. 18). We’re grateful because God is here, holding us together when we feel like we’re falling apart.

Bringing It All Together

The Thanksgiving Psalms invite us into a personal encounter with God's provision, teaching gratitude in everything. Whether you're celebrating or struggling, they show how to see God's hand in every moment. Thanksgiving threads through every season and emotion, holding everything together with His love.

Write Your Own Thanksgiving Psalm

A Thanksgiving Psalm is a prayer, a song, and a meditation to reflect on your life, emotions, and even your struggles. It helps you notice God's love and work, even in hard times. Grab a pen and write your own Thanksgiving Psalm, expressing gratitude for all He's done for you.

1. Start from a place of gratitude.

Where do you see God right now? Where have you seen His love, His care, His awesome power today? How has He surprised you with a way through your struggles? What is unbelievably beautiful in your life right now? Start with a list, and then let your heart overflow.

2. Create with vivid imagery.

As you create your psalm, use language that paints a picture. What do God's blessings feel or look like to you? Close your eyes and see what snapshot captures what God has done for you. Doodle a picture. Don't worry about using the perfect words; write what you see.

3. Get personal; be specific.

Dig into the details of your past. Remember God's small moments of grace: the day He helped you find your footing when you felt un-hinged or how He has walked alongside you when you felt alone or terrified. Thanksgiving is for the everyday mercies. Let the personal details of your story shine in your psalm, just like David did.

4. Ground it in who God is.

Thanksgiving Psalms are rooted in who God is. As you write, reflect on His character—His steady love, His unshakable faithfulness, His patience with you. Point your psalm to these eternal qualities.

5. Remember you're part of a bigger story.

Your Thanksgiving Psalm isn't just about this particular day or season of your life. It connects you to the bigger picture, the larger arc of God's work throughout all of your life. The psalmists praised God for His faithfulness across generations. As you write, let your love for Jesus inspire your praise. Every blessing is a glimpse of His greater work in you and through you.



1. HELPLESS

Missing on an '80s Camping Trip

For Dad, who is never afraid to admit his weakness.

Psalm 116

- ¹I love the LORD, because He has heard
my voice and my pleas for mercy.
- ²Because He inclined His ear to me,
therefore I will call on Him as long as I live.
- ³The snares of death encompassed me;
the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me;
I suffered distress and anguish.
- ⁴Then I called on the name of the LORD:
"O LORD, I pray, deliver my soul!"
- ⁵Gracious is the LORD, and righteous;
our God is merciful.
- ⁶The LORD preserves the simple;
when I was brought low, He saved me.
- ⁷Return, O my soul, to your rest;
for the LORD has dealt bountifully with you.
- ⁸For You have delivered my soul from death,
my eyes from tears,
my feet from stumbling;
- ⁹I will walk before the LORD
in the land of the living.

EVERLASTING

¹⁰I believed, even when I spoke:

"I am greatly afflicted";

¹¹I said in my alarm,

"All mankind are liars."

¹²What shall I render to the LORD

for all His benefits to me?

¹³I will lift up the cup of salvation

and call on the name of the LORD,

¹⁴I will pay my vows to the LORD

in the presence of all His people.

¹⁵Precious in the sight of the LORD

is the death of His saints.

¹⁶O LORD, I am Your servant;

I am Your servant, the son of Your maidservant.

You have loosed my bonds.

¹⁷I will offer to You the sacrifice of thanksgiving

and call on the name of the LORD.

¹⁸I will pay my vows to the LORD

in the presence of all His people,

¹⁹in the courts of the house of the LORD,

in your midst, O Jerusalem.

Praise the LORD!

Camping in the eighties? Totally different from today.

My parents were teachers, and when I was growing up, we could only afford vacations to Texas state parks. During the summers, we gathered with friends from church for epic camping trips. These vacations included sleeping in old tents, fishing in mossy lakes, and hiking miles of trails.

We didn't have today's space-age coolers or energy drinks. We had a musty canvas tent, an ancient Coleman stove, and plenty of unscheduled time. A gift of the eighties is all the free time we took for granted.

We all loved these trips. We constructed a tent village with six

1. HELPLESS

other families and then spent our days floating in the lake, playing horseshoes, and reading. When it got dark, we circled the fire for hot dogs and stories. At bedtime, we stumbled through the dark woods to the cinder block bathrooms and killed the spiders scurrying from the light before we took freezing showers. We sneezed all night in our muggy tents that smelled like mold.

How weird to feel so safe away from home, zipped into a black cocoon. Security and comfort cloaked all around us. Except that one terrifying memory—our infamous Eight-Mile Hike. It was a nightmare.

When nine of us elementary-age kids took off for a day-long hike, we just marched away from the campsite. Our parents didn't seem to care much. Of course, we didn't have cell phones. We also didn't have permission.

Three bold boys—the Purcell brothers—led the other six of us away from our tent village. I was seven years old, the youngest and the only girl. I would soon learn that I didn't belong with them.

As we hiked down the wide, dusty trail, the rambunctious boys jostled to be first. Now I realize that Dr Pepper and emerging testosterone fueled their competition, but then I thought they were cool. As we traveled farther down the narrowing trail, I felt an increasing danger. They were already hiking too fast for me. I knew I should turn around. But I didn't want them to call me a chicken.

After about a mile, my mouth was dry and I had to pee. Two unfortunate—and opposite—problems that made me feel helpless. My thick glasses slid down my nose, and sweat plastered my thin blonde hair to my neck.

Our leader, John, scared me. A fifth-grader, he cussed and told stories about feeding mice to his python, Luci. He had seen *The Exorcist* a dozen times and had read all Stephen King's books. He hiked too fast and said that if we complained, he'd leave us.

But then we got horribly lost. Darren, a boy my age, yelled to John that we were walking in circles. This made John mad, and he ordered Darren to go back to camp. The other boys argued about which way

that was. More screaming. Three boys stomped away to try another trail. I rubbed away my tears and trudged behind Jeff.

After another hour, we were even more lost. We were in a tangle of thick trees, scraped by the brambles and poking tree limbs. John became strangely quiet, and the rest of us started to panic.

“HEELLLLLPPP!” we screamed into the dense woods. I can still hear our yells echoing through the oaks. We were terrified. I thought we would die.

I wanted our parents to be searching for us, but I thought they probably were not. They were stoic German Lutherans—never alarmists. They were playing bridge in the sunshine, drinking mid-day Budweisers, talking about the gas shortage, using lake water to scrub bacon grease from the breakfast skillet, making Kool-Aid for dinner, hanging wet towels on our jump rope clothesline, and reading Agatha Christie. They didn’t give us a thought.

My adrenaline was gone and only exhaustion remained. I sat in the dirt and cried. The heat, thirst, and walking had eroded my determination. I gave up and peed all over myself.

I can see myself on that dirty trail. I needed a hug, food, water, dry clothes, Band-Aids, a shower. I needed everything that I had no way of getting. Completely hopeless.

I carry that exact moment of helplessness with me. Even now, the sensations of my wet shorts, blinding dehydration, a headache, and breathless fear, anger, and terror are a splinter in my psyche.

What about you? What moment of overwhelming helplessness have you survived? When have you lost all comfort and control and been left with only panic, misery, rejection, and weakness? From here, on the ground, you can see everything you don’t have. You’re lost in the proverbial hot woods, exhausted, crying, starving, thirsty, and ashamed.

This is when you fully understand how dependent you are on God.

Eventually, our parents did look for us. I remember hearing them call and then running to my mom and crying, my relief and adren-

aline colliding into sobs. Even those tough older boys fell into hugs from their parents. Our moms led us back to base camp and gave us water and Goldfish crackers, bandaged up our blisters, and handed us clean, dry clothes.

By the time we roasted marshmallows around the fire that night, the terrifying afternoon was already a story that we would retell a hundred times over the following decades. From the safety of that circle of friends, everything about that trek seemed ridiculous. Whose idea was it to go? Why didn't we take any water? The boys argued about who got us off track, and our parents muttered, "Thank God you're safe."

I've never forgotten that feeling of total helplessness. I'm feeling it now—the realization of my own weakness, my relief when help arrived, the faith that God will always help.

As in all the psalms—but especially in Psalm 116—we admit we need the Savior. We need the hope He provides, His love, His presence. We cannot do this on our own. It's through Christ's sacrifice and resurrection that we find hope. Even in our deepest helplessness, we are never abandoned.

ABOUT PSALM 116

Psalm 116 overflows with emotion. From the very first line, "I love the LORD, because He has heard my voice and my pleas for mercy" (v. 1), we can feel the relief of being rescued. We know that feeling well, the overwhelming gratitude that makes us want to cry out, "I will call on Him as long as I live" (v. 2).

Helpless, Yet Held

The psalmist vividly describes his desperation: "The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me; I suffered distress and anguish" (v. 3). That's what true helplessness feels like—trapped, scared, unsure if we'll make it through. But God doesn't leave us there. When the psalmist cries out, "O LORD, I pray, deliver

my soul!” (v. 4), God responds. We can’t save ourselves, but He steps in, bringing hope and comfort and rescue.

God’s Compassionate Response

In our weakest moments, God isn’t detached. “Gracious is the LORD, and righteous; our God is merciful” (v. 5). He meets us with grace and kindness, never asking us to handle things alone.

Rest in His Goodness

Finally, the crisis ends, and we find relief. We can breathe again, knowing God has taken care of us. The psalmist’s words in verse 7 ring true: “Return, O my soul, to your rest; for the LORD has dealt bountifully with you.” Our heavenly Father wants us to find peace in His faithful care.

Ancient Hymn of Our Savior

Psalm 116 was part of the Hallel Psalms (Psalms 113–118) sung during Passover. Imagine Jesus singing these words, just as generations had done before Him. Imagine Him lifting His voice even as He prepared to face the cross. Knowing that Jesus trusted God’s help in His darkest hour gives this psalm incredible significance. Jesus lived out the truth that God is present in our suffering, and, through His sacrifice, we experience God’s everlasting love.

God’s Love Is Always Enough

Psalm 116 reminds us of God’s faithfulness. His grace meets us in our weakness, His mercy carries us through our struggles, and His love remains constant. This is not based on who we are but on who He is. Even when you feel helpless, remember this: God hears you, knows your heart, and stays with you. His love will always be enough.

1. HELPLESS

DISCUSS PSALM 116

1. Share a moment when you felt helpless. How did your body react to the lack of control? Reflect on those feelings and what you experienced.
2. Reread Psalm 116. Which images or phrases resonate with your own experiences of helplessness?

PRAY

Heavenly Father, life often reveals our weaknesses. Please give me faith to trust You. Thank You for hearing my cries and lifting me up with Your love. Help me to see the ways You continually rescue me. In Jesus' name. Amen.



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You Made Your Bed

For Mark, who quietly takes care of those he loves.

Psalm 23

¹The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

²He makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside still waters.

³He restores my soul.

He leads me in paths of righteousness
for His name's sake.

⁴Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
for You are with me;
Your rod and Your staff,
they comfort me.

⁵You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
forever.

At age 48, I found myself in a midlife crisis. I felt empty. Our oldest daughter had left for college. Our kids, who had needed so much for so many years, were now teenagers. I realized that one day they would all just *leave*. My husband, Mike, and I would be all alone.

Who would we become without the engine of our kids' needs propelling us?

Mike and I were both wrestling with that question one Saturday in October while we cleaned our vacation rental, Best of Times Beach House. For thirteen years, we had hosted thousands of guests at our Airbnb on Galveston Island, my hometown.

As I hosed sand off surf boards, those questions about my identity bobbed in my mind. I looked up to see a Realtor sticking a for-sale sign in front of the tall, skinny house across the street. We knew that house. Ten years earlier, we had watched the construction crew build it directly in front of ours.

"Hey!" Mike called to me from the upper deck. "Want to buy another beach house?"

"Ha. Right. Like we're playing Monopoly and buying up all the houses on the street," I yelled back.

Our family was in the most expensive season of our lives—one kid in college and three others headed there soon. We agonized over replacing the brakes on our old minivan. We didn't have hundreds of thousands of dollars for another beach house.

Except we were both struggling with something deeper than financial pressure. We were antsy for a purpose. And now Mike's idea was out there, right between us. We longed for direction that would push us to the next chapter. This could be it. We already knew how to run one vacation rental. Why not two?

So, we asked our Realtor to show us the tall house. Just for fun, just to daydream, just to snap us out of our current confusion. Inside, the beach house was stuffy and cluttered. We peeked in closets and measured bedrooms and murmured to each other the problems of

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turning this house into a short-term rental. It would take too much time and money. Impossible.

Or, maybe not? We desperately needed something to do. Maybe this house was a plot point that led to our next chapter?

Then, an HGTV-like montage of exciting real-estate moments occurred. We made a ridiculously low offer—so low that our Realtor warned us it would insult the sellers. Except, plot twist, they accepted it. Before we knew if we could pull this off, we were signing papers for a huge mortgage.

Then came *anxiety*.

You know this feeling: the constant drip of uncertainty pooling deep in you, creating puddles of fear, of anticipation, of regret, of buzzy, frantic worry. Growing out of those pools—like weeds, like pond ferns—was body-racking fear.

We carried this feeling in our guts as we signed papers on this illogical idea. We did not know how this could work. Fear made my jaw clench, my hands fidget, my eyes wild. I saw the same thing in Mike's face. Was this angst our new normal?

We stopped sleeping and worked instead. We quickly realized we hadn't found a mere plot twist; we'd found a tragedy. Unless we could figure out how to stop spending money and rent these houses out, we would have to sell one.

This new chapter in our lives made money weird. We owned two beach houses—and also scolded our kids when they ordered soda at Chick-fil-A instead of water. I felt so ashamed. The soundtrack playing in our heads was, *Do not fail, you irresponsible idiots. Work. Work. Work.*

And, oh, the problems with the new house. It had a weird, formal, outdated vibe. Dark wood floors, lace curtains, neglected areas. Everything was hard. Repairing broken deck boards and leaky faucets cost money we didn't have. We shopped thrift stores and clearance aisles for beachy decor and paid for it with credit cards we couldn't afford.