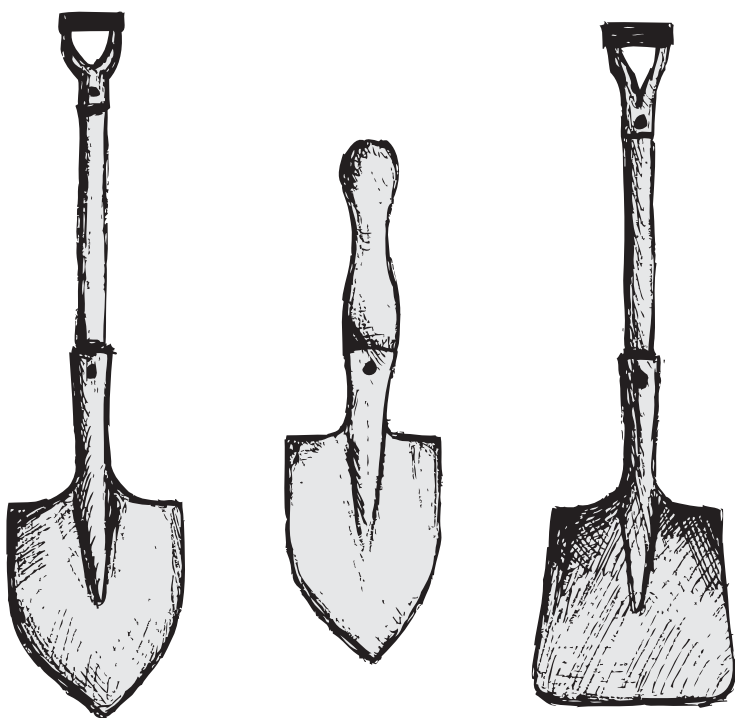


Unearthing the Heart

Simple Tools for Soul-Deep Prayers



A RENOVARÉ RESOURCE FOR SPIRITUAL RENEWAL

Layout and Design by Melodee Dill Stephens

Edited by Grace Pate Pouch

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About this Resource

Mutual self-disclosure is essential for all deep relationships, including our relationship with God, but it can be hard to bare our souls to the Lord. We need tools that help us to know our own hearts and express ourselves.

“The Psalms are the best tools available,” according to Eugene Peterson. “They are God’s gift to train us in prayer that is comprehensive... and honest.”¹

The preeminent author of the Psalms is David—“the apple of God’s eye.” David’s bond with Yahweh grew through an exchange of thoughts and ideas at the deepest level, a true sharing of self and love, unearthed by the practice of crafting prayers in the form of poetry.

Can we follow in David’s footsteps and speak to God that way? Yes! The exercises in this book draw on the biblical psalms as examples that we can imitate in our own words, to pray about our unique circumstances and feelings.

Psalms are poetry—but don’t let that intimidate you. Crafting psalms isn’t just for “writers”—the treasure we are after is honesty and soul-deep connection, not a fancy finished product. Peterson says that “poetry requires that we... dive beneath the surfaces of prose and pretense, straight into the depths.”² The point of these exercises is to help you work with your words and discover what you didn’t even know you had to say, to move past surface-y prayer and get *real* with God.

Whether you are brand-new to praying or well-seasoned in a conversational life with God, you can pick up these psalm-crafting tools to bring more of yourself into the light of God.

“May the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you” as you share your heart with him and with each other.

Grace Pouch
Renovaré Content Manager

A FEW PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

- This is a workbook, so write in it!
- The prompts are re-usable. You can go back through the exercises anytime you are struggling to go deeper in your conversation with God.
- Written prayers can be intensely private, but sharing the psalms you craft with others and hearing theirs can be a wonderful blessing. You may want to use the booklet with your congregation or with a few friends and offer space for sharing.
- Don't force it, but do stretch yourself. If you begin the exercise to create a psalm of praise and you feel full to the brim of bitterness, it may be wise to craft a psalm of lament instead! On the other hand, many Christians throughout history have noticed that digging past some initial resistance has the power to shift our outlook and unearth things we need to talk over with God, after all.

¹ Eugene Peterson, *Answering God*, HarperOne, 1989, 2-3.

² Peterson, 12.

Mining the Ground of Our Lives

ESSAY BY KATELYN J. DIXON

If we're honest, the task of finding the words to say to God can feel like just that—a wearying task in a word-saturated, noisy world.

When our own powers of expression feel wobbly and weak-kneed, the Psalms provide solid ground. Throughout the ages, the Psalms have given us deep and wide scope for what it looks like to be both human and holy when addressing the Lord. They put a new song in our mouth when joy and wonder leave us at a loss for words; they give us words of petition and lament when sorrow has taken much and we have nothing left to give. The Psalms invite us to pray with borrowed words and yet to feel them as our own.

But the Psalms also do something more in handing us a shovel and telling us to dig, to earnestly search the ground of our lives until we uncover our own holy stories. Like peering into a mirror, as we encounter the Psalms, they reveal parts of us we can't see on our own. If we take the time to look deeper, we will become aware of our own unique longings, laments, gratitudes, and praises that are just waiting to be brought out into the light of conversation with God. Like a good parent who delights in receiving handmade gifts from their child, God delights in hearing us pray in our own words as a gift of love. Nothing is too complicated, trivial, or vulnerable to lay before him. And yet, we hesitate to place the full weight of ourselves in his hands.

We sometimes avoid looking beneath the surface of our lives. What if we do not approve of what we find? No matter. With brutal forthrightness, the Psalms show us that there is gold strewn among the humus and decay. When we write our own psalms—when we dig with prayer and pen just a little deeper than perhaps makes us comfortable—we mine both the mountains and valleys of our lives for the luminous treasures that are there, beholding God's presence in our storied lives, affirming the wondrous miracles that they are.

This, after all, is the definition of wisdom: to reflect upon our stories without guile or pretense and point to what we've learned of God, humanity, and the world in our days under the sun.

As a template for our own creative praying, the Psalms help us turn our stories into song—our lives into works of art. They show us a sacred way of seeing what we've been given as gifts. They help us to bear witness to God's goodness by taking the raw, unearthed materials of our storied days and working them into jewels of praise and petition. Psalm-crafting can guide us right to the heart of God, into His very throne room.

We're going to mine the earth of our lives through two psalm writing exercises: one of thanksgiving, one of longing or lament. We will practice taking off our shoes and standing upon the holy ground of our lives, bearing witness to the goodness of God in both the high and low places. In seasons of lament and seasons of thanksgiving, the Psalms invite us to declare with faith, "I remain confident of this: I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living" (Psalm 27:13). With eyes wide open and excavation tools in hand, we begin.

Unearthing Lament and Longing

In times of inner turmoil, psalms of Lament and Longing bring us out of isolated brooding and start a dialogue with God, our Helper. We can pour out heartache, complaint, betrayal, grief, and yearning, knowing that God can hold it, trusting that God *wants* to hear what we *need* to say.

Biblical Examples

PSALM 13

How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
and day after day have sorrow in my heart?
How long will my enemy triumph over me?
Look on me and answer, Lord my God.
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death,
and my enemy will say, "I have overcome him,"
and my foes will rejoice when I fall.
But I trust in your unfailing love;
my heart rejoices in your salvation.
I will sing the Lord's praise, for he has been good to me.

PSALM 42

As the deer pants for streams of water,
so my soul pants for you, my God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When can I go and meet with God?
My tears have been my food day and night,
while people say to me all day long, “Where is your God?”
These things I remember as I pour out my soul:
how I used to go to the house of God
under the protection of the Mighty One
with shouts of joy and praise among the festive throng.
Why, my soul, are you downcast?
Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him,
my Savior and my God.
My soul is downcast within me;
therefore I will remember you from the land of the Jordan,
the heights of Hermon—from Mount Mizar.
Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls;
all your waves and breakers have swept over me.
By day the Lord directs his love, at night his song is with me—
a prayer to the God of my life.
I say to God my Rock, “Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?”
My bones suffer mortal agony as my foes taunt me,
saying to me all day long, “Where is your God?”
Why, my soul, are you downcast?
Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him,
my Savior and my God.

Common Elements

Though the Bible's psalms of longing and lament are far from formulaic, many of them share similar elements:

- A cry for God's attention and care
- Name for God (e.g. Rock, Shepherd, Savior)
- A "before and after" story of loss
- Request or burning question for God
- Affirmation of what is true

These common features can serve as entry points when we set out to mine the ground of our lives to unearth our own lament or longing.

Contemporary Example

by Katelyn J. Dixon

Oh God my compass, do you see my fretful wanderings?

I am like a child lost in the woods,
lonely and scared as night draws near—
My shaking hands fumble for a map that no longer exists.

Once I knew my own topography, and I thought You did too.
Confident in your safekeeping, I explored your kingdom far and wide.
Though I've lost my way, come and find me, Map Maker.

I am stranded out here, and I need a little light.
You know the way through my darkest night;
I put my hope in your rising sun.

Your Turn

Let's put this into practice. Choose one question below that feels like an invitation into prayer:

- ☐ What seems to be going all wrong in my life?
- ☐ What anger, grief, or disappointment is burning in my chest?
- ☐ What big questions are stirring up worry deep in my soul?
- ☐ What unmet longing has been making me feel heart-sick?
- ☐ If someone could bear the full weight of my honesty, what sorrow would I want to unleash?



1. Dig

Using elements from biblical psalms as a rough outline, dig into the prayer topic you chose.

You don't have to answer all the prompts.

Start wherever you like, and write down everything that needs to come to the surface.

It's ok to get messy here—mark all over the page, scratch things out, play in the dirt.

As I consider my situation, what cry for God's attention and care wells up inside of me?

What is my “before and after” story?

What has been lost or spoiled?

What hoped-for situation hasn't come to pass?

What request or burning question do I have for the Lord?

What name for God describes who I need God to be for me right now? (e.g. *Rock, Shepherd, Savior*)

Even if this situation does not resolve easily or anytime soon, what do I believe to be true about the character of God, or what hope has God given me?



2. Sift

Next, pull words and ideas from what you wrote in Step 1 to craft eight lines that best express your heart. Think of this process as taking all that you have unearthed and placing it in a sifting pan, searching for gold.

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8



3. Refine

Now, place your lines from Step 2 in the structure below to create a *pantoum*—a Malaysian poetic style that uses reordering and repetition to reveal layers of meaning—the gold within. Then read your psalm aloud to God.

Line 1

Line 2

Line 3

Line 4

Line 2

Line 5

Line 4

Line 6

Line 5

Line 7

Line 6

Line 8

Line 7

Line 3

Line 8

Line 1

Unearthing Gratitude and Praise

In a time when pausing to savor is rare, psalms of Gratitude and Praise teach us not to miss God's presence and provision. They are an invitation to *notice* and *delight* in goodness and give credit to the Giver. In these psalms we pour out the joy, wonder, delight, contentment, and adoration that God has filled us with, and recommit ourselves to him.

Biblical Examples

PSALM 30

I will exalt you, Lord,
for you lifted me out of the depths
and did not let my enemies gloat over me.
Lord my God, I called to you for help, and you healed me.
You, Lord, brought me up from the realm of the dead;
you spared me from going down to the pit.
Sing the praises of the Lord, you his faithful people; praise his holy name.
For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime;
weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning.
When I felt secure, I said, "I will never be shaken."
Lord, when you favored me, you made my royal mountain stand firm;
but when you hid your face, I was dismayed.
To you, Lord, I called; to the Lord I cried for mercy:
"What is gained if I am silenced, if I go down to the pit?
Will the dust praise you? Will it proclaim your faithfulness?
Hear, Lord, and be merciful to me; Lord, be my help."
You turned my wailing into dancing;
you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy,
that my heart may sing your praises and not be silent.
Lord my God, I will praise you forever.

PSALM 98

Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things;
his right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him.
The Lord has made his salvation known
and revealed his righteousness to the nations.
He has remembered his love and his faithfulness to Israel;
all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.
Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth, burst into jubilant song
with music; make music to the Lord with the harp,
with the harp and the sound of singing,
with trumpets and the blast of the ram's horn—
shout for joy before the Lord, the King.
Let the sea resound, and everything in it,
the world, and all who live in it.
Let the rivers clap their hands, let the mountains sing together for joy;
let them sing before the Lord, for he comes to judge the earth.
He will judge the world in righteousness
and the peoples with equity.

PSALM 93

The Lord reigns, he is robed in majesty;
the Lord is robed in majesty and armed with strength;
indeed, the world is established, firm and secure.
Your throne was established long ago;
you are from all eternity.
The seas have lifted up, Lord,
the seas have lifted up their voice;
the seas have lifted up their pounding waves.
Mightier than the thunder of the great waters,
mightier than the breakers of the sea—
the Lord on high is mighty.
Your statutes, Lord, stand firm;
holiness adorns your house for endless days.

Common Elements

Though Biblical psalms of praise and gratitude vary greatly in style, subject matter, and length—Psalm 119 has 176 verses!—many of them share some or all of these elements:

- Feeling, emotion, or mental state (e.g. relief, joy, safety, amazement)
- Reason for rejoicing (a “before and after” story or an epiphany about God, self, the world)
- Description of God’s character
- Name for God
- Invitation for others to join the celebration
- Intention to live in response to God’s goodness

These common features can be entry points when we set out to mine the ground of our lives to unearth our own gratitude and praise.

Contemporary Example

by Grace Pouch

Perfection. Completeness.

To sit here, in the spot where I dreamed as future this now—
this day of fulfilment.

I could cry but the tears stop just shy of falling because they are content
where they are.

And I am content
where I am.

Friends, lift your glasses! You who’ve prayed me through,
rejoice with me!

Praise be to the Faithful One! Thank you, Lord, thank you.

Your Turn

Let's put this into practice. What praise-worthy topic would you like to dig into? Choose one situation below that you want to explore in prayer.

A time when...

- ☐ God came through for me
- ☐ I felt peace that couldn't be explained
- ☐ I experienced wonder or beauty
- ☐ Jesus healed or changed me
- ☐ A burden was lifted



1. Dig

Using some or all of the common elements from biblical psalms of praise and gratitude, dig into the situation you chose.

You don't have to answer all the prompts.

Start wherever you like, and write down everything that needs to come to the surface.

It's ok to get messy here—mark all over the page, scratch things out, play in the dirt.

What feelings do I need to express? (*relief, joy, safety, amazement, etc.*)

What are the sensations in my body? How do I want to move or make noise?

What's the reason for my rejoicing? Tell a "before and after" story, or recount something that dawned on you.

Before it was like this [metaphor; e.g. withered tree, dirty lake].

Now it's like this.

I missed it before, but now I see it...

How would I describe God to a friend? What name for God captures who God has been for me?

How will I invite others to rejoice with me?

Who do I want to hear my testimony or share in my joy?

How can I include them in the celebration?

Looking to the future, what is my intention to live in response to God's goodness?

How can I keep myself from forgetting the wonders of God's love?

How will I use my life to keep telling this story?



2. Sift

Next, pull words and ideas from what you wrote in Step 1 to craft six lines that best express your heart. Think of this process as taking all that you have unearthed and placing it in a sifting pan, searching for gold.

1

2

3

4

5

6



3. Refine

Now, take the six lines you crafted in Step 2 and insert them into the structure below to see what emerges.

When you have finished,
read your psalm aloud to God.

Line 1

Line 2

Line 3

Line 4

Line 2

Line 5

Line 4

Line 6

Line 5

Line 3

Line 6

Line 1

Post-prayer Reflection

(FOR INDIVIDUAL USE OR SMALL GROUP SHARING)

How did it feel to dig beneath the surface and bring up your story?

What was hard about this exercise? How did it stretch you?

What emerged in the sifting and refining process that surprised you?

Contributors



Katelyn J. Dixon is a writer, speaker, and podcaster living in the Seattle area. She considers it a profound gift to partner with Renovaré as a Listening Group Coordinator, writing contributor, and workshop facilitator. Since earning her Master's degree in Counseling in 2017, she has pursued vocational writing as ministry while leading workshops and retreats that help others find healing. Katelyn co-hosts *The Still Christian Podcast*, re-orienting those who've been wounded by the church towards newness and hope. Most of all, Katelyn enjoys discovering what it means to live as God's beloved while exploring the enchanting Pacific North West with her husband Drew. You can find her work at katelynjdixon.com and on Instagram @katelynjdixon.



Grace Pate Pouch is Content Manager for Renovaré where she curates and produces resources for spiritual renewal. Grace is a graduate of Davidson College, the Renovaré Institute, and Erskine Theological Seminary. She is the author of *Savoring Childhood: Practical Wisdom for Slowing Down*. In the past, Grace has served as a seminary professor and Christian education specialist for elementary school children. She and her husband William live with their two children, Charlotte and Henry, in Greenville, SC. Find Grace on Substack @grapplepie and on Instagram @grace.pate.pouch.

*Two psalm writing exercises—
one of thanksgiving, one of longing
or lament—to mine the earth of
our lives and enter deep prayer.*



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