

GARDEN SONG

Exploring the psalms through paintings, reflections and prayers



Reflections by **Clare Hayns** Artwork by **Micah Hayns**

GARDEN SONG



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ISBN 978 1 80039 237 3
First published 2024
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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed by Gutenberg Press, Tarxien, Malta

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Introduction: Micah

About five years ago, I was sitting in a Christian conference and was a bit bored with the talk being given. So I decided to flick through my Bible. At that time I was slowly digesting the gospels and hadn't ventured much further than that. But I found myself in the psalms and, more specifically, Psalm 139. I remember reading the verses and feeling so inspired. The visual imagery and emotion were so rich and a stark contrast to the talk I was listening to.

I could see colour and passion in the words. As I read the psalms, they opened up a different side to my faith which I hadn't realised was there. The words didn't feel censored, careful or polite. Instead, they were raw, forward and honest. Having grown up in church environments, I have noticed that sometimes this brash expression of fear, doubt, love and joy can be toned down in worship services. But my inner artist found the psalms to be a deep relief. It felt like the authors were giving me permission to feel and think and fear. I could embrace life in all its fullness and enter into it without the fear of it being too much, too weird, too intense.

This is why I wanted to make this book. I wanted to paint the different verses in the psalms so they might encourage people to read and meditate on them. To find this same freedom and release.

The verse I wrote in a sketchbook during that conference was ‘wings of the dawn’ (Psalm 139:9, NIV). I saw an image of abundant beauty, colour and life. It was this verse that stayed in my mind and sparked me to take on the project four years later.

I am not sure where the name *Garden Song* came from or when it came to me, but for me it represents the psalms. I like to think of a garden being a metaphor for the kingdom of God, and song being the outward expression of that. As well as this, the word ‘psalm’ means song.

The pictures are made using either oil paint on canvas or charcoal on paper, using classical techniques I acquired while studying the Old Masters in Florence. I hope you enjoy this book. It was such an honour to create it. All the images are available as prints on my website – micahhayns.com. If you could see yourself owning any of the pictures from the book, original pieces and prints are available – please email me at micah.hayns@gmail.com.



Micah Hayns

Introduction: Clare

The last time Micah and I collaborated on a book with BRF Ministries (*Unveiled: Women of the Old Testament and the choices they made*), it was very much driven by me; this time it was the other way round. Micah, as he writes in his introduction, felt inspired to paint images from the psalms and asked if I would write reflections to go with these. I am so pleased I agreed, as the process has been a joy and has reignited my love of the psalms.

I have always been drawn to the psalms, as they give voice to the full range of human emotions. I once remember someone saying that the psalms were ‘150 things it’s okay to say to God’. This means they can be uncomfortable to read at times, as they can be angry, despairing and vengeful. For example, Psalm 139 ends with ‘I hate them with perfect hatred’ (v. 22). The psalmists don’t hold back in speaking to God about how they really feel, and this can be enormously refreshing. The psalms can also be glorious songs of praise, containing amazing poetry and imagery, inspiring us to wonder at the world around us and at the faithfulness of God throughout history.

We do not know who wrote the psalms or the exact dates they were written. Some are titled 'of David' or 'of Asaph', but we can't be sure if these were written by them, commissioned by them or inspired by them. Psalms would have been memorised and were used while travelling (the psalms of ascent), in temple liturgy or in private prayer. Jesus drew from the psalms throughout his ministry, and among his final words on the cross were, 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me' (Psalm 22:1).

Psalms have been used in private and corporate prayer by Christians since the inception of the church. The fourth-century theologian Athanasius wrote:

Whatever your particular need or trouble, from this same book you can select a form of words to fit it, so that you not merely hear and then pass on, but learn a way to remedy your ill.¹

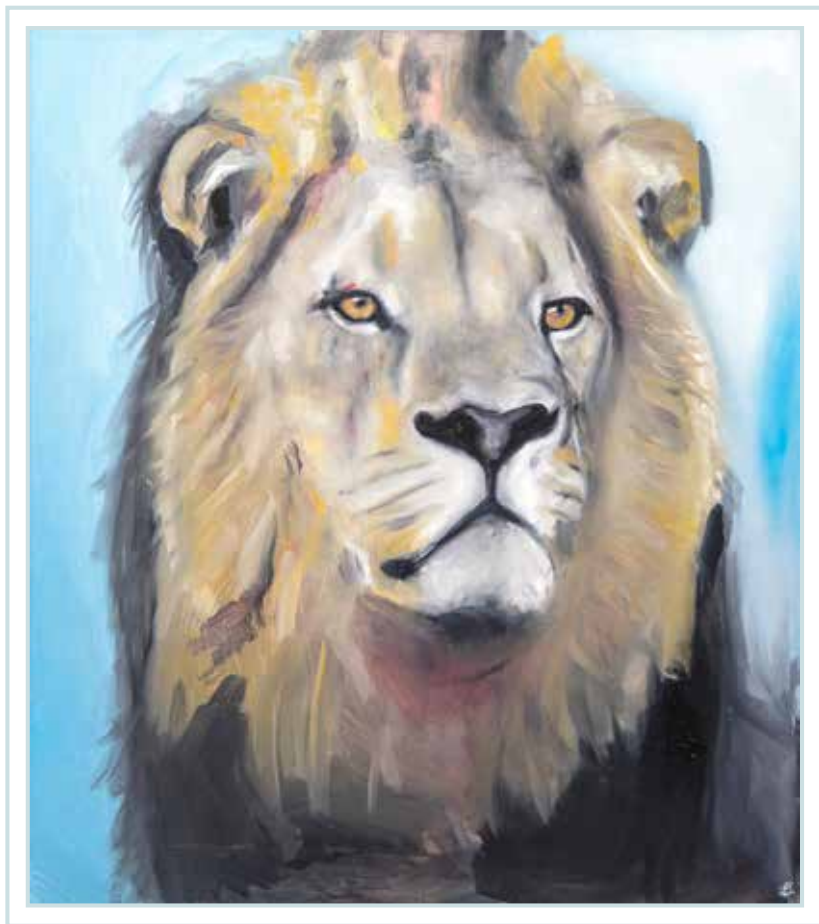
The psalms were written to be set to music, and the books of Chronicles refer to psalm singing both inside and outside the temple, normally led by the leaders from the Levite tribe, who were appointed to lead the Israelite community in worship (1 Chronicles 16). We have no idea what this music might have originally sounded like, but psalms have been sung in all forms of musical genre down the centuries: plainchant, choral, hymnody, modern chorus and more. For this reason, we have put together some music for suggested listening, all inspired by the psalms in some way, and from a variety of musical genres. I'd like to thank Alannah, Helen and Katie

for help with these. All the music can be found on Spotify (or other sources), and is also available on YouTube. We have also gathered the pieces into a Spotify playlist called 'Garden Song' ([sptfy.com/QRy9](https://open.spotify.com/playlist/3QY9)).

I hope that by reading the reflections, looking at Micah's images, and listening to the music you might encounter God within the psalms, and that you might also be inspired to express the full range of human emotions as you do so.

Clare

Clare Hayns



 Psalm 2 

‘Therefore, O kings, be wise’

Why do the nations conspire,
and the peoples plot in vain?

The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers take counsel together,
against the Lord and his anointed, saying,
‘Let us burst their bonds apart
and cast their cords from us.’

He who sits in the heavens laughs;
the Lord has them in derision.

Then he will speak to them in his wrath
and terrify them in his fury, saying,
‘I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill.’

I will tell of the decree of the Lord:

He said to me, 'You are my son;
today I have begotten you.

Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage
and the ends of the earth your possession.

You shall break them with a rod of iron
and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.'

Now therefore, O kings, be wise;
be warned, O rulers of the earth.

Serve the Lord with fear,
with trembling kiss his feet,
or he will be angry, and you will perish in the way,
for his wrath is quickly kindled.

Happy are all who take refuge in him.

The Emperor Diocletian ruled the Roman Empire from AD284–305 and spent much of it persecuting the early church and attempting to eradicate Christianity. He razed churches, burned scriptures, executed believers and prohibited gatherings. His Great Persecution of AD303 was brutal, and at the height of his rule he set up a monument on the Spanish frontier of his empire with the inscription:

Diocletian Jovian Maximian Hercules Caesares Augusti for having extended the Roman Empire in the east and the west and for having extinguished the name of Christians who brought the republic to ruin.¹²

Of course, his plan failed and followers of Jesus now make up the largest faith group in the world, numbering over two billion.

Religious persecution is as old as faith itself, and this psalm seems to be set within the context of an attack on Judea by an alliance of nations who were seeking, once again, to subjugate the Jewish people (v. 3). I am writing this while conflicts in Ukraine, Myanmar, the Middle East and Sudan (to name just a few) are raging and where the seemingly intractable political, geographical and religious issues have led to the deaths of many thousands of innocent people. The psalmist asks, ‘Why do the nations so furiously rage?’ (as translated in Handel’s *Messiah*), a question we no doubt all continue to ask ourselves!

This is a psalm about the hubris of those who rule the nations, thinking they are invincible and can evade God's judgement. The psalm puts human power into an eternal perspective. God 'laughs', holds them 'in derision', will 'terrify them in his fury' and 'speak to them in his wrath' (vv. 4-5). It's not an easy read for those in a position of authority!

While Psalm 1 (which I recommend you read as well) is about God's promise to individual people, this psalm is about God's promises to a nation. The king in verse 6 is likely to be David, the shepherd boy anointed as king of an eternal dynasty, as prophesied by the prophet Nathan:

[David] is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he shall be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him... But my love will never be taken away from him.

2 SAMUEL 7:13-15 (NIV)

This promise forms the bedrock of Israel's hope for a messiah, and Christians believe this promise was fulfilled in the person of Jesus, a very different kind of king, one who was born from David's line but who brought into being a kingdom based on humility, service and love, and who wore a rather different kind of crown as he died.

When we consider a world where people are still being persecuted for their faith, where conflicts continue to rage and where leaders still believe themselves to be above reproach, perhaps this psalm can be a comfort – there will one day be judgement:

Therefore, O kings, be wise;
be warned, O rulers of the earth.

v. 10

Further reading, reflection and prayer



Reading



And now, O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, although I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted. Give your servant, therefore, an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil, for who can govern this your great people of yours?’

1 KINGS 3:7–9

Listen

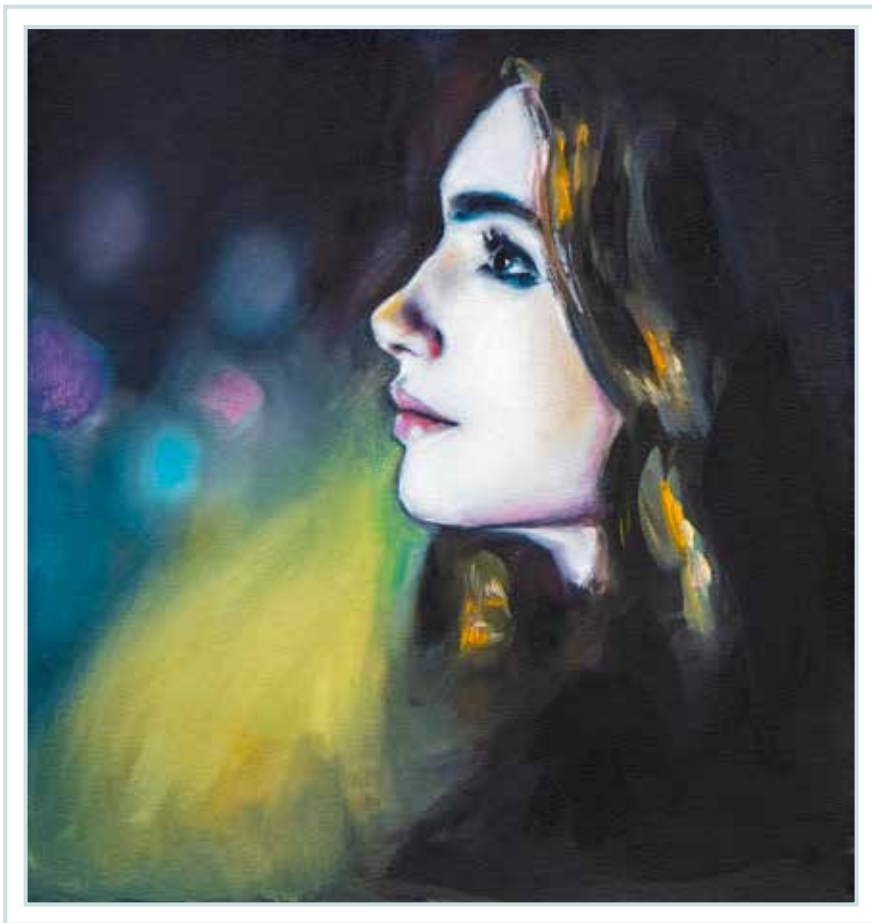
'Why Do the Nations So Furiously Rage Together' by The Tabernacle Choir at Temple Square, Orchestra at Temple Square, *Handel's Messiah* (2016)

Prayer

Eternal Light, shine into our hearts,
Eternal Goodness, deliver us from evil,
Eternal Power, be our support,
Eternal Wisdom, scatter the darkness of our ignorance,
Eternal Pity, have mercy on us;
that with all our heart and mind and strength
we may seek thy face and be brought by thine infinite mercy
to thy holy presence; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Alcuin of York (c. 735–804)





 Psalm 27 

'Behold the beauty of the Lord'

The Lord is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?

The Lord is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?...

Though an army encamp against me,
my heart shall not fear;
though war rise up against me,
yet I will be confident.

One thing I asked of the Lord,
this I seek:
to live in the house of the Lord
all the days of my life,

to behold the beauty of the Lord,
and to inquire in his temple.

For he will hide me in his shelter
in the day of trouble;
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;
he will set me high on a rock.

Now my head is lifted up
above my enemies all around me,
and I will offer in his tent
sacrifices with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make melody to the Lord.

Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud;
be gracious to me and answer me!
'Come,' my heart says, 'seek his face!'
Your face, Lord, do I seek.
Do not hide your face from me.

vv. 1, 3-9

What is so comforting and reassuring in the Psalms is that they allow for the whole gamut of human emotion, not just psalm by psalm, but so often all muddled together in one psalm, much the way we find in life. Psalm 27 is one you could spend a year pondering and still find different images and emotions to dwell on.

One of the things I'm most afraid of is heights. As a mother of three sons, I've always enjoyed joining them on outdoor challenges, never wanting to be the kind of parent that sits on the sidelines. This was all fine until the time I became stranded on one of those tree-top high ropes and had to be rescued by the guide and brought down. I remember standing on the small board at the top of a tree, clutching the bark with my heart beating and my body refusing to move. I knew deep down that I was strapped in, that the ropes would hold me and that I was safe, but at the very same time I was terrified. The only thing that kept me from panicking was singing the hymn 'Dear Lord and Father of mankind' until help came!

Although it's titled a 'triumphant song of confidence', there is a sense of fear pervading this psalm. The psalmist is beset by evildoers, adversaries and foes (v. 2), and there is a feeling of abandonment by God (v. 9) and by family (v. 10), both of whom they'd expected to be there for protection. Despite this, it is a psalm of courage – courage in the face of adversity. You can imagine David speaking it line by line as he and his men flee from King Saul and are hunted down.

This psalm allows for complexity, for paradox. We can know deep down that we are safe, that we are loved or that we belong, but at the very same time feel unsafe, unloved or alone. And conversely, we can deep down feel threatened, fearful and abandoned while at the same time knowing that we are never abandoned by a God who loves us.

I am reminded of two instances in the gospels. First, of the father of the boy with seizures, who pleads for Jesus to heal his son when he says: ‘I believe; help my unbelief!’ (Mark 9:24). And second, of the disciples after witnessing the bodily resurrection of Jesus, who ‘yet for all their joy were still were disbelieving and wondering’ (Luke 24:41).

In a similar way, in contrast to the psalm’s pervading sense of fear, the final verse strikes a note of courage:

Wait for the Lord;
 be strong, and let your heart take courage;
 wait for the Lord!

v. 14

The root of the word ‘courage’ is *cor*, the Latin for heart. In one of its earliest forms, the word courage meant ‘to speak one’s mind by telling one’s heart’.¹³

In the midst of the turmoil of life, and at those times when we are feeling most threatened, fearful and vulnerable, the invitation of this psalm is to embrace such turmoil and emotions rather than running away from them. Sometimes all that means is taking time to ‘behold’ the beauty all around us (v. 4), to ‘wait for the Lord’ (v. 14) and to sing God’s praises, even when we’re afraid (v. 6).

Further reading, reflection and prayer



Reading



Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

PHILIPPIANS 4:6–7

Listen



‘Concerto in C Major for Sopranino Recorder, Strings and BC, RV 443: II. Largo’ by Karl Strangenberg, Munich Chamber Orchestra and Hans Stadlmeier, *Baroque Concertos for Recorder* (2009)

Prayer

O Lord, calm the waves of this heart; calm its tempests.
Calm thyself, O my soul, so that the divine can act in thee.
Calm thyself, O my soul... so that his peace may cover thee.
Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55)



A fresh, vibrant interpretation for today

Garden Song brings together original artwork by artist Micah Hayns and reflections and prayers by the Revd Clare Hayns. Leading the reader through 30 selected psalms, the mother-son duo capture the essence of this ancient text – the worship, the grieving and the joy – and open up new ways to engage with its riches. There is also a playlist of suggested music to accompany the reflections.



Clare Hayns is a vicar in the diocese of Oxford and was previously college chaplain at Christ Church, Oxford. Pre-ordination she worked as a social worker specialising in substance misuse and for a while was an entertainment agent. She is married to John, a performer, and has three creative sons, the eldest of whom is the illustrator of this book. This is the second book collaboration between Clare and Micah, the first being *Unveiled: Women of the Old Testament and the choices they made*, also published by BRF Ministries.



Micah Hayns is a contemporary artist based in Oxford. Trained in Florence, he combines classical techniques with a contemporary style, inspired by the impressionists, street art and the Old Masters. Through his work he hopes to share where he finds beauty, life and truth. He currently paints from his studio gallery in Oxford, called The Jungle, which also operates as a community space run by a local charity.



Cover artwork © Micah Hayns

