

An abstract, high-contrast portrait of a person with a beard, rendered in shades of red, purple, and yellow. The person's face is the central focus, with their eyes closed or looking down. The background is a mix of these colors, creating a textured, layered effect.

VOICES OF LAMENT

Reflections on Brokenness and Hope
in a World Longing for Justice

EDITED BY

NATASHA SISTRUNK ROBINSON

Foreword by Latasha Morrison

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a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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In Memoriam

Hays Jenkins, Jr.
Brother-in-law of K. A. Ellis
June 14, 1949–January 23, 2021

James Carlton Graham, Jr.
Godson to Lisa Rodriguez-Watson
May 29, 1991–January 11, 2021

Luis Flores
Grandfather to Bethany Rivera Molinar
December 23, 1931–May 23, 2021

Myrna S. Proper
Mother of Marlena Graves
May 3, 1946–June 27, 2021

Phillip Mose Berryhill
Cousin to Mariah Humphries
September 22, 1974–November 12, 2020

Pu Hwi Cho and Po Sun Cho
Grandparents-in-law of Grace P. Cho
December 22, 1929–June 8, 2020
February 5, 1934–January 6, 2021

Robert James Berryhill
Uncle to Mariah Humphries
December 8, 1932–December 6, 2020

Wilbur Moore
Brother of Kristie Anyabwile
November 13, 1957–November 6, 2020

This book was written during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of our loved ones listed here lost their lives to it, along with millions around the world. We honor our deceased while lifting up the millions whose names may be unknown to us but are certainly known by God. We pray for all people as grief continues to move its way through our communities.

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FOREWORD

From first contact to the current racial climate in the United States, Women of Color have been victims of suppression and oppression. As a result, we have been long-suffering. Through the generations, our existence has been the source of disdain. Our bodies and our minds have suffered through the centuries, but despite generational suffering, we have held on to hope and belief that we are more than our oppressors' opinion of us. That belief, that faith and hope in God, has filled the following pages of stories, exegeses, essays, poetry, and liturgies.

You are about to be blessed by the faithfulness of Christian women, even when God's timing of true equity does not necessarily mirror our own. In these reflections from Women of Color, we are reminded that our current and historical cultural traditions and family legacies reject the mindset of our oppressors. Individually and collectively as diverse people groups, we are created by God exactly as we are, and we refuse to accept less.

Natasha Sistrunk Robinson has brought a collection to the forefront that shows the beauty and depth of Women of Color voices and shared experiences. This book takes us on a journey of pain and loss, admiration and respect, inspiration and hope. In the following pages we receive an in-depth view of Psalm 37, as the lived experiences and beautiful testimonies of our matriarchs and ancestors are brought to life through the historical reflections.

Many reflections in *Voices of Lament* immediately resonated with me. Some of these stories are familiar because they are a part of my story and shared history. Others of them are new, bringing knowledge and insight for the important work of bridge-building, for which I have committed my life. This is what makes *Voices of Lament* a classic work that is so important for all of us—in it, we see ourselves, and we also have the opportunity to become students of our sisters.

This book is an anthem of the power of Indigenous, Black, Asian, and Latina women, and indeed Women of Color across the world. It is a gift to each of us and a reminder that we are still here standing, fighting for justice, speaking the truth, and purposing to hope for such a time as this. Our strength and resolve have been initiated by God, inspired by our ancestors, and supported by the women who continue to influence us.

This book is for anyone who is broken, longing for justice, and trusting that “Jesus is a rock in a weary land.”¹ These insights invite you to feast, fellowship, listen, and learn at the table of the marginalized. Read the powerful words of these women of faith and witness how God leads and uplifts the blameless, no matter how the systemic structures seek to weigh us down. Our cries of lament are also cries of strength and resolve as we continue on the journey of justice. For you to pursue justice, you must first have eyes to see, ears to hear, and a heart to understand injustice.

This is the work of building bridges: when we come together, willing to learn from one another, we begin to understand how we are interconnected and why we need one another. In this work, we gain strength and unity by embracing our individual and collective stories. That’s the deepest gift that this book offers; may we embrace it.

To the Women of Color, I love us. Let us rejoice that *Voices of Lament* shows our love for us.

Latasha Morrison, founder of Be the Bridge
and author of *Be the Bridge*

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My musings began in summer 2020 and were inspired by the book of expository devotions on Psalm 119, *His Testimonies, My Heritage: Women of Color on the Word of God*. I contributed to that work, which was edited by Kristie Anyabwile. I reflected on it as I spent this unimaginable summer—which included the lingering effects of COVID-19 and the aftermath of George Floyd’s murder by the state—reading through the Psalms and the book of Jeremiah.

Personally, I was nearly a year into an unexpected move, as a Black woman living in Alabama. I was lonely, isolated, and anxious. Yet God and I continued to commune together. He reminded me that he was near and concerned with my struggles. So, I thank God and my husband and daughter for persevering through such a difficult time, for cooking and eating well, for cleaning, for schooling and working virtually, for allowing long evening walks, for the days when there was art, and music, and movies, and laughter, and for not quitting when none of those things were present.

Months later, we prepared to move back to North Carolina, but our house wasn’t ready. Sweet friends created a haven as my husband and I drove through Washington, DC, on my birthday and during the first insurrection of our lifetime. For nearly two months, we were houseless but not homeless, because Anne and David made their home available to us. They created a space for being with

home-cooked meals and table fellowship, nature walks and geese, games, snowball fights, and opportunities to sit still by the water. It was the best place to write and edit this book, and that's mostly what I did. Thank you.

I thank God for Andrea Doering, editorial director of Revell Books, who seriously considered my vision for this project, took time to read and reflect on Psalm 37, and believed in and got behind this project from the very beginning. Throughout the process, our editor, Kelsey Bowen, was a fierce advocate and champion. I am also grateful for the editing team, proofreaders, and fact-checkers who did amazing work to ensure that we spoke the truth with integrity. Thank you, Kristin Kornoelje and Linda Washington! The entire Revell team has been a delight to work with. Thank you for centering Women of Color throughout this process, inviting and supporting Helena Brantley to join us on the journey.

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Finally, a special thanks to the contributors: You believed and trusted God and me to deliver this classic work. You were vulnerable and gracious to share your stories. You joined me in prayer and committed to shifting the way the industry and society present our stories. You wrote, edited, and worked without complaint. There would be no book without you all. Together, we have built a community, and I pray that it is a source of support and inspiration for you going forward.

My God, I thank you for these authors, editors, advocates, organizers, organizational leaders, community builders, and pastors. I thank you for these daughters, sisters, mothers, wives, grandmothers, and friends.

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I thank you for the brilliance of our poets and liturgists, and I thank you for THEEE PATREECE LEWIS, who took my heart, passion, and vision and created art before reading a single word. Sis, I believe in you and have no regrets about my decision. Your professionalism and desire to get every piece right matched my desire to honor the individuals, people groups, cultures, and legacies shared throughout the book. Without my asking, you went back to the blank page again and again because you love and care about us and our stories. May God bless you every time that you lay your pen to paper or brush to canvas.

My God, you have done it again. To you alone be praise.

INTRODUCTION

Answering the Call to Lead in the Dark

The world was on fire again, not only because a global pandemic was taking thousands of lives each day but also because there was another incident of racialized violence on a Black body in the United States of America. This time it was the knee of a police officer on George Floyd's neck for nine minutes and twenty-nine seconds. Mr. Floyd called out to his deceased Black mother before his body lay dead in the street.

There was a video that I did not initially watch, because even without it, this incident reinforced generational racialized trauma. I know the wilderness of this fight for racial justice all too well. But this time was different. This time a Black man was dead, and all over the world, cries and protests rang out in the streets.

Women of Color know about crying over our dead and making public protests. We do not turn away when our loved ones die prematurely or are murdered and crucified unjustly by the state. We are Rizpah (2 Sam. 21:1–14), who stood watch when several of her family members were murdered by the king, and Naomi, who lost her husband and her two sons (Ruth 1:3–5). We are Jochebed, Miriam, Shiprah, and Puah, who cried out and worked tirelessly to preserve

the lives of their brown baby boys, who were violently under attack by the empire (Exod. 1–2:11). We are Mary looking up at the cross, and Martha, who was the first sister to cry out to Jesus, “If you had been here, my brother would not have died” (John 11:21). Whether we are heard or not, Women of Color have learned how to cry out to God in our darkest moments.

The year 2020 brought COVID-19, and I was in yet another wilderness. I thought, *God is trying to get our attention*. I was reading through the book of Jeremiah and the book of Psalms. The focus of Jeremiah is to present God’s judgment to God’s people because of their covenant infidelity and worldwide sin. It is a historical reflection of Israel’s experience. It expresses God’s faithfulness and their shared hope for the future. In the good biblical practice of corporate confession and Lamentations, I read and repented my way through the book of Jeremiah. When I came across Jeremiah chapter 9, the truth of the words from the “weeping prophet” and a call to leadership kept tugging at my heart.

Where Are the Women Leaders?

In verses 17–18, Jeremiah shares the Lord’s command:

Consider now! Call for the wailing women to come;
send for the most skillful of them.
Let them come quickly
and wail over us
till our eyes overflow with tears
and water streams from our eyelids.

These wailing women were most likely professional mourners. Notice, however, that God and Jeremiah are not calling the women emotional or insignificant. The women are not silent. They are not nice to have around. No, they call the women “skilled” because the

women had learned and practiced the spiritual discipline of mourning. They are called upon to lead the community in wailing because they had been there before! They know exactly what to do when death and destruction are all around.

I believe that God's women must rise quickly now to lead us and show us all how to respond to this present darkness.

Jeremiah continues speaking directly to the women in verses 20–21:

Now, you women, hear the word of the LORD;
open your ears to the words of his mouth.
Teach your daughters how to wail;
teach one another a lament.
Death has climbed in through our windows
and has entered our fortresses;
it has removed the children from the streets
and the young men from the public squares.

The first call to the women is to listen to God. Then they are called to teach their daughters *and* their generation while they are *in* their suffering so they don't forget God's faithfulness. The women must teach their community about how God showed up to meet them *in* the dark.

I know what it feels like when the thief of death uninvitedly climbs in through my window. I am a Black woman who is the daughter of a Black man, the wife of a Black man, the sister to my mother's Black son. From poor education to mass incarceration, Black women know what it is like for our men to be taken out of the public square. When a Black man is shot in the streets, I don't care who pulled the trigger—that is cause for our wailing.

As a collective, Women of Color know that we are vulnerable, and the people whom we love are vulnerable too. We know that there is no fortress, no police, no policy, no president, no government that fights for us. God is our Strong Tower!

Women of Color know about our children being taken out on the streets. So, whether we wanted to or not, we have taught our daughters how to wail. Picture now: the unarmed thirty-two-year-old Black man Philando Castile, sitting in the driver's seat of his car after being pulled over by the police for a busted taillight. Next to him in the passenger's seat is his Black girlfriend, Diamond Reynolds, recording the aftermath of the incident on her phone via Facebook livestream because they are Black, and she knows that there is no fortress for *any* of them. The phone is her effort to show the lack of security and safety that she feels. In the back seat is their four-year-old daughter, who watched calmly as the cops shot her father multiple times at point-blank range in cold blood. After the murder, it is the Black girl—a little child—who comforts her mother, "It's okay, I'm right here with you."¹ While in the police car, she continues her plea, "Mom, please stop saying cusses and screaming because I don't want you to get shot." And then this baby says to her Black mother, "I can keep you safe." Through her tears she cries out, "I wish this town was safer. I don't want it to be like this anymore."²

Whenever our men are taken out of the public square, Women of Color are the ones left behind to uphold our reputations and guard our legacies, to speak against the slander, to care for our children and grieving mothers, to figure out how bills will get paid and how we are all going to eat. We are the ones who lead our families and communities, showing them how to pick up the bloody pieces because we have been through this suffering before.

Sisters, we must encourage ourselves and each other now to unlearn the ways of the white colonizer. Our wounds are serious. May we never call for peace, when there is none (Jer. 6:14)! May we learn how to lead ourselves better and set an example for our daughters and communities about the redemptive ways of self-love, self-care,

rest, and rejoicing *in* the mourning as we unapologetically pursue healing for ourselves and our communities.

As many people are being awakened to the systemic injustice of racism for the first time, the church can lead them toward righteous acts and a biblical understanding of justice that would first require humility and a willingness to sit at the feet of and learn from the women who know the ways of journeying through the dark. We have the pulse of our children and our collective communities. We have learned how to persevere through our righteous anger and lots of tears, while being ignored, abused, and silenced. We know that our children are angry and the temptation to hate is boiling over the rim so that all they want to do is yell, protest, or do anything but remain silent.

At one point during this global pandemic, I heard Pastor Charlie Dates share his concern that “we have raised up a generation that knows how to protest but doesn’t know how to pray.”³ That doesn’t reflect the Women of Color authors who are featured in this book. We are people of strong faith. We are also a praying and lamenting community of leaders. In the face of darkness, we stand with assurance, saying, “Because the Sovereign LORD helps [us], [we] will not be disgraced. Therefore [we] have set [our faces] like flint, and [we] know [that we] will not be put to shame” (Isa. 50:7). As leaders, we cry out to the only one that we know can help us. I am hopeful that the collective church in the United States will rise from the ashes and become the leaders that our country and our world desperately need at such a dark and difficult moment in history. And we need the leadership of Women of Color to do so.

The Call, the Culture, and the Church

I grieve this toxic environment of performance allyship and a weightless solidarity that social media has allowed our culture to create.

The urgent, knee-jerk response is always in the moment to appear relevant, “woke,” or socially conscious. Real leadership and social change take long-term commitments, strategy, and planning, and the investments of resources and time. I’m looking for all people of goodwill to make a long-term commitment to justice, love, and truth-telling.

I’m looking for white people to shed their tears at home, then publicly confront the systems of oppression with their own families and personal and professional networks, and then put their money where their mouth is concerning this justice work. I’m looking for them to take ownership of and responsibility for the social, political (because it is always political), and historical problems that their people have created so that Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) can have time and space to grieve when our lives, livelihoods, families, churches, and communities are in danger. This book is a response to “why” we *all* need to make this commitment to leadership.

In my prayers to the Lord during this season, it dawned on me that the church in the United States appears irrelevant to some and is not leading in this moment because she generally doesn’t know what to do. By and large, Christian denominational, parachurch, seminary, missionary, and nonprofit leadership in the American church—like every other system and sphere of cultural influence in America—is dominated by men, most of them white. And just like in Jesus’s day, although women have been faithful companions on this journey—supporting the work of ministry with our lives, resources, wisdom, and hospitality—generally we are not sitting at the tables and we are not the last ones in the rooms when critical decisions are being made that impact our lives, churches, communities, and families. Yet, we are often the ones who stand watch in the darkness, and who rise early to care for the living and the dead. Generally, we

do not abandon our Savior when we do not understand or when things do not go our way. We are the faithful servants. Let us not forget that it was the women who did not scatter but followed Jesus into the darkness of the cross and the cave until the very end (Mark 15:40–41; Luke 23:55, 24:1–11, 24:22–24; John 19:25–27, 20:10–18). Indeed, Mary of Bethany was the only disciple to welcome the darkness of the cross. Being faithful to the suffering in the dark is what forever attached her name to the gospel of Jesus Christ!⁴

Therefore, let us learn from the leadership of Women of Color as we answer God's call to follow him and listen to his instructions. Women of Color can lead the dirges and the ditties, the songs of justice and lament. We can lead our communities in cultivating the spiritual disciplines, as they protest and fight for justice. We can educate and teach our children and the coming generations. We can tell them about the goodness of the Lord *in* the dark. Our God has not forsaken us; he is our Strong Tower indeed!

About This Book

This book is a collaboration from Women of Color who have answered the call to leadership. Through our reflections on Psalm 37, we speak of Yahweh's faithfulness to respond to the righteous and the wicked. We are not simply sharing how God has met us individually in the darkness; we are also revealing God's faithfulness to our communities across time and throughout generations.

Psalm 37 is an acrostic poem—following the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet—that traces the themes of justice and lament. It is organized into seven strophes. “A strophe is to poetry what a paragraph is to prose. . . . [It is] a group of related lines . . . that focus on a common theme; or one idea that holds the verses in the strophe together.”⁵ In this book, each strophe is introduced with a poem or

liturgy written by a Woman of Color that captures the theme of the strophe. The essays and prayers are presented as outlined by the Hebrew alphabet. Modeling the Psalms and the Wisdom books, these essays invite us to hear the cries of the oppressed, and grow in our empathy and human understanding, while drawing us all into deeper intimacy with God.

In the historical profiles at the end of each essay, contributors share the faithfulness of image bearers—some are Christian and some are not—who have embodied the verses' theme and have modeled this way of leadership. I invite you to sit at the feet and learn from the testimonies of these Women of Color, the elders and ancestors who have gone before us. My prayer is that these stories of brokenness shared in truth about our horrors, laments, and resilience will offer you the light of hope and love in the darkest of times. I also pray that you, too, will stand for justice and will teach your communities, your children, and the coming generations to answer this call to leadership.

PSALM 37

A Psalm of David

Do not fret because of those who are evil
or be envious of those who do wrong;
for like the grass they will soon wither,
like green plants they will soon die away.
Trust in the LORD and do good;
dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture.
Take delight in the LORD,
and he will give you the desires of your heart.
Commit your way to the LORD;
trust in him and he will do this:
He will make your righteous reward shine like the dawn,
your vindication like the noonday sun.
Be still before the LORD
and wait patiently for him;
do not fret when people succeed in their ways,
when they carry out their wicked schemes.
Refrain from anger and turn from wrath;
do not fret—it leads only to evil.
For those who are evil will be destroyed,
but those who hope in the LORD will inherit the land.
A little while, and the wicked will be no more;
though you look for them, they will not be found.
But the meek will inherit the land
and enjoy peace and prosperity.
The wicked plot against the righteous
and gnash their teeth at them;

but the Lord laughs at the wicked,
for he knows their day is coming.
The wicked draw the sword
and bend the bow
to bring down the poor and needy,
to slay those whose ways are upright.
But their swords will pierce their own hearts,
and their bows will be broken.
Better the little that the righteous have
than the wealth of many wicked;
for the power of the wicked will be broken,
but the LORD upholds the righteous.
The blameless spend their days under the LORD's care,
and their inheritance will endure forever.
In times of disaster they will not wither;
in days of famine they will enjoy plenty.
But the wicked will perish:
Though the LORD's enemies are like the flowers of the field,
they will be consumed, they will go up in smoke.
The wicked borrow and do not repay,
but the righteous give generously;
those the LORD blesses will inherit the land,
but those he curses will be destroyed.
The LORD makes firm the steps
of the one who delights in him;
though he may stumble, he will not fall,
for the LORD upholds him with his hand.
I was young and now I am old,
yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken
or their children begging bread.
They are always generous and lend freely;
their children will be a blessing.
Turn from evil and do good;
then you will dwell in the land forever.

For the LORD loves the just
and will not forsake his faithful ones.
Wrongdoers will be completely destroyed;
the offspring of the wicked will perish.
The righteous will inherit the land
and dwell in it forever.
The mouths of the righteous utter wisdom,
and their tongues speak what is just.
The law of their God is in their hearts;
their feet do not slip.
The wicked lie in wait for the righteous,
intent on putting them to death;
but the LORD will not leave them in the power of the wicked
or let them be condemned when brought to trial.
Hope in the LORD
and keep his way.
He will exalt you to inherit the land;
when the wicked are destroyed, you will see it.
I have seen a wicked and ruthless man
flourishing like a luxuriant native tree,
but he soon passed away and was no more;
though I looked for him, he could not be found.
Consider the blameless, observe the upright;
a future awaits those who seek peace.
But all sinners will be destroyed;
there will be no future for the wicked.
The salvation of the righteous comes from the LORD;
he is their stronghold in time of trouble.
The LORD helps them and delivers them;
he delivers them from the wicked and saves them,
because they take refuge in him.

PSALM 37

לְדוֹד |

אַל-תִּתְחַר בַּמֵּרְעִים אֶל-תִּקְנָא בַעֲשֵׂי עוֹלָה:
כִּי כַחֲצִיר מִהֶרָה יִמָּלֵךְ וְכִי־רֶק דָּשָׁא יִבּוֹלֵן:

בִּטָּח בַּיהוָה וַעֲשֵׂה-טוֹב שְׁכֵן-אֶרֶץ וְרַעַה אֲמוֹנָה:
וְהִתְעַנֵּג עַל-יְהוָה וַיִּתֵּן-לָךְ מִשְׁאֵלֶת לִבְךָ:

גִּזְלֹעַל-יְהוָה דִּרְכָּךְ וּבִטָּח עָלָיו וְהוּא יַעֲשֶׂה:
וְהוֹצִיא כְּאוֹר צִדְקָךְ וּמִשְׁפָּטְךָ כַּצְהָרִים:

דָּוִם | לִיהוָה וְהִתְחַלֵּל לוֹ

אַל-תִּתְחַר בַּמַּצְלִיחַ דִּרְכּוֹ בְּאִישׁ עֹשֶׂה מַזְמוֹת:

הִרְרָ מֵאֵף וַעֲזֹב חֲמָה אֶל-תִּתְחַר אֶד-לְהִרַע:
כִּי־מֵרְעִים יִכְרֹתוּן וְקִנְיֵי יְהוָה הֵמָּה יִירְשׁוּ-אֶרֶץ:

וְעוֹד מַעַט וְאִין רָשָׁע וְהִתְבּוֹנְנַת עַל-מְקוֹמוֹ וְאִינְנוּ:
וְעֲנִיִּים יִירְשׁוּ-אֶרֶץ וְהִתְעַנְּנוּ עַל-רֵב שְׁלוֹם:

אִמָּם רָשָׁע לְצַדִּיק וְחָרַק עָלָיו שִׁנּוּ:

אֲדֹנִי יִשְׁחַק-לוֹ כִּי־דָאָה כִּי־יָבֵא יוֹמוֹ:

תִּקְרַב | פִּתְחוּ רַשְׁעִים וְדַרְכוֹ מִשְׁתֶּם לְהַפִּיל עָנִי וְאֲבִיזֹן לְטָבוּחַ יִשְׁרֵי־דָרָךְ:
חֲרָפִם תָּבֹא בָלֶפֶם וְקִשְׁתוֹתֶם תִּשְׁבְּרֶנָּה:

טוב־מעט לצדיק מהמון רשעים רבים:
כי זרועות רשעים תשברנה וסומך צדיקים יהוה:

ידע יהוה ימי תמימם ונחלתם לעולם תהיה:
לא יבשו בעת רעה ובימי רעבון ישבעו:

כי רשעים יאבדו ואיבי יהוה
כיקר פרים פלו בעשן פלו:

לֹה רשע ולא ישלם לצדיק חונן ונותן:
כי מברכיו יירשו ארץ ומקלליו יכרתו:

מֵיהוה מצעדי־גבר כוננו ודרכו יחפץ:
כי־פֶל לא־יוטל כי־יהוה סומך ידו:

גֵּער | הִיתִי גַם־זִקְנָתִי וְלֹא־רֵאִיתִי צִדִּיק נֶעֱזַב וְזָרְעוֹ מִבְּקֶשׁ־לֶחֶם:
פֶּלֶה־יוֹם חוֹנֵן וּמִלֹּה וְזָרְעוֹ לְבִרְכָּה:

סֹר מֶרַע וַעֲשֵׂה־טוֹב וּשְׁכֵן לְעוֹלָם:
כִּי יִהְיֶה | אֱהָב מִשְׁפָּט וְלֹא־יֵעֲזֹב אֶת־חֲסִידוֹ

לְעוֹלָם נִשְׁמְרוּ זֶרַע רִשְׁעִים נִכְרַת:
צִדִּיקִים יִירְשׁוּ־אֶרֶץ וַיִּשְׁכְּנוּ לְעַד עָלֶיהָ:

פִּי־צִדִּיק יִהְיֶה חֲכָמָה וְלִשׁוֹנוֹ תִּדְבֵּר מִשְׁפָּט:
תּוֹרַת אֱלֹהִיו בִּלְבּוֹ לֹא תִמְעַד אֲשֶׁרִיו:

צוּפָה רִשָּׁע לְצִדִּיק וּמִבְּקֶשׁ לִהְיוֹתוֹ:
יִהְיֶה לֹא־יֵעֲזֹבֵנוּ בִּידּוֹ וְלֹא יִרְשִׁיעֵנוּ בַּהֲשָׁפְטוֹ:

קִנְיָה אֶל־יְהוָה | וּשְׁמֹר דְּרָכּוֹ
וִירוֹמֶמְךָ לְרֶשֶׁת אֶרֶץ בְּהַכְרַת רִשְׁעִים תִּרְאֶה:

רְאִיתִי רָשָׁע עָרִיץ וּמִתְעַרָּה כְּאֶזְרַח רַעְנָן:
וַיַּעֲבֹר וְהִנֵּה אֵינָנוּ וְאֶבְקָשׁוּהוּ וְלֹא נִמְצָא:
שִׁמְרֶתֶם וּרְאֵה יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי־אַחֲרִית לְאִישׁ שָׁלוֹם:
וּפְשָׁעִים נִשְׁמְדוּ יַחְדּוֹ אַחֲרִית רָשָׁעִים נִכְרְתָה:
וּתְשׁוּעַת צְדִיקִים מִיְּהוָה מְעוֹז בְּעַת צָרָה:
וַיַּעֲזְרֵם יְהוָה וַיַּפְּלֵטֵם וַיַּפְּלֵטֵם מִרְשָׁעִים וַיּוֹשִׁיעֵם כִּי־חָסוּ בּוֹ:

STROPHE 1

PSALM 37:1–6

ONE

My Utmost Delight

A Poem by Ifueko Fex Ogbomo, Nigerian Poet

Sunrise to sunset, I pursue
Things
Necessities, naturally
For what's a belly without food?
A body without clothing?
I say, a life with no means
Is like beauty with no beholders.
And there's no making a difference
Without first making a living.
But why settle for bare necessities
If one can afford a few luxuries?
Should I strive to amass blame not greed?
But my close acquaintance with dire need
To escape the clutches of indigence
I latched on for dear life to diligence
A day without doing—
Perish the thought!
I discipline myself for I'm certain
If I run hard enough, I'll catch it:
The big break
The proverbial pot of gold
After which even with my feet up
Nothing is ever again out of arm's reach.
I seek prosperity
So I rise, morning after morning

Like a racing rodent with a cheesy crumb in sight
Chasing, *my greatest pursuit*.

Day and night, I ponder
Thoughts.

Woven from a variety of words
Reprimands parents whispered in my girlish ears
Resounding louder and louder over the years
Comments uttered by supposedly jesting peers
Cutting like double blades of sharpened shears
Sentences stated by revered voices
Sealing my fate as forever inferior
Slurs the sun-shy spit out in a moment
Staining my sun-kissed kind for all time
How is it these are the words that fill me
When they are not the words that formed me?
They're so certain, so conclusive
I forget from where they come:
Mouths that bless one minute and curse the next
That speak not what they mean or mean what they speak.
I forget these are not the words that will remain
When the heavens and the earth pass away,
Only those spoken by mouths that predate time
Printed on white pages in black or red text
Timeless truths that echo in the silence of still souls
But get lost in the traffic of troubled thoughts.
I seek identity
Yet I dwell, again and again
Upon fading words and fleeting thoughts
Denying, *my truest reality*.

Dawn 'til dusk, I desire
Fairness.
Is it really too much to ask
That karma always acts publicly
And reaping follow sowing instantly?
Shouldn't grace weigh more than gold
And doing right more than doing well?
Children shouldn't pay for their parents' choices
Status shouldn't dictate the validity of voices
Why can't judgment be based on the hue of hearts
Instead of the shade of skin or the texture of tresses?
If rewards equally matched the colors of deeds
Surely wrongdoers would never outlive weeds!
Would that no matter how badly things begin
Working out for my good is how it all ends
Alas bribe takers grow wealthy
Tale bearers grow famous
Profanity is lauded
Chastity is mocked
Injustice prances arrogantly
Unrighteousness dances brazenly
And the ears that decide never hear my own side
For their eyes have already condemned my dark hide.
I seek vindication
While I swing, back and forth
Like a pitiful pendulum, between anger and envy
Craving, *my deepest desire.*

Asleep and awake, I dream
Freedom.
What's it like to be utterly free?
A life without limitations

A mind without worries
Someone else bearing all my burdens
So I could happily live carefree
That someone would have to be special
Powerful. Truthful. Faithful.
Even if I found a friend so incredible
Ultimately, none is infallible.
Am I so blinded by mortality
I can no longer see the immortal?
God can neither lie nor fail
Why then is it so hard to trust Him?
Do I crave activity when He chooses stillness?
Seek His speaking but spurn His silence?
Perhaps I trust His power but doubt His timing
Didn't He leave His chosen people enslaved 400 years
And let His beloved son endure a bloody death?
Will He come to my rescue before it's too late
Or let me remain the ugly girl at the beautiful gate?
Alas divinity can't be weighed on humanity's scales
Hence my underestimation of His perfect love
Unrelenting. Unconditional. Utterly undeserved.
A love anyone would term "too good to be true."
Am I childlike enough to believe the incredible?
Certainly freedom cannot be found without trust.
Strong. Steadfast. Stoic.
The kind that allows a willing fall
Without net or parachute
Falling into Love
I seek liberation
But I struggle, day after day
Beneath back-breaking burdens of fears and cares
Dreaming, *my wildest fantasy.*

Moment to moment, I exist
Chasing. Denying. Craving. Dreaming.
Days grow into months
Years stretch into decades
And one question plagues me:
How am I no closer to reaching it?
My mirror tells me I grow wrinkly
My soul tells me I grow weary
Looking back it seems a wanton waste
To have pursued that which is freely given
To the birds and lilies for simply being
After what feels like a lifetime of failing
I have ended up where I should've begun:
Seeking Your face
Listening for Your voice
Meditating on Your word
Basking in Your presence
Here, in Your arms, love is unveiled
The resplendence of my righteousness, revealed:
Sure as a new dawn
Strong as the noon sun.
Here, with eyes closed, I finally see
A truth You lovingly concealed for me:
To fulfill my deepest desire I forsake my greatest pursuit
Delighting in You above all else
Liberated by Your love that embraces me just for being.
My wildest fantasy is now my truest reality
I seek no thing.
So I live
Sunrise to sunset
Day and night
Dawn 'til dusk
Asleep and awake

Soaring on wings of gratitude and ecstasy
Loving, *my utmost delight*.

Ifueko Fex Ogbomo, alias Lady InspiroLogos, is a self-employed Nigerian writer, poet, performing artist, author, and sickle cell activist. For her internationally acclaimed work in the performing arts, she was classified as an “Alien of Extraordinary Ability” and awarded United States permanent residency in 2017. She enjoys sharing the gospel through storytelling.