

# Psalms and the Dynamics of the Missionary Journey

*Jim Van Meter*

All spiritual journeys with God are unique. They are unique because God's purposes for the individual are unique. The missionary's journey is also unique. However, there are also some common themes in our journey with God. The psalms are perhaps the best place in Scripture to see a model for the spiritual journey for the people of God. Calvin said that the psalms are "an anatomy of the soul", where the whole faith of the whole person is articulated.

In this article, I will first look at the spiritual journey in general through the grid of the psalms. Dr. Walter Brueggemann, in his book, *The Message of the Psalms*, has done a wonderful work illustrating the dynamics of the journey of the soul around three ongoing themes. I will use these themes as a foundation for understanding and applying the dynamics of the spiritual journey to the missionary's journey.

## The Psalms Model

The Book of Psalms has historically been used as the prayer book of the church. The psalms are largely prayers which give us insight into the "anatomy" of the soul and heart of the psalmists as they engage in prayer with God the Father. Brueggemann has organized the psalms around three general themes that run throughout the book. Sometimes a particular psalm will focus on one theme, and other times we can see all these themes in one particular psalm. These themes are the reality of human life and experience, and for that reason can serve as a model for the journey in our faith-walk with our Lord.

1. **Psalms of orientation.** The reality of human life consists of seasons of well-being. The psalms that express

orientation would focus on the truth about Who God is, the truth that God created the world, and His intention for the way life should be lived in this world (shalom). In this season of well-being, we are grateful for His continued blessings to us. There is congruency between the promises of God, the trustworthiness of His Word, and the reality of life. Consequently, these psalms of orientation articulate the joy and delight for the goodness and reliability of God, His creation, and for the coherence of God's governing law in this season of well-being. Some examples of psalms which focus on orientation would be Psalms 1, 8, 11, 16, 19, and 119.

2. **Psalms of disorientation.** However, human life also consists of seasons in which we experience and lament over hurt, alienation, suffering, darkness and death. Feelings of anger, self-pity, resentment, fear and hatred are evoked during these periods. These seasons can be the result of sin (e.g., Psalm 51), but most often they are the result of living in a fallen world, where our sense of Shalom is lost. (e.g., Isaiah 50:10; 2 Cor. 1:8). Disorientation is the major theme of these psalms because one feels an incongruence between the present experience and the truth about God and His promises. Anger can be involved because of the expectation that "orientation" and a sense of well-being would last forever, and because we are shocked by trouble and hard times, thinking our journey with God would include immunity from trouble. Some examples of psalms of disorientation are Psalms 13, 17, 36, 51, 73, 74, and 86.

3. **Psalms of new orientation.** Life also consists of times when we experience surprises and new gifts from God, when joy and light break through the despair and darkness. The “light at the end of the tunnel” has come. The Lord has come to our aid, and we rejoice over the way He has delivered us from the “pit of despair” and the troubles of “disorientation”. These psalms and our experience affirm that God is sovereign and in control, and that He has intervened with something fresh and new. He has answered our cry for help and as a result, we rejoice and tell of His goodness and this “new orientation”. Some examples are Psalms 18, 30, 40, 65, 66, and 96.

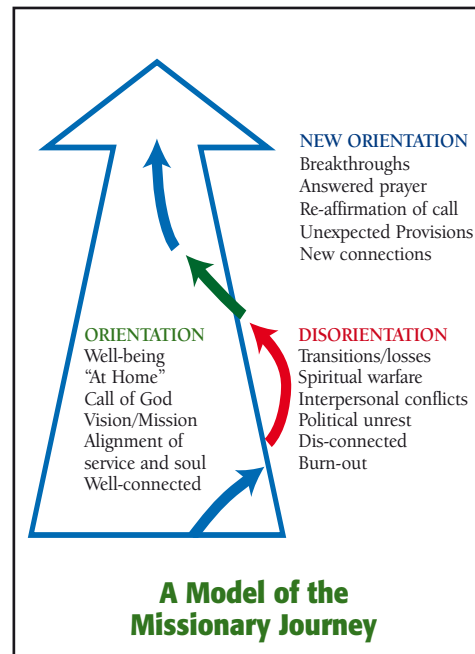
There are 2 *decisive movements* of faith in this model. Human life is not simply a place in which we find ourselves. “It is also a movement from one circumstance to another, changing and being changed, finding ourselves surprised by a new circumstance we did not expect, resistant to a new place, clinging desperately to the old circumstance. . . . The life of faith expressed in the psalms is focused on these two decisive moves of faith that are always underway, by which we are regularly surprised, and which we regularly resist” (Brueggeman, pp. 19-20).

“*One move* we make is out of a settled orientation into a season of disorientation. . . . It constitutes the dismantling of the old, known world, and a relinquishment of safe, reliable, confidence in God’s good creation. The movement of dismantling includes a rash of negativities, including rage, resentment, guilt, shame, isolation, despair, hatred and hostility” (p.20). It is the lament of being in a new situation of chaos, now devoid of the coherence that marks God’s creation. It feels like the end of the world.

The second move we make is the move from a context of disorientation to a new orientation, “surprised by a new gift from God, a new coherence made present to us just when we thought all was lost” (p. 20). It is a move inexplicable to us, to be credited only to the intervention of God, where we respond with amazement, wonder, awe, gratitude and thanksgiving.

### The dynamics of the missionary journey in light of the Psalms model.

The missionary journey also follows the model of the psalms. For the missionary, there are seasons of “orientation” and

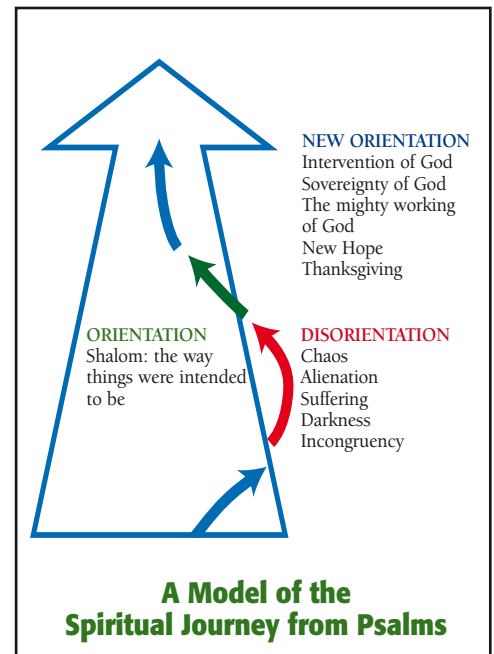


well-being, where the truth of shalom (the way things were intended to be) is for the most part reality. There is peace internally and externally. The vision of our mission is clear, challenging and very fulfilling. Family and friends are in good relationship. The provision and blessings of God are plentiful.

There are also times of disorientation. The missionary predictably experiences much loss: loss of identity, lack of fruit and fulfillment, loss of friends and family, ambiguous ministry assignment, etc., especially during those early years. These often evoke a rash of negative feelings, as the missionary seeks to find “new orientation”. There are times of conflict with team members and local leaders, political unrest and sometimes persecution, sickness, financial challenges, misalignment between one’s giftedness and the ministry assignment, stress, and even sometimes burnout.

Then there are seasons of “new orientation” when the missionary experiences breakthroughs in ministry and experiences the mighty workings of God, when light breaks through the darkness and there is great joy and victory. Unexpected blessings, provisions and victories cause us to rejoice and give thanks to God for His intervention. These experiences give us new hope, strength and motivation, because God has intervened on our behalf, as He promised He would.

The movements from “orientation” to “disorientation”, and from “disorientation” to “new orientation”, are partly predictable and partly unpredictable; however, both



require faith. Part of the movement into disorientation is predictable, because it is inherent in the missionary call. When missionaries move out in obedience to the call upon their lives, they are knowingly and predictably moving into transition and ambiguity. They are leaving their home country and moving to places where they are strangers and aliens, where language and culture are usually foreign. This time of transition evokes feelings of confusion, because their props and orientation have been removed and replaced with new and untested support structures. Although the dynamics are predictable, faith is still required. Faith is needed as one trusts God for the strength to endure and for His intervention to bring us out of the darkness into the light. Many agencies give new missionaries “orientation” to help them re-orient, so that there will be care and support into this movement of disorientation and so that movement out of disorientation into new orientation will be fruitful.

The movement from disorientation into new orientation also requires faith. While one is waiting for God to intervene, faith is required, because the timing of the movement is uncertain. When will the unrest subside? When will the needed provision be supplied? When will the fruit of ministry be seen? When will our prayers and cries for help be answered? When will the conflict be resolved and harmony restored? Throughout, faith is called for, just like Abraham waiting for the birth of the promised son.

## Caring for the soul on the missionary journey.

In light of the Psalms Model and the two important movements of faith (the movement from orientation into disorientation, and the movement from disorientation into new orientation), some observations need to be made. First, the cycle is not once for all (see the model). The issues will be different and vary from person to person, but missionaries are going

to move through the cycle many times throughout life. Second, leaders need to be careful to not be judgmental when a missionary is experiencing “disorientation”. Rather, loving care and support is important during times of disorientation, because the missionary is more vulnerable then than during times of orientation and new orientation. Some of the issues faced in “disorientation”, if ignored, or addressed with little compassion and understanding, can lead to unnecessary attrition.

### Some Characteristics of the Missionary Journey

Orientation	Disorientation	New Orientation
Settledness in old home	Transition/Loss	Settledness in new home
Political stability/peace	Political Unrest/persecution	Political peace agreements
Interpersonal harmony	Interpersonal Conflict	Conflict resolution
Vision/Mission	Ambiguity	Vision Re-clarified
Health	Sickness	Healing
Alignment of soul/service	Misalignment of soul/service	Joy of alignment
Call of God	Serving out of nothingness	Re-affirmation of call
Healthy Family	Children Issues	Children Issues Resolved
Healthy marriage	Marriage strain	Second honeymoon
Provision	Financial challenges	Unexpected provision
Promises of God	Spiritual warfare	Victory/deliverance
Emotional Hardiness	Emotional Distress/Burnout	Restoration
Insider/citizen	Outsider/alien/foreigner	Acceptance by insiders
At home	Culture Shock	Adjustment

Fourth, the ongoing care of the soul is the most important thing that can be done. The organization needs to encourage its people to tenaciously care for their souls; and the individual needs to practice spiritual disciplines routinely to foster the care and vitality of one’s own soul. A well-cared-for soul is the best thing we can offer the kingdom of God, our mission agency, and those around us. <<

### Discussion Questions:

1. How do you care for your soul at the various places of your journey?
2. What does care of the soul look like at these two critical junctures/movements in your context?
3. As you think of pastoral care for the missionary, what are the implications of this model in light of the pastoral care that is provided for missionaries? What can be learned from the journey of your own soul in caring for and leading other missionaries?

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