

In his new album-book *Only the Lover Sings*, singer-songwriter Matthew Clark has assembled a unique and harmonious blend of voices, tough and tender, looking out over our perennial dilemma at a horizon of hope. Clark's craftsmanship, alongside his ability to draw out the passion of others, achieves for him a fresh vision where healing and joy can be known after loss and pain and failure. Take up and read. Open and listen... Come and see. You may find your own dark ladder downward leading you out onto a surprising open plain of possibility and light.

—Bruce Herman, painter

These essays and the songs they celebrate are altogether lovely, each one adding a new dimension of insight, purpose, comfort, and hope. The collection shines with variations on a theme, and the whole is so much greater than the sum of its parts. Matthew Clark joins the ranks of George Macdonald, G. K. Chesterton, C. S. Lewis, and others who connect head with heart, reason with imagination, and scripture with hard-won experience. The result is both a feast and a fellowship. I love it.

—Diana Pavlac Glyer, author of *Clay in the Potter's Hands*,
The Company They Keep, and *Bandersnatch: C. S. Lewis,*
J. R. R. Tolkien, and the Creative Collaboration of the Inklings.

If you've ever found yourself held back in life by your own doubt, fear, or shame, you know there are three kinds of friends—and three kinds of books—that can help you. One reaches in and pulls you out. The other just sits by your side and understands. 'Only the Lover Sings' is the rarest: it sits with you, and shares the kind of lived hope you can't shrug off.

—Brian Brown
Executive Director, The Anselm Society

Every once in a while, a sum is greater than its individual parts, and Matthew Clark has managed to bring about such a marvel while creating *Only the Lover Sings*. Matthew's work has long been tender, unique, vulnerable, and heartening. But in this latest project, he's collaborated with writers who thoughtfully interact with each main theme Matthew introduces. The resulting work is prismatic and harmonious, the fruit of faith in community. In these lonely, fragmented times, it's hopeful and healing to encounter their chorus of gentle and honest reflection. I think you're going to love Matthew's record. I think you're also going to love what a group of friends has grown from his roots.

—Rebecca Reynolds, author of *Courage, Dear Heart: Letters to a Weary World*

As a teenager and young adult, I filled many happy hours reading liner notes, copying lyrics into my journal, and exploring the credits of my favorite records. Streaming music online is robbing a generation of these delightful, tangible experiences. This is just one of the many reasons I have been so taken by Matthew Clark's *Only the Lover Sings*. In this album-book combo, Clark has coupled thoughtful meditations with songs that are a balm to my heart. This project is biblically rich, poetic, and honest. And, I am so glad I can find myself once again copying down lyrics into my journal!

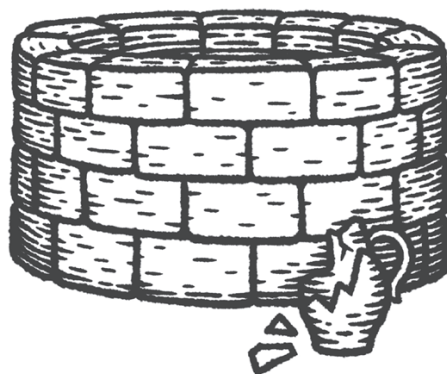
—Leslie Bustard, co-founder of Square Halo Books, writer, poet, and editor of *Wild Things and Castles in the Sky: A Guide to Choosing the Best Books for Children*

Once at a youth camp, I was taught that every person alive bears 'ultimate' questions about meaning and origin. But, I believe, deeper than even those must be this single aching question: 'Am I loved?' There are many reasons, in a world pocked by cruelty and tragedy, that the answer to that question can be profoundly difficult to find. In this beautiful book of song and Scripture, essay and story, Matthew Clark helps his readers to the healing, redemptive, life-forming answer to that burning question by showing us that with God, 'belovedness is our starting point'. This is a gentle, redemptive work, a generous opening of Matthew's heart and a joyous response by fellow writers to his words, leading the reader ever deeper into the knowledge of God's real love; personal, present, invading our darkness and healing our souls.

—Sarah Clarkson, author of *This Beautiful Truth:
How God's Goodness Breaks into Our Darkness*

ONLY_{THE} LOVER SINGS

Part One of *The Well Trilogy*



Meditations on the Woman at the Well
• in STORY and SONG •

MATTHEW CLARK

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The title is presented in a stylized graphic consisting of two overlapping banners. The top banner is rectangular with a decorative, hand-drawn border and contains the words "ONLY THE LOVER" in a serif font. The bottom banner is narrower, also with a decorative border, and contains the word "SINGS" in a larger, bold serif font. The banners are tied together at the ends with decorative knot-like elements.

ONLY THE LOVER SINGS

Part One of *The Well Trilogy*

by Matthew Clark

Andrew Roycroft

Lanier Ivester

Théa Rosenburg

Adam Whipple

Heidi White

Jessie Todd

Adam R. Nettesheim

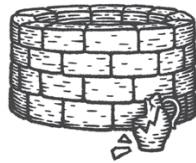
Amy Baik Lee

Junius Johnson

Rex Bradshaw

Edited by Elisabeth Adams

For those who thirst.



My heart says of you, “Seek his face!”
Your face, LORD, I will seek.

Ps 27:8

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Welcome

In your hands you hold the first in a trilogy of books. Or are these albums? What's going on here? Let me explain.

Back in August 2019, I dumped about fifty little recordings onto my phone. Some were partly finished songs, others were scraps of melodies, lyrical impressions, or things I'd hummed into my phone while half awake in the middle of the night. A few were second or third drafts of songs I liked, and a handful were over a decade old—songs I'd kept coming back to for some reason, rewritten over and over again, and wondered if I'd ever finish. The rest of that autumn, I drove around and listened to these recordings. I didn't have a project in mind. No big idea. But the more I listened, the more the songs seemed to group themselves like folks at a party finding their way to this or that conversation in a corner of the room.

Three distinct conversations surfaced. The first group of songs were talking about personal encounter, others about holding on in suffering, and still others were saying something about joy and coming home to the Lord. Life is noisy, and I felt like I was only catching snippets of these conversations, but from what I could hear, they were all connected. The songs may have gravitated to

their own nooks in the room, but they were in the same room; they were having particular conversations within an overarching conversation. I was surprised to discover three albums taking shape.

Now, sometimes an idea shows up, and it gets no traction; I forget about it. But by the following spring, I was even more excited. I couldn't stop thinking about it. The only problem was that the songs needed a whole lot of attention, and they were only half the songs I would need to fill out the trilogy. As I prayed, I realized I'd need to take a deep dive into songwriting to pull this off. Ideally, I'd need a two- or three-month dedicated songwriting retreat. I couldn't see how that was going to happen.

Then, in March 2020, the pandemic lockdowns hit. I knew I wouldn't be able to tour that coming fall, so now that whole season was wide open. I sent an email to some friends in Colorado asking for advice and any leads on a place to retreat during the autumn months to work on this project. A three-month writing retreat? I was shooting for the moon. And the moon is what I got. Well, more specifically, *the Moons*.

Steve and Terri Moon were friends I'd met through The Anselm Society and The Cultivating Project. To my astonishment, they offered their guest room. Obviously they didn't understand; I would need to live there for a few months. Well, they *did* understand; I could stay as long as I liked. Their welcome and care was a direct provision from the Lord.

That retreat was beautiful, not to mention fruitful. Steve and Terri's generosity freed me to write all day, every day for over two months. Sixteen of the trilogy's thirty-three initial songs got major make-overs, and seventeen brand new songs showed up. That's the power of arts patronage. And the Moons were not the only patrons. A few years before, I'd begun raising support through my Patron Partners program, and this work would not be possible without the prayers and gifts of those friends as well.

But what about this book/album/essay collection thingy? Right. That.

Well, one thing the Lord has been hammering into my mind in the last few years is that bodies with only one part are no bodies at all; you can't be a person without other people. If that's true, then how could I expect to make an album in keeping with the relational shape of reality all by myself? Here was a chance to explore collaboration more deeply. Besides that, I'd gotten tired of my own voice. I wanted to be surprised, and it's hard to surprise yourself.

What if I invited writers I admired to join the conversation? What if I asked them not to review the songs, or analyze the songs, or critique the songs, but to *respond* to them? To lovingly cooperate with them? What if we all entered into the story together and collaborated in making it available through the various voices of music, lyric, and essay? And what if each album had a book? What if each album *was* both an album *and* a book? A balbum? An albook?

It would be a bit of an experiment, to be sure.

Now you're caught up on the short history of what I'm calling *The Well Trilogy*. I'll release an album and book each year for the next three years, until the trilogy is complete. (Then I will take a long nap.) Here's a quick overview of the core idea of each album:

Only the Lover Sings: Album One gets its narrative shape from the Samaritan woman's meeting with Jesus by a well. What failures and griefs obstruct our view of that face that smiles upon us and calls us his Beloved? What changes when our thirst is slaked as we finally see him seeing us?

A Tale of Two Trees: Album Two is about the fight to hold onto the light of that face as darkness closes in on us. Wasn't meeting Jesus supposed to fix everything? How do we endure *this*?

Can our parched throats still sing the songs of home, as home begins to feel like an empty promise? What decisions will we make when it seems like the well has run dry?

Where the River Goes: Album Three looks towards that blessed vision when every veil that clouds our sight is removed. We will meet Jesus face to face, evil and death will be no more, he will wipe away every tear, and Ezekiel's prophecy will come true: the well becomes a river, and everything will live where the river goes.

The only thing missing at this point is you. You are invited into this conversation, too. Come sit beside Jacob's well. Let's go looking together for this God who first came looking for us. Scary as it may seem to meet his gaze, *only the one who dares to look him full-on in the face finds out the shocking good news.*

Introduction

A Long Season of Grief

Beginning about seven years ago, I entered into a long season of grief and healing after divorce. It was traumatic, to say the least, and would have been even more so, had it not been for a little ragtag church plant that met in a borrowed gymnasium, and a few friends who held onto me. But the divorce was more than just a surprising twist in my own story, it was the brutal shredding of the book I had been reading. Much of how I had come to understand my life, myself, and my God would have to be rewritten now, because I could not have imagined the terrifying thing my life had become. Moments of despair had made their appearances on the pages before, of course, but during this season I found that I had no language or categories for the species of death that seemed to soak through every page of my life like an exploded bottle of India ink. My own story had become unrecognizable to me. Who was I now? I must admit I often dreamt of simply burning the tattered remains of my book, because I couldn't envision anything good to come. I felt my face was pressed up against an immovable "wall of black."¹

¹ Matthew Clark, "You're Gonna Be Okay," Come Tell Your Story, Path in the Pines Music (ASCAP), 2014, Track 10.

One of the strange saving graces of the whole ordeal was its public nature. Because the thing was unhideable, I wasn't able to isolate myself in my grief as easily as I might have otherwise. Nor could I live in denial. Because people knew, there was no point in trying to convince anyone who checked on me that I was fine. I simply had to face the fact that there was no "going around" this thing; if I was to survive, I would have to go through it.

Before the divorce, I had been a worship leader for about ten years. Being in ministry, maybe I had begun to depend on a false sense of my own goodness. More likely I'd always been that way. The divorce was a failure that sprung the trap door of self esteem I'd been standing on. While talking with my (amazing) counselor Vicki about that sense of lost identity, I mentioned that I'd always wanted to be "good," to which she raised her eyebrows and uttered a long "ahhhh" before descending pen-in-hand upon her little notebook to record an apparently significant insight. We really do need a sense of goodness, if we're to feel that our presence in this world is justified, but most of the time we try to drum up what can only be received as a gift. It was painful to discover that much of my sense of goodness had been my own construction, but learning to receive my sense of belovedness as a gift from the Lord has turned out to be a relief.

So why do I bring all that up? I can assure you that it's not because I love to talk about it. But at this point I am just entering the strange territory of actually being thankful for the most painful thing that has ever happened to me. Don't worry, I'm not suggesting that God causes these kinds of things for our good. God didn't cause my marriage, the circumstances that led to its death, or the divorce. I wish I could blame him, but the only thing he's "guilty" of is beating me to rock bottom, where I was surprised to discover Jesus already bringing the light of his face to bear in the places where I had supposed even God wasn't allowed to go.

No, I bring it up because, like my friend Brian once pointed out, our griefs can become like knots along the previously smooth rope of our souls—knots that provide handholds for others sinking in the water as we let down the rope to them from our canoes.² I’ve found that to be true; my grief seemed to summon companions in suffering who tossed well-knotted ropes to me as I flailed in the ‘whelming flood. What friends, artists, or authors have done that for you? During those first two years, Henri Nouwen was one such author whose little book *The Inner Voice of Love*³ companioned me. He threw out his knotted rope and I clung to it. I have no idea who gave that little book to me or how many times I read it. I just *looped* it: whenever I finished, I turned to page one and started again.

In the same way, I hope that sharing my own experience can serve others. Granted, I won’t pretend to know how, but I’m thinking it’s worth the risk of tossing the rope out, if it helps someone discover they’re not as alone as they had thought. At the very least, it should help make some sense of this album (and the trilogy it begins) by giving you some context for the songs. This project is emerging after long incubation in that extended season of grief that (oddly enough to me) held at its heart a healing encounter with Jesus. And these songs are a kind of record (no pun intended) of my own journey of despair visited by the surprise of God’s unshakable lovingkindness. As an album, *Only the Lover Sings* bears witness to the reality of how desperately dried up the wells on which we’ve depended can get, and yet, how our most devastating thirst is evidence that our true destiny has always been to bathe forever in the Wellspring of Living Water. We are made for the love of God in Jesus.

“But,” you may be asking, “why is this album called ‘Only the Lover Sings’?” Well, (pun intended) I’m glad you asked.

² Clark, “Now There’s Laughter,” *Come Tell Your Story*, Track 9.

³ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Inner Voice of Love: A Journey through Anguish to Freedom* (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 2014).

The Woman at the Well

Maybe you've experienced this too? The same conversation randomly comes up with multiple unconnected people over a few weeks? You start to notice a pattern of uncanny coincidences, and the breadcrumbs seem to be leading you somewhere. Like a plot thickening.

The Lord knows how each of us learns best, and this is one of the ways he gets my attention: some story, phrase, word, or conversation seems to pop up all over the place during a season. It usually takes a while for me to get the idea, but eventually I start to look closer.

During the years since my divorce, there has been a specific story that just keeps coming up again and again. I didn't go looking for it; I began to feel like it had come looking for me. That story was Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well from John 4.

This is the scene that, over the last seven years, has become a kind of low-ground gathering place for the many rivulets of those uncanny coincidences I mentioned. The Lord kept dropping breadcrumbs, and the more I followed the pattern, the more I would wind up again and again in John 4, watching this woman meet this man. During this season, I found myself repeatedly invited to allow the encounter at Jacob's Well to give shape to my own life.

Henri Nouwen had a similar experience with the story of the prodigal son, and specifically Rembrandt's famous painting of the father tenderly receiving his lost child. Nouwen found that God's ministering presence pooled in the depiction of that story, cleansing and quenching him during a season of deadly thirst. Likewise, this particular encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman has since captivated my imagination, until seemingly impossible hope began to spring up within me, transforming those places of deep, withering despair.

You would be correct in thinking that after such a heartbreaking experience with marriage, marriage would be the last thing I'd want to think about. But, God, in his great wisdom and kindness, took my experience of broken human love and affirmed that very thirst as bearing witness to the supernatural love of Christ, because the story of this whole world is the story of a Groom proposing to a Bride. A Bride who for the most part has refused his proposal. But Jesus is a most devoted lover, to say the least, pursuing his Beloved all the way to hell and back. John 4 is a story about just how terrifying life can become when love goes wrong, and how surprisingly beautiful it can yet be when we come face to face with Jesus, the lover of our souls.

Needless to say, the Samaritan woman's story has made a lot of sense to me. These last several years, I have felt something like a shared understanding of bewilderment and loss, as she has walked with me through my own dark forest of grief. Take a few moments to imagine this woman with me:

She's *already* had five husbands; she's working on number six. Right down to the roots of our very essence we are relational creatures, so we understand ourselves by how we are received by others, who mirror us back to ourselves. The most basic example is a smile, signifying that someone is glad to be in our presence. But perhaps this woman is used to seeing herself dirty in the frowning muddy mirrors of the faces around her? Because we are made in the image of the Trinity, a communion of three persons, life loses all context and narrative when we are pulled like a single thread from the tapestry of loving community. That strand becomes *stranded*, and she is stranded from a healthy social fabric. Or, much like some animals do, humans call out to one another in a sort of echo-location that says, "Is anybody there? Am I really alone?" And we wait for a kind voice to return, "I am here with you." But she's called out to locate herself, and the voices that should echo back are either cold

in their silence or cruel. She's lonely and lost, which is another way of saying *thirsty*. Very thirsty. She's dried up five wells already.

Now, nobody starts out thinking, "How can I make my life as miserable as possible?" In the beginning, at least, she wasn't some wicked floozy traipsing around town luring hapless men to her bower. Most likely she began just as young, naive, and hopeful for a life of love and happiness as the rest of us. Because only men could initiate divorces at the time, this woman was likely cast off by a string of husbands. Who knows why? Maybe she had some kind of defect, possibly infertility. But life's tragedies snowballed, and things got worse and worse. By the time you get to spouse number six, who among us wouldn't have ditched the virtuous life and filled the emptiness with any number of cynicism's many protective devices? Anybody would have resorted to street-smarts, having learned the hard way that the vulnerability goodness requires is much too costly in a world so cruel.

But today, she goes to a well and finds another man. A man who gently calls out to her from his own place of weariness and vulnerability, locating her in conversation with himself. Jesus goes first, pioneering a conversation by sharing his own thirst for connection. God-in-the-flesh calls out as if to say, "Is anyone there? Am I really alone?" And the Samaritan woman is a little shocked to be invited into his presence. He goes on to touch all the ragged strands of her threadbare life; he is interweaving himself with her shame. She is a bruised reed he will not break—a lonely one he intends to set in a family. Finally, as the encounter gets more and more uncomfortable, she wriggles and squirms to keep from having to face this man. She picks up her jar to leave. But just then something amazing happens—she turns to face him. At the last second, she sees him seeing her, and she suddenly sees herself in a previously unimaginable way: she is his Beloved.

Now, imagine: every well holds a little round mirror deep

underground at its center. Can you see it in your mind's eye? She had gazed into six muddy mirrors only to find herself trapped in a deep, dark place, unable to face herself with any hope. But by the end of her conversation with Jesus, the very Well from which Jacob's promise was drawn, she sees herself reflected in his tender and compelling gaze. Astonishingly, he is glad to be in her presence; there is an unexpected light in his face, and it dawns on her that he is mirroring back to her a glimmer of growing hope.

What exactly did she see that day on the face of our tired, thirsty Lord? Because, God knows, all of us long all our lives to see it ourselves, searching for it in every face we meet. Notably, we're not given a description of what the woman at the well sees. We're only allowed to see what happens as a result of what she saw. So, what is the result of coming face to face with Jesus? She blooms like a virgin bud facing a gladdening light—a burgeoning flower lifting its face towards the summons of gentle dawn. She sees Jesus seeing her, and in his face, she sees herself truly as God's Bride, radiant. Once she has seen him seeing her, she will only ever see herself as situated beneath the banner of the Lord's loving gaze.

And this is too good not to mention: My friend Esther pointed out that in the Bible, typically, when you see a man and woman meet at a well, guess what happens next? Somebody's getting married. It's a pattern in Scripture. As this bizarre meeting of Jesus and the Samaritan woman was retold, every Jewish reader would've picked up on the familiar plotline. So think about it. This woman has been through *five* husbands, is working on number *six*, and then she runs into a man at a well. And he's number . . . what? *Seven*. Jesus is himself the Sabbath; he's her seventh and final, her Sabbath husband. This poor worn-out woman can finally rest.

But this story is about so much more than just one woman's healing encounter. The One through whom creation was brought into being is putting the whole disordered cosmos back in order

by replacing its discarded Sabbath Capstone. Buechner beautifully said that “the story of any one of us is in some measure the story of us all,”⁴ and this story is like that. As much as it is about this one particular woman, it is about all of us, who are so worn out trying to live without our Sabbath Lord. As St. Augustine said, “Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee.” For a man with Augustine’s past, I doubt those were just pretty words.

So, if the Sabbath himself has come to spread his banner of love over humanity, his Bride, then you and I are being asked, in the midst of our most dried-out, exhausted places, to look up and be surprised to find, not one more frowning mirror, but a face (oddly enough) delighting in us. Which leads me to this:

I want to see what she saw.

Beholding Jesus: A New Song

I’d like to tell you about a turning point towards the end of the first two years after my divorce. Those years were very dark, and nearly all my time was spent in constant anxiety, turmoil, and depression. One day, having worn myself out by spinning my wheels in the muddy rut of my fears and hopelessness, I looked up and across the room. In my mind’s eye, I saw Jesus sitting on the gray bricks of the hearth like the rim of a well, calmly saying, “I’m still here, and when you’re finished, I’ll still be here.”

My worst sins and rantings couldn’t shake him. Jesus is so quietly constant in his love, and you can’t intimidate him with your failure. I thought maybe he’d have changed his mind after all this mess, but his steady lovingkindness gave me the courage to keep going. Could there be new chapters in my book?

That Jesus had not budged was a surprising realization. He clearly cared deeply about me in the chaos I was experiencing, but

⁴ Frederick Buechner, *The Sacred Journey* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1982).

though my whole world had changed, nothing had changed in the least for him. He counted the cost of choosing to commit himself to humanity long ago. While I was flipping out, he was patient, waiting for me to realize he loved me exactly the same as he always had. I began to understand why the Lord is called a rock and a refuge.

Like the Samaritan woman in her moment of beholding, I discovered myself to be held in love by the Lord. That was a threshold moment, and though I still had a long road to travel, I was given the courage to begin taking a few feeble steps forward on my pilgrimage. Jesus' assurance meant that, whether I can perceive it or not, there *is* somewhere to go from here. The pages of my book may be blank, but their blankness is now no longer a symbol of despair's emptiness but of hope. Somehow though nothing changed in my circumstances, everything changed.

Everything changed for the woman at the well, too.

I love the subtle detail of her dropping her old water jar, which represents her old ways of trying to satisfy her thirst on her own. It never did her much good and she won't need it anymore now that she has a well of living water springing up inside of her. That withering way of life is over with. Then, she runs off with a new song of joy pouring from her lips. Those lips had been so parched; every song had dried up. But she goes to the town knocking on doors, singing, "Come meet this man!"

Our Own Worst Enemies

Scripture says "God is love" (1 John 4:8) but the broken heart of humanity flips the phrase, asserting instead that "love is god." There's a world of difference in that subtle reversal. "Love is god" makes our wandering, confused passions the means of navigating a bewildering world. *I am prone to wander, Lord, I feel it!* On the other hand, "God is love" means that love is an actual concrete

person with a face; this person, Jesus, is our fixed, steady, unfused point of reference. When Jesus says “Follow me,” it means we’re not doomed to be forever trapped in the closed system of our sin. There’s a Way out. The woman at the well had followed that subtle reversal of *love-as-god* to its throttling, thirsty end, like we all do. But *the heart is deceitful above all things*.⁵ Once her loves had left her at the bottom of a dried-up well, she met the Lord, and found a spring of Living Water, the Fount of Every Blessing.

So why do we cause ourselves so much trouble? Well, I learned how true it is that we tend to be our own worst enemies. The world avoids the face of Jesus because it prefers the darkness, because its deeds are evil.⁶ That’s how Jesus explained it to Nicodemus, who was drawn to the light of Jesus’ face in the dark of night—but not everyone is drawn. Many work to deface or disregard Jesus. Others, like the woman at the well, are afraid to look. Others don’t bother to look because they lack the imagination—they can’t imagine that God could ever possibly be happy to see them.

We’re all longing to have our very existence affirmed in love; our hearts are forever asking questions like “Is it good that I’m here at all? Would anyone miss me if I weren’t?” and the corollaries, “Am I only valuable insofar as I prove useful to others? Would anyone want me if I had nothing to offer them?” Those are sad thoughts, and common as clouds. But the good news really is good; the Lord has made the light of his face to shine upon us. And what is a “shining face”? It’s a *smiling* face that is bright with gladness, and Jesus is that face; he has come to make clear that our Creator’s loving affirmation of humanity at its outset in Eden still stands. Our Father loves dearly those whom he has made, considers the simple fact of their existence a gladdening thing, and longs to rescue them from every species of death that has put asunder what he has always dreamt of seeing joined in Christ.

⁵ Jer 17:9

⁶ John 3:19

The Samaritan woman's story is our story too. She is the whole human race. We've all been hurt by others and done our share of hurting them too, only to return with an empty water jug. But this woman urges us to keep turning our faces towards God, who has made "the light of the knowledge of God's glory"⁷ appear in this world in the face of Jesus. It is only in that face, in the fathomless wells of his loving eyes, that our thirst can truly be met. Only the light of his face can shed light on the truth about us: that we are his Beloved.

That all sounds great, doesn't it? But it has not been the easiest story to sit with. I'd have preferred John 9, where the man born blind is told that his suffering isn't his fault. That would've been nice. But in the story I was asked to dwell in, Jesus lovingly, if bluntly, asks the woman at the well to face her own failures. Before she'll be able to see his face clearly, she'll have to face her own sin. She wriggles, changes the subject, plays religious trivial pursuit, and so on. But the cat's out of the bag. When she finally risks turning to face him, it's with the knowledge that Jesus is under no illusions about her. And yet. Yet he looks at her like *that*. He looks at her in the nakedness of her shame over her very real sin, and she can't help but sing for joy. In fact, she writes this little fact into the lyrics of her song, "Come see the man!" What man? The one "*who told me everything I ever did*" (John 4:29).

The big surprise ending of this encounter is not Jesus pretending like she is a virgin bride. Jesus is too realistic for that. The surprise is that in full view of everything she ever did (and everything done to her) he freely gives her a look of such love that she feels like a virgin again. Because she *is*. Jesus' love is in no way blind; his is an all-seeing look. Being seen by him in this way opens her eyes to good possibilities for herself that she had long ceased imagining could ever be. The most beautiful chapters of her story are still to be written. God's dream for her can still come true.

⁷ 2 Cor 4:6

But getting to that point isn't so easy. The journey of facing the evil in the world, the evil done to us, and the evil that we have done, is necessary if we're to face Jesus as we truly are. Jesus is no trespasser; he will only heal what we allow him to touch. The more truthful we become in facing our sin, grief, and fear, the more of ourselves becomes touchable as we turn to face Jesus, whose face sheds a light that both reveals and heals. A liar can't be touched because what he presents isn't really him. *Until you tell the truth, you can't be touched.* We must be willing to show up to reality. I think this is part of what Jesus is getting at when he tells the Samaritan woman that the Father is not all that interested in whether he's worshipped on this or that mountain. Rather, the Father is seeking people willing to really show up in "spirit and truth." It's almost as if he's saying to her and to us, "I know the real you is in there somewhere hiding behind so many protective layers, but you can come out now. It's safe."

The nitty-gritty details of my own experience aren't really the point here, because this isn't really an album about my marriage or divorce, but rather about what it's like to be a human learning to turn and face Jesus in spite of all the baggage that gets in the way.

This assurance of his love is the only thing that can get us through the process of honesty. By sitting down at the well and striking up a conversation with the deeply broken, he makes clear that he's already made up his mind about us; he was seeking our faces long before we ever sought his. *Belovedness is actually our starting point;* from there we are given the courage to be vulnerable in a process of facing ourselves that would otherwise be too devastating to endure. For those of us who can't tell the difference anymore between who God says we are and the names our Enemy has called us, and those for whom losing what we've become, even if it is miserable, feels like it will kill us, Jesus interrupts to clarify. When making contact with the truth of our own guilt and woundedness feels like giving our

pain the final say, Jesus steps into the world to bring a better and more final word, ultimately at the cross.

At the cross, the dying face of Jesus leaves no room for doubt about whether or not we are loved. *I don't owe jack to confusion, now Love has come and made himself so clear.*

A Welling-up of Song

In the end, there's no way around learning to entrust ourselves to Jesus in the very place where it is the last thing we feel able to do. That's painful. Who wants to feel all that pain? I didn't. However, it was in that moment of facing Jesus by the hearth that a new song began to well up within me. It was just the tiniest bit of moisture seeping up through the bare ground, but over the following five years it would slowly gather to a tune enough to carry in a bucket.

St. Augustine says that only the lover sings; only the soul that bravely takes a drink from the Living Water has a chance of discovering a full-throated song that simply must overflow if her joy is to be complete. But here's the kicker: *only the one who dares to look the Lord full-on in the face finds out the shocking good news.* The Samaritan woman leads the way for us. Though it wasn't easy for her either, she risked it, and her life speaks like the old song: "How can I keep from singing?"⁸

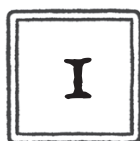
Scripture says, "For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light" (Ps 36:9). In the light of Jesus' face, she is lit like a candle, and she goes door to door singing, "The Lord *has* made the light of his face to shine upon us. Come and see!" For,

*"Streams of mercy never ceasing
Call for songs of loudest praise!"*⁹

Matthew Clark
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⁸ Anonymous author, "How Can I Keep from Singing?" Public Domain.

⁹ Robert Robinson, "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing." Public Domain.



Looking for You

“We all are born into the world looking for someone looking for us.”

Curt Thompson, *The Soul of Shame*

“But the LORD God called to the man, ‘Where are you?’”

Gen 3:9



I was probably four years old at the time. I had chased my brother Sam, who is seven years older, and one of his buddies out into the trees behind our house in Ackerman, Mississippi, where, if you walked far enough through the woods, you really did end up at our grandmother's house.

I was a typical tag-along nuisance, and the bigger, faster boys easily left me in the dust. After moping around a while, I started to make my way back towards the house. Then I tripped and fell, knocking or scraping something badly enough to make me cry.

It's funny what you remember. What I remember most strongly was feeling so pitiful and sad about being alone and left out, that I decided in my little boy mind to lie on the ground and cry until someone came to find me. Surely, I thought, I'd be missed and looked for. Someone would come scoop me up. Any minute now.

I lay on the ground at the roots of the trees, and waited. The afternoon drifted into evening as the chirrups and bird-chatter of day gave way to the croaks and creakings of night.

No one came looking.

I gave up eventually, and limped back (very dramatically, I'm sure) to the house, where no one seemed to have noticed I had been gone. Later, I came to relish the fact that our parents didn't hover, and having spent hours upon glorious hours alone in the woods is something I treasure from my childhood. But at that moment, I didn't want to be alone. I wanted to look up and find myself looked for.

This happened long before the legion voice of shame had a chance to take up residence in my life. As Andrew Roycroft's essay makes clear, shame has a way of convincing us that not only is no one missing us, but we were never worth missing in the first place. But those devils are all diabolical liars seeking to put asunder what God always intended to be wedded in perfect, fear-dissolving love.

What if, after believing those diabolical lies until they'd hardened like an asphalt crust over pastureland, a tiny green-leafed question worked its way up through some oily crack in the blackness? What if you found out that something impossibly good was true?



Looking for You

What if you found out someone had been looking,
Looking for you the whole time, the whole time?

Tell me, do you feel forgotten?
Tell me, do you feel like a throw-away
Left last in line and never picked to play?
You're wondering if your prayers have ever made it
Past the ceiling

Seems like I recall a story
Seems like I recall a son who left
Flat turned his back on everyone who cared
He never would have guessed that every day since then
The Lord was searching

I'm telling you there is a friend who
Loves you at your worst
And he is searching everywhere

Child, when your heart gets broken
Child, when your heart gets stolen by
Thieves in the valley, covered up in lies
God is out there digging where the rest gave up
On the treasure



A Stranger on the Road

Andrew Roycroft

Shame never supplied a roadmap, insisting you follow the course they set for you. (Shame is plural because, like Legion, its voices are many.) With terrifying skill, Shame carried you away, along the high-hedged lanes of skewed logic, out onto a footway where thought was no longer needed, only raw feeling, guilt, a hung head, and a heavy heart. Shame shared little about your destination, insisting it was more effective to keep you travelling than talk about arrival or belonging. Shame invited you to rest in roadside lodges where the table was only ever set for one, where the rooms were windowless, with single beds and a trickling excuse for running water. Each day, Shame gave you an early wakeup call, reminding you of why you belong on the road and not at home, instilling in you again the fact that you are broken.

Occasionally Shame would lose their focus and you could snatch a reprieve, branching off the footway and down some back road, where birds dared to sing the day, and where the sunlight offered a brief embrace. You met with others who had found this way. Together you drifted along pine-needled paths, into the hush of heavy canopied woodland, finally finding a clearing where you

sat together, just half a dozen, and soaked up your surroundings. At times you talked with one another, but never about your shared master, Shame. You spoke in words with well-rounded edges, careful, politic, never fully opening up your heart or probing the hearts of others. At first you welcomed their offer of sharing in a common cup, but you learned that the coolness of that water in your mouth was bitter to your gut.

Soon you were back on the footway, driven there by sulking Shame, who was affronted at your boldness in seeking fellowship. While the road only carried you in one direction, the lane opposite seemed like a different world. The travellers there were well-dressed, their heads held high, engaging constantly with one another, but never with those on your side of the footway. In the earliest days of your journey, you tried to stop some of these travellers, forlornly hoping that you might be able to switch sides and go with them. Only one ever stopped to give you the time of day, but his demeanour was aloof and condescending. He would tell you nothing of his destination, nor even his name. From then onwards, the mere sight of those other travelers wounded you more and more deeply, and you never crossed to speak with them again.

Once at dinner time in the roadside lodge you were approached by a stranger who hustled a seat alongside your table and asked to enjoy your company. Starved for days of any conversation, you accepted, gratified when your fellow traveller ordered a bottle of the finest wine and much better food than you had eaten so far on your travels. The conversation made your heart leap, touching the nerve of your relationship with Shame, proffering sympathy and commiseration about your bitter journey. At the end of the evening, when your senses were slick with red wine, the stranger invited you to share an en suite room in the upper sections of the lodge, far from the bustle and clamour of the roadside. You hesitated for a moment, but Shame suddenly appeared in the dining

room urging you to accept the offer, to allow yourself this luxury. Blushing, you gratefully accepted. But the next morning you were awakened by Shame ceaselessly raining blows on your head. The double bed had been stripped while you slept, and the room furnished with old photos of your past. Your companion left the room, eyes now hard and black, face alive with gleeful reproach on you and on your history.

Years into the monotony of the journey, you became disturbed by the presence of a stranger who seemed to be following you. He would appear in the same village inns you chose, and sit alone nearby, quietly eating his meal and occasionally watching you. There was something in his eyes that made you squirm, but not with concern that you would be harmed again. There was a burning benevolence in his gaze, a fervent emotion that for a moment looked like something stronger than love.

On one such night, someone knocked on the door to your room. Quickly lifting the peephole cover, you saw that it was Shame, come to speak to you. For a moment, you felt both relieved and disappointed that it was not the stranger at your door. Then Shame rushed into the room, throwing all of the bolts on the door in a panic. They bade you sit, and asked in hurried tones, “Have you seen the stranger following you these weeks?”

Heart leaden, you swallowed and responded, voice constricted and hoarse: “Yes . . . yes, I have. Who is he?”

“Never mind his name!” shouted Shame. “All you need to know is that you must never speak with him, and certainly never listen to him. He is a liar who peddles stories about different roads. He’s dangerous; he’s a predator; he means you great harm.”

“He looks kind,” you muttered.

Shame moved towards you with fearful speed, taking you by the throat, and spat words into your face that felt like thorns. “You

have done enough damage already, don't you think? Listen to these words: NEVER speak with this man. I will kill you very slowly if you do." Then Shame took a seat at the end of the bed, demanding that you lie down, but wakening you every hour to remind you of your past.

With each day's travel, your consciousness of the stranger grew. The more you increased your pace, the more closely he followed behind you, at times within touching distance. With the death that Shame threatened constantly looming in your mind, you would mingle with crowds of travellers, or cross lanes on the footway, but still the stranger was there. At night you began to avoid the popular lodging towns, delving deeper and deeper into the badlands, choosing hostleries where the air stank with transgression and reproach. Here there was only bread and water, eaten furtively at the bar. Other travellers would steal your bread or spit in your water, and the threat of violence hung in the air with stinging force. You were sure that such a place would shake the stranger, but time and again you would see him at the far end of the bar, often handing his rations to other travellers with a look of pity and concern.

One night at a hostel, the rain guttering and pooling through the bottom of the ill-conceived door, the stranger approached and stood right beside you. Your mind lurched and heaved, all emotion and no thought. Unthinkably, he spoke your name. You had not heard it on another's lips for what felt like a lifetime.

"How do you know my name?" you stammered, shocked that he had broken breath with you.

"Our Father gave it to you," he said in a voice both soft and capable of great power.

"Fath—" you choked on the word, and abandoned trying to say it again. "He is a distant memory to me; I cannot think of him."

"But he thinks of you, and he has sent me to look for you, to

Speak with you, and to bring you home. He loves you, and on the very day you left, he sent me to seek you.” The stranger’s tone was tender, trembling with emotion.

You sat in silence for a long while, crumbing the hard loaf onto the bar. At last, you responded, “What is your name?”

“Immanuel,” he replied, and the word wounded and healed you all at once.

“Oh, please!” you gasped, tears flowing. “Please take me home now! I’ll go with you.”

“I will take you home,” Immanuel offered, “but you must trust me for the journey. It won’t be easy, but its outcome is sure. Meet me here in the morning before dawn, and we will set out.”

Retiring to your room, which was furnished like a cell, you lay on the hard, flea-infested bed. Your heart was glowing. *Home. Your name.* Those words had not been spoken with tenderness for longer than you could remember. You closed your eyes and began to drift into sleep.

Shame was suddenly at your side, their eyes aflame with malice. Without a word, they pulled you from where you lay. With no sound from their lips they began to beat you, mechanically and efficiently, kicking and punching you with greater force than you thought possible to endure. Finally, as a rooster began to presage the dawn, they stood above you. With stunning calmness, they stamped on your ankle, shattering it with a single blow. “See where you can walk with Immanuel now,” they snarled, taking their customary seat at the end of the bed.

Surprised that the promised death was not now yours, you lay face-down and panted into the grimy floor. Pain wracked your entire body. Your ankle pulsed and throbbed, sending shockwaves along the whole limb. You clambered on to your one good leg, feeling every place where Shame had wounded you. Groping in

the darkness for the door handle, you limped and lumbered out of that place.

Immanuel was at the bench when you shambled in. Rushing to your side, he propped you up with a strength that belied his slight frame.

“Don’t worry,” he soothed, speaking your name again. “I have strength enough to get you home. We will not take the footway anymore, but must go by the back roads. The journey will be shorter but much harder than you imagine.”

Together you left the hostel, and the dawn seemed endlessly delayed as you hobbled beside Immanuel, leaning heavily on his shoulder. The road was serpentine, populated by miscreants and devil-faced men whose gaze fell on you with a malice and constancy that made dread creep across your chest. Shame seemed to scream at you from each of their faces. The farther you travelled, the more closely the darkness seemed to cling to you. Immanuel’s face was set firmly on the road ahead, and your clumsy limp did not seem to perturb or burden him.

After what seemed like days of walking, you arrived at another hostel, a hellish prison of a place with no lights in the windows. Immanuel ushered you inside, helping you into a ragged chair beside a soot-smudged window. From below, in the basement, you could hear howls and shrieks, as though souls were being tormented. Immanuel shuddered, and then spoke, his voice tight and firm. “You must wait here,” he said. “Don’t leave this room, and do not try to light any candles. I will return soon.” Opening a door to the cellar, he disappeared into darkness.

You burst into uncontrollable tears, horror and terror and tiredness rubbing salt into your pain-racked body. Where had he gone? What was he doing? How long would he be? On the sill at the darkened window sat a candle and a box of matches. You longed for

some light, but remembering Immanuel's words, you resisted the temptation to use them.

Time passed, and curiosity gave way to the grip of fear. Through the floor beneath you, the howls and crowing from the cellar seemed to intensify. You now felt parched for light, famished for even a faint glimmer. Without further thought, you struck a match and lit the stubby candle. Its light was surprisingly far-reaching, and the room it revealed was diabolical.

The walls were covered with photos from your past, cruelly altered by the unmistakable hand of Shame. The garden where you had once played in the presence of your Father was overgrown with knotweed, its roots fissuring the once-warm brick walls that enclosed it. Family portraits, once redolent with mutual love, had been cunningly altered, your image scratched out of them, and your Father's expression changed to one of rejection and disgust. On and on the pictures stretched, each one engraved with pain, regret and impotent sadness. Your mind reeled and raced, your heart surging, your head spinning. Spreading pain strangled your throat and your voice. Shame was dealing the death they had promised, irretrievably splintering your soul.

You woke with a start, no longer in the hostelry but in your Father's garden. You had been laid down on a bench with a light blanket draped across you. The pains in your joints were gone. Blinking more fully awake, you saw Immanuel at your side. He looked different now, seasoned in some way. His eyes held the same searching, loving fire that you observed on first seeing him. You began to speak, but he raised his finger to his lips in hush. His hand was scarred deeply, but beautifully, his bronzed forehead stippled as though by thorns. "There will be time for talking," he said, "and singing, and laughing, and dancing. First, though, we must dine."

Taking you by the hand, he led you to a large mead hall that adjoined the garden. Countless places had been set at the long tables; Immanuel led you to yours, stopping to pull your seat out for you. “Our Father is here already, and is looking forward to our meal together,” he said softly. “Many others will join us.”

As Immanuel moved away, your eye fell on your place setting. Embossed on the white card was your name, followed by five words:

LOVED – LOST – SOUGHT – FOUND – HOME.

Contributors

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Andrew Roycroft is a pastor and a poet from Northern Ireland. He is married to Carolyn and the father of two wonderful daughters. Andrew's big interests lie in theology and literature, and their capacity to point us towards God, his gospel, and his glory. Andrew serves as pastor of Portadown Baptist Church in County Armagh, and as a visiting lecturer in Biblical Theology and Apologetics at the Irish Baptist College. He also is privileged to provide regular contributions to The Rabbit Room website. His poetry has appeared in a variety of literary journals, and has been featured in community arts projects in Northern Ireland, in collaborative work with New Irish Arts, and in radio broadcasts with the BBC.

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Lanier Ivester is a homemaker and writer in the beautiful state of Georgia, where she maintains a small farm with her husband, Philip, and an ever-expanding menagerie of cats, dogs, sheep, goats, chickens, ducks, and peacocks. She studied English Literature at the University of Oxford, and her special areas of interest include the intersection of Christianity and art, the sacramental nature of

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Théa Rosenburg has worked as a dental assistant, an indie musician, a peddler of handknit gifts, an art teacher, an informal librarian, and an editor. She is a regular contributor to Story Warren; her work has also appeared on The Rabbit Room, Risen Motherhood, Deeply Rooted, and in *Wildflowers Magazine*. Théa lives with her husband and four daughters in the Pacific Northwest where, when the wind blows from the right direction, she can smell the ocean from her front yard. She reviews children's books for her blog, Little Book, Big Story.

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Adam Whipple is a songwriter, multi-instrumentalist, composer, poet, and author releasing records and writings into the world from his home in East Tennessee. The founding editor of the arts journal Foundling House (2015-2021), his work has also appeared in The Rabbit Room, Curator Magazine, Blue Mountain Review, and the hometown Knoxville lit mag *The Pigeon Parade Quarterly*.

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Matthew Clark is a singer/songwriter and storyteller from Mississippi. He has recorded several full-length albums, including a Bible walk-through called “Bright Came the Word from His Mouth” and “Beautiful Secret Life,” a collection of songs highlighting, in George Herbert’s phrase, “heaven in ordinary.” Matthew hosts a weekly podcast, “One Thousand Words—Stories on the Way,” featuring essays reflecting on faith-keeping. A musician and speaker, Matthew travels sharing songs and stories. Whether it’s a song, a podcast, a meal, or an essay, Matthew loves to “make things that make room for people to meet Jesus.”

Jessie Todd

Jessie Todd lives in Cleveland, Ohio, and works as a labor and delivery nurse by night and an amateur essayist by day. She has an English degree from Grove City College, and worked as a middle school English teacher at Evangelical Christian Academy in Madrid, Spain for several years before getting her nursing degree. She authors a newsletter called The Melancholy Monthly, and you can find those newsletters and her other work at themelancholy-monthly.wordpress.com. She enjoys spending her free time walking and running through the Cuyahoga National Park, cooking any and all things autumnal, and caring for her many house plants.

Adam R. Nettesheim

Adam wanders through the arts as a vagabond. Though he still hasn't found what he's looking for, his travels have shown him that God has been weaving the golden thread of his story through our stories since the beginning, and he's not done yet. Adam and his wife Sarah have three children and live in Northern Colorado.

Amy Baik Lee

Amy Baik Lee writes from a desk looking out on a cottage garden, usually surrounded by children's drawings, teacups, and stacks of patient books. She is a writer and managing editor for The Cultivating Project, a contributing writer for The Rabbit Room, and

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Junius Johnson is an independent scholar, musician, and writer with expertise in historical and systematic theology. He writes articles both scholarly and popular, considering theological aspects of beauty, imagination, and culture, and their implications for the Christian life. He holds a PhD in Philosophical Theology from Yale University and is the author of four books, including *The Father of Lights: A Theology of Beauty* (Baker Academic, 2020). An engaging speaker and teacher, he is a member of The Cultivating Project and offers online courses in theology, literature, and Latin through Junius Johnson Academics (academics.juniusjohnson.com).

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