

# Reflections by the Pond

THE WRITINGS OF DAVID S. LAMPEL

## the Middle Time

*My heart has no desire to stay  
Where doubts arise and fears dismay;  
Though some may dwell where these abound,  
My prayer, my aim, is higher ground.*

*Lord, lift me up and let me stand,  
By faith on heaven's table land,  
A higher plane than I have found;  
Lord, plant my feet on higher ground.*

Johnson Oatman, Jr.

# doldrums

**B**ack in the days when the United States was a military presence in Vietnam, I was one of about a thousand sailors aboard the cruiser *U.S.S. Chicago*—a flag ship running a circuitous route around the Gulf of Tonkin. Being a teenager from the land-locked state of Iowa, I was a stranger to the rolling, flip-flopping acrobatics that even a large warship can experience on the high seas.

A military ship is decidedly not a luxury ocean liner filled with paying customers. The government does not spend a lot of money on stabilizers intended as a digestive aid during high seas. The new, green-gilled swabby is expected to become accustomed to eating from a tray that is trying desperately to fly across the room, and to learn how to

walk with a curious rolling gait through passageways that are tipping and rolling from side to side. And most do get used to the inherent oddities of life aboard a military ship.

Odder still, however, at least for this young sailor, were those infrequent days when the vast ocean was strangely calm, its surface utterly flat. With the top of the liquid depths as smooth and still as a linoleum floor, it felt as if the massive warship was nothing more than a toy boat sitting in a

vast, empty room. The eerie calm was as unnerving as the silence of a vast desert roaring in the ears. Had we been on a sailing ship, we would have been helpless to move an inch. It was, in its barren vastness, quite claustrophobic.

In nautical parlance this phenomenon is called the “doldrums”—a word that has been borrowed to

describe that flat, sluggish, unproductive feeling that most human beings experience from time to time. In spiritual terms it can describe a period of listless separation from God—a feeling of “*He* no longer cares, so why should *I*,” or that God has simply become irrelevant for the moment. Our mind becomes sluggish and dispirited, our thoughts rooted more to the temporal soil, than soaring like the eagles. //

*Lord God, there are times when my spirit-energy seems to vaporize, leaving me feeling cold and disconnected from You. There are times when my thoughts become thick and wrapped in a cocoon of insulating cotton—until my life in You becomes only a distant, alien memory. When that happens, come to my rescue, Lord, and lift me out of my doldrums. Revive my spirit with Yours, and lead me to a higher place—that place where You dwell.*

# revive us

For thus says the high and exalted One  
Who lives forever, whose name is Holy,  
“I dwell on a high and holy place,  
And also with the contrite and lowly of spirit  
In order to revive the spirit of the lowly  
And to revive the heart of the contrite.”

*Isaiah 57:15*

The summer months are when nature really takes off, when the woods go from sparse clusters of green sprouting on the blackened branches to dense, impenetrable foliage that hides from our gaze the deer and coyotes traipsing through. It is when the male birds stop looking and calling for mates, and settle into domestic family life. It is when early blossoming bushes and bulbs such as lilacs, daffodils and lily of the valley, shed their initial colorful blooms and settle into the leafy season.

Summer is when the coats come off, and flesh is reintroduced to perspiration, because summer is when we get the most work done outside. The two go together: extravagant growth and work. The more things grow, the more maintenance is required. In early summer especially the lawn cannot be held back; it grows quickly, and must be mowed more often. Spreading trees and bushes must be trimmed, for their good and ours.

But summer, with all its benefits, can also become monotonously routine and, later on, when temperatures peak and humidity becomes oppressive, when all one wants to do is recline under a shade tree with a cold drink, the doldrums can set in. Life turns flat and uninspired, and a season that began with explosive, luxuriant growth and activity can end in lethargy, and the monotony of the routine.

The springtime in a new believer's life is followed, ideally, by a summer of accelerated growth. Beyond those heady, earliest days with the Holy Spirit lies the root and foundation of Christian faith: coming to a deeper understanding of our Savior Jesus Christ. Here is the work of the church, to embrace the new Christian and begin his or her schooling in Christ through the teaching of God's word.

Thus begins the growth spurt of summer. Guided by a loving, attentive local body, the new believer's faith begins to mature, begins to be grounded in truth, rather than supposition or, worse, fallacy. In this warm season of vitality the babe becomes a healthy, well-fed, growing child on his way to spiritual adulthood.

In the heat of summer, however, it is possible for not just the young believer, but even the fully developed, mature adult—for summer is the longest season in a Christian's life—to become numbed to the routine. When teaching withers into repetitive

litany, when discipling becomes mindless mimicry, when the vitality of the Spirit is drained from instruction, then even the things of the Lord Jesus are reduced to little more than monotonous routine. And the believer of any spiritual age can then find himself adrift in the doldrums.

During these lazy middle days of the season the afternoon heat is searing, the horizon lost in summer haze. As the cicadas rev their nostalgic hum, and the unforgiving sun drills down, the pace of both man and nature slows, and ennui becomes a more familiar companion.

In the springtime of our relationship with the Lord, there is easily excited, luxuriant growth. We look forward to time spent with Him. We open His word with eager anticipation, hungry for His counsel. Our prayers are simple, clear, direct, and passionate. There is a powerful, almost overwhelming desire to love Him, to serve Him—to be with Him.

The Spirit of God does not sleep, but remains active and inventive throughout the year of seasons and the lifetime of years. When our devotion flags, His does not. When we become hypnotized by the incessant drone of our own ennui, He does not. When we are distracted by smaller things, the Holy Spirit remains focused on the essential. All the time our senses are numbed by the heat-soaked vapors of a tired world, the Spirit living within us remains attentive, sharp, and wholly de-

voted to the growth of our relationship with the Father and Son.

As summer begins its slow descent into autumn, the pace of the relationship slows. Our early fervor diminishes, it becomes easier to go days without seeking the Lord's counsel, and the obligations of this age re-exert their claim on our time and affections. We search harder for the words to our prayers, and our ears become less attuned to His voice.

In the summer of our relationship with God, it is easy to think that the growth has stopped—that because the rains have diminished and the heat has caused us to stop looking up, we must settle for the monotonous plateau on which we find ourselves.

But if we think of that relationship in terms of a lifetime, instead of a solitary year, we come to realize that while there will indeed be the slower seasons of summer and autumn, there will just as surely follow the bracing rush of winter and the glorious new growth of the spring.

We don't spend just one year with the Lord; we spend a lifetime—indeed, an eternity. And while we will surely experience summers in which we become sluggish and lazy, to accept that condition as the inevitable norm is to deny that springtime will indeed occur again. ☘

*Father, there are days that I step away from You—or worse, forget about You. There are days that the thick, gasping smog of my world dulls senses tuned to Yours, and it seems easier to just go along. But then, Father, my spirit cries out to Yours; that part of me connected to You reaches out beyond the smog to grasp Your extended hand. And, once again, it is spring.*

# drowning

Save me, O God,  
For the waters have threatened my life.  
I have sunk in deep mire, and there is no  
foothold;  
I have come into deep waters, and a flood  
overflows me.  
I am weary with my crying; my throat is  
parched;  
My eyes fail while I wait for my God.

*Psalm 69:1-3*

To a very little boy, the municipal swimming pool in my hometown was a huge and imposing ocean of chlorinated water. Having revisited that dilapidated container in Riverview Park as an adult, I can see that it was really not that large at all. But as a little boy its waters seemed to stretch to the horizon.

One day those waters got the better of me. I could not swim, but I could walk on the bottom. So, spying an adult friend who was swimming the circumference of the pool, I pursued, safely trudging after her as she rounded the shallow end, then headed for the opposite, deeper end. Intent on my pursuit, I failed to notice that the water was deepening, and before I knew it I was beneath the waves, struggling for air.

Even decades later, I can still feel the claustrophobic sensation of being immersed in that smothering cocoon—of being utterly surrounded by something profoundly unfriendly, cut off from all sound and life-giving air. But then, after what seemed an eternity, a strong hand reached down into my watery grave and yanked me up and out onto the safety of dry land. Just when all seemed lost, my dad reached down into my abyss, and pulled me to safety.

There are days when God seems not to exist. There are days when it seems there must be a thick, iron

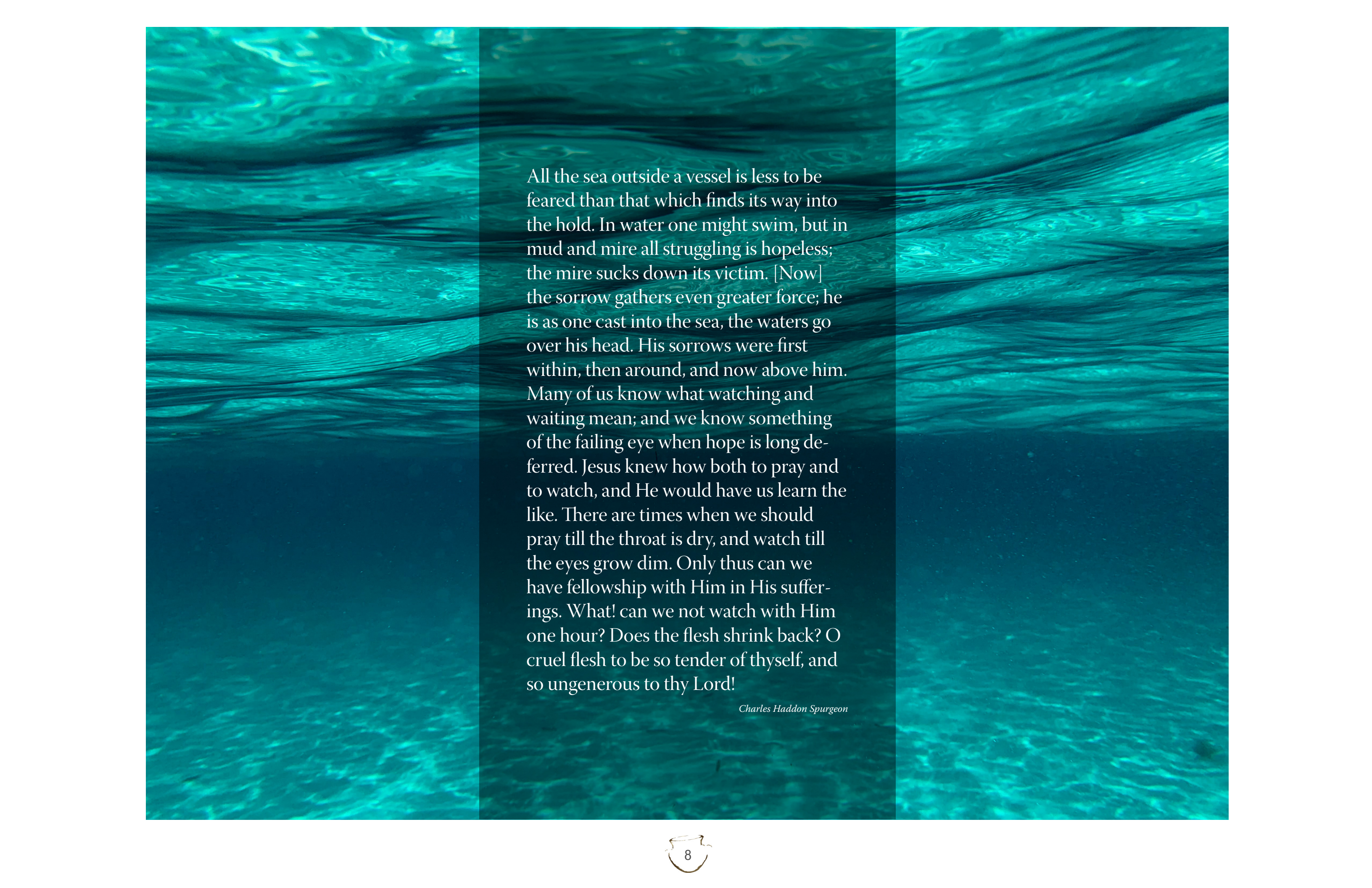
canopy arched above the clouds, blocking any two-way communication between heaven and earth. Or there are days when, though He does still exist, God just doesn't seem to care about our mournful, skyward entreaties.

How shortsighted we have become in this age of instant news, instant food, and instant gratification. How short-tempered we have become to expect God to adjust His schedule to ours, to expect Him to acknowledge how terribly busy we are—*so would He please just take care of this one simple matter of answering my prayer! I mean, how hard can it be?*

Immersed in the watery grave of a smothering, narcissistic world, we can feel, at times, utterly cut off from our heavenly Father. It seems, at times, that His voice no longer resounds through the ether, that His hand no longer reaches down to where we live.

But we cannot escape the hard truth of His sovereign will. What good is there in calling upon a God who does only our bidding? That would not be a God at all, but a marionette. The truth of faith-living is found in the waiting, in the dependency, in the strong arm that ultimately reaches down into our abyss and draws us up to safety. ❧

*O Lord, my God, in Your mercy You have reached down and lifted me up to a place of safety. You have heard my cry, and cared about me when everyone else fell silent. What little I have with which to praise You! So, along with all of Your creation, I will lift up my voice—just as You lifted up me from the abyss—and I will shout Your praise. May this humble choir bring glory and honor to Your name.*

The background of the page is a close-up, high-angle shot of water with a teal or cyan tint. The water's surface is covered in fine, rhythmic ripples that catch the light, creating a shimmering, textured effect. The lighting is soft, highlighting the peaks of the ripples and casting gentle shadows in the troughs.

All the sea outside a vessel is less to be feared than that which finds its way into the hold. In water one might swim, but in mud and mire all struggling is hopeless; the mire sucks down its victim. [Now] the sorrow gathers even greater force; he is as one cast into the sea, the waters go over his head. His sorrows were first within, then around, and now above him. Many of us know what watching and waiting mean; and we know something of the failing eye when hope is long deferred. Jesus knew how both to pray and to watch, and He would have us learn the like. There are times when we should pray till the throat is dry, and watch till the eyes grow dim. Only thus can we have fellowship with Him in His sufferings. What! can we not watch with Him one hour? Does the flesh shrink back? O cruel flesh to be so tender of thyself, and so ungenerous to thy Lord!

*Charles Haddon Spurgeon*



# refreshed

To look out upon a clean, sharply defined world, devoid of smog and muck, the view not sterile but wholesomely unsullied by man—that is the gift of living out away from the city.

Here where the immediate neighbors have four legs, there are two bright moments in every year. The first is that glorious splash of warming spring that shakes off the long, glacial winter, and the second is the refreshing arrival of crisp, dry autumn after the doldrums of withering heat and humidity. These two moments revive and cleanse not only the world about us, but our lagging spirits. Month after month of either oppressive heat or dull, aching cold can slowly beat us down, suppressing the brighter spirit that dwells within.

Months have passed since the first fresh buds of spring heralded new growth after the winter hush. After the dry brittle cold of the white season, even the damp heat that crept unevenly close was a welcome visitor. But the visitor stayed—stayed well past the point of being a polite guest. It abused our generous nature, settled in and made itself at home.

Now the fragrant greens no longer herald fresh growth, but, old and tired, have joined to feed and be fed by the hovering dampness that pervades the land, the house—and the clammy sheets upon which one seeks relief.

“Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.”

*Ezekiel 36:25-26*

Then a new day breaks wide with a cool breeze from out of the North. Suddenly the surrounding greens are once again friends. No longer in conspiracy with the cloying damp, they are now kissed with the fresh clean air that heralds the approach of autumn. Trees gone long without rain, drop their leaves to litter the crackling grass with the dry musk of new mulch.

There are those who see life through the heavy mask of unrelieved sin—oppressive, mind-clouding, unrelenting muck that heaves the soul back down into the damp earth from which it was born. Philosophy does not conquer their frowning outlook; even their joy is muted by the emptiness of their heart. Discouraged, pessimistic, their days are a clouded blur, the distant horizon shrouded by the heat-shimmering mirage of depressed resignation and ennui.

There are others, however, who see life through the colorful prism of unfettered grace—the fresh breeze that blows cool and dry, carrying within it wisps of fragrant hope. Their feet tread lightly, springing easily upon the soil that holds no claim upon them. Their outlook is clean, open, their joy deep and real. Each new day bears new hope, new opportunity. Their horizon is sparkling as crystalline glass, near, and as certain as yesterday. They see each today through the hope and promise of their tomorrow.

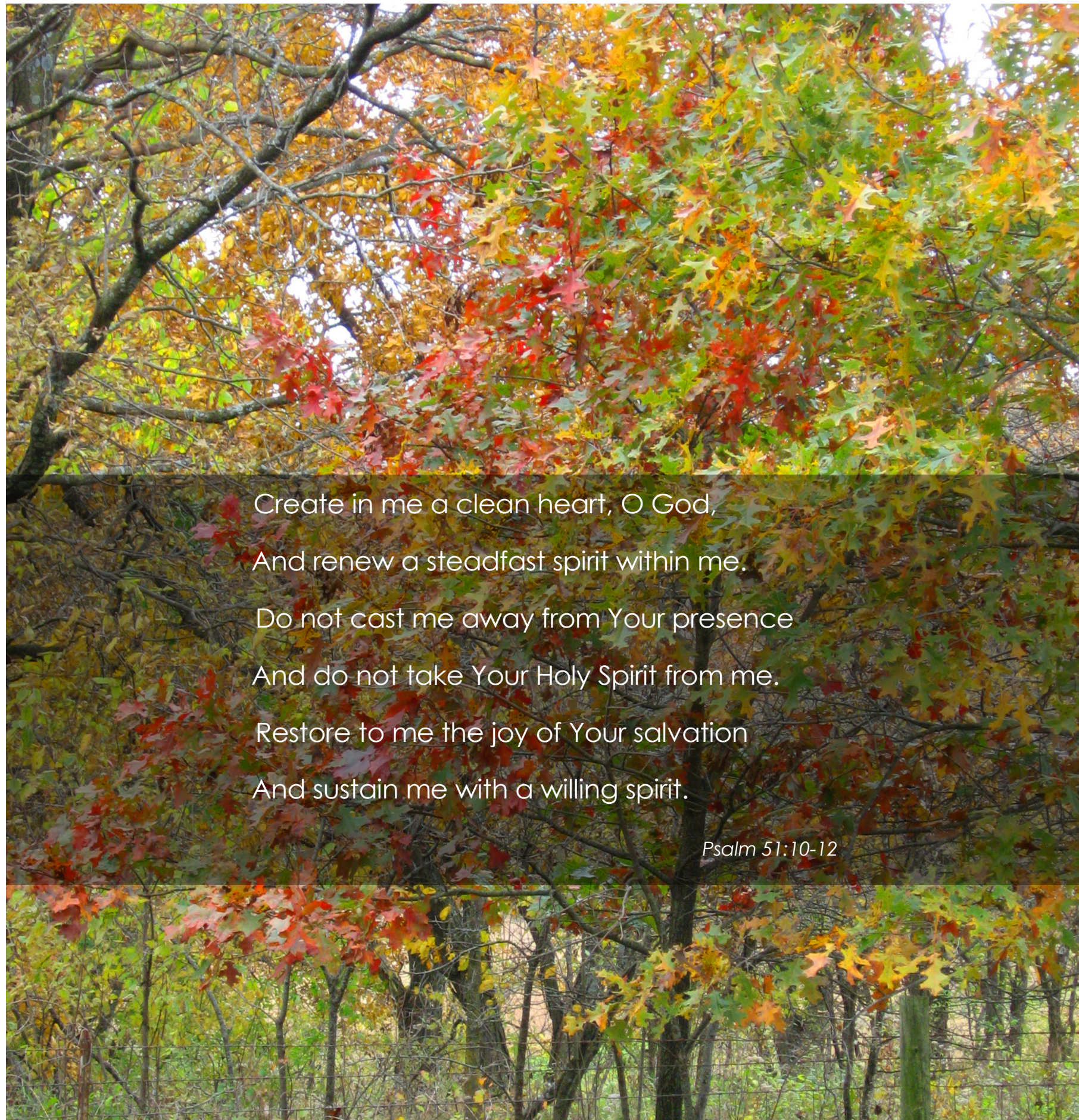
Remember my affliction and my  
wandering, the wormwood and bitterness.  
Surely my soul remembers  
And is bowed down within me.  
This I recall to my mind,  
Therefore I have hope.  
The Lord's lovingkindness indeed never  
cease,

For His compassions never fail.  
They are new every morning;  
Great is Your faithfulness.

*Lamentations 3:19-23*

This is the refreshment of God's Spirit. And part of the joy in these two seasons is that they represent our eternal longing for His refreshment. Day after day, month after month we are oppressed by the spirit of this world, submitting to the doldrums, becoming acclimated to the smog that we eventually come to believe is clean air.

But twice a year God's nature reminds us that it is all false, all a muck-coated sham meant to numb us to the true brightness of His refreshing Spirit. So we come to Him, bathing in His restorative grace to cleanse away the foul muck that has for too long numbed us to His presence. ☘



Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
And renew a steadfast spirit within me.  
Do not cast me away from Your presence  
And do not take Your Holy Spirit from me.  
Restore to me the joy of Your salvation  
And sustain me with a willing spirit.

*Psalm 51:10-12*