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The Psalms and The Good Life of God's People

Rachel McCloskey

We belong to Christ who speaks his word to us. As a creedal church body, we recognize that God's word is not only a word to be received, but a word to be confessed back to him. As the Spirit works through the word, he forms and shapes us as God's confessing people. It has a transformative effect. We belong to Christ and his word does not leave us unchanged.

The Psalms are a particular example of words God puts in our mouth to shape us. They run the gamut of human experience. From the highest high to the lowest low, the Psalms articulate what it feels like to be God's treasured possession in the midst of a fallen and sinful world. The psalmists rage in burning anger, calling out to God for justice. In exuberant joy, they praise Him for his unending love. They cry in desperate fear, begging the Lord for salvation from their distress. They agonize in sorrow and even accuse Yahweh of abandoning them. Nothing is untouched or off-limits in the Psalms' expression of life as God's people.

Renowned scholar James K.A. Smith asserts that humans are, at our core, affective creatures.¹ This means that the Psalms speak to us in a different way than a systematized creed can. As we make them our own, speaking them back to God, they form us on our most basic level. Smith labels habits such as praying the Psalms, which so acutely influence our affections, as liturgies. He argues that liturgies shape our desires and implant in us a picture of what he calls the good life of human flourishing.² As sinful creatures, our instinctual vision of the good life often revolves around the gods we make for ourselves. We fashion idols out of full bellies and fuller wallets.



But the good life that the Psalms ignite our desire for is not the health, wealth, and prosperity that would usurp God's rightful place in our hearts. Rather, the good life presented in the Psalms is one rooted in Yahweh's faithfulness to us even as we experience intense anger, sadness, joy, and fear.

This vision of the good life is put forward in the very first Psalm. The upright man who meditates day and night on Yahweh's law flourishes like a sturdy tree planted by streams. The second Psalm firmly asserts what the good life is not. That is, it is not belonging to the rebellious people who seek to disentangle themselves from the true King's reign. Rather, the one who is blessed is the person who takes refuge in the Son's rule.

Reading on in the book of Psalms, one encounters a vision of the good life viewed from every angle and posture of human emotion. Upon seeing the ranks of his enemies in Psalm 3, the psalmist cries to God in fear and anguish. But then he imagines Yahweh as a protective shield around him. "I will not fear," says the psalmist, "though tens of thousands assail me on every side" (3:6). Enraged, the psalmist in 7 calls on God to administer justice, crying, "vindicate me, Lord!" (7:8). The psalmist knows that the good life—and God—cannot tolerate evil. "Bring to an end the violence of the wicked, and make the righteous secure," the psalmist pleads. Bubbling over with uncontainable joy the psalmist shouts of Yahweh's steadfast faithfulness to his people in Psalm 98. "All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God!" (98:3b). Being a recipient of God's promises is the definition of human flourishing.

It is not always easy to recognize the vision of the good life presented in a psalm at first glance. Most of us would not characterize wasting away in sorrow (Psalm 6) or having all of one's bones out of joint (Psalm 22) as particularly representative pictures of human flourishing. But the psalms are a special way God forms us into creatures that envision the good life in terms of hope. The Psalms do not sweep pain, heartache, and other unpleasant emotions under the rug. But they give us a voice to remind God and ourselves about the things He will do—either today or in eternity.

In this way, the Psalms are a transformative experience. The psalmists pour out their fear, sadness, anger, and joy before the Lord. Often, by the end of a psalm, however, the tone shifts. The psalmist may still be experiencing distress but something else has entered the scene. The one praying now perceives his or her situation in terms of the Lord's vows. Even the Psalms that do not find an immediate, peaceful resolution, like Psalm 88, still provide words for us to speak to our Father in every circumstance—even if we are not yet ready for comfort or resolution. Instead, the Psalms call us to recognize that we do not have an indifferent or an absent God. The act of prayer itself is a confession of this fact.

The result is that the Psalms reassert our identity as God's beloved children

in a way that speaks to our circumstances. When we pray the Psalms, we walk away changed. Our problems may not instantly be solved (although God certainly has the power to do so and promises to hear our requests). But we have been given a glimpse of the good life—one in which we are heirs of God's promises of justice, restoration, rescue, and salvation. We are not—as it may seem in life's darkest moments—abandoned, forsaken, and alone. We belong to God. And here and now, the Psalms assert, the good life means trusting in Yahweh's word. Through the Psalms, we can rub God's ears with his own promises and remind ourselves of the same. One day, we look forward to the fulfillment of the good life in eternal fellowship with God.

Because we belong to God, we can pour out our grief, anger, sorrow, and joy and be reminded of God's promises and presence. As we participate in the Psalms, we are imprinted with the vision of the good life. God shows Himself in the Psalms to be our shield, as well as our righteous defender, and our comforter in every circumstance. Our imagination is captured by what it means to be God's dear child. We are changed. We are His.

Endnotes

- 1 James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship Worldview and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids Michigan: Baker Academic, 2009), 34.
- 2 Smith, 25-26.