

Eternal Optimism

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Psalm 16

An eternal optimist. You may know just such a person. They are the ones who are hopeful about the future. For example, optimists are the ones who examine the effects of inflation, soaring food prices, high interest rates, sky-rocketing housing costs, and look to the future, believing that the economy will eventually balance out once again.

They are the ones who, when going out for dinner, are willing to be patient when service is extremely slow, knowing that the delicious food for which the restaurant is well-known, will be worth the wait.

They are the ones who hear of a massive snow storm headed their way, one that will likely cripple traffic, clog driveways, and make hazardous conditions on the sidewalks, and think instead about the tremendous beauty that will be created by the new-fallen snow (or, if they're a school-age child, the snow day that lies ahead).

After reading Psalm 16, we might be led to believe that David is also an eternal optimist, given the extremely positive nature of this passage. We know from his other writings, however, that he did experience a wide range of emotions in life, and when we dig a bit deeper into this Psalm, we see an area where David perhaps struggled a bit.

The Psalm opens with a beautiful prayer; one that characterizes this entire God-centered Psalm, and one that can be prayed by believers during all seasons of life. It can be prayed in faith as we begin our day: "Keep me safe, O God, for in you I take refuge." It's one that can be prayed (as we did tonight) to assist us in our communal prayers. But it's also a prayer that can be prayed during times of uncertainty or struggle. Perhaps then we might pray with a bit less energy, but with the same request: "Keep me safe, O God, for in you I take refuge."

This prayer leads us to ask the question: from what is David asking God to keep him safe? One of the answers can be found in verse 10, where David writes, "You will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, nor will you let your faithful one see decay (or as some translations put it, you will not let your faithful one go down to the pit)." The topic on David's mind in this verse is death. Although we don't know when this Psalm was written, it's possible David may have penned it near the later years of his life, when death was more on the forefront of his mind, or perhaps even more likely, it was written during one of the times when his life was in danger.

This topic is also on the mind of many people today, including those who are growing older and facing death because their bodies are simply wearing out. Heart disease takes over, another spot of cancer is discovered, kidneys stop functioning, legs don't work as they once did... As I have been told many times on visits with our homebound members: "Getting older is not for sissies."

Unfortunately, death is also increasingly on the minds of those who are younger. Children, who should be living a care-free life, can have their perspectives change dramatically after traumatizing events, such as incidents of school violence like the one at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newton, Connecticut, back in 2012, when 26 students and teachers were killed. Closer to home, I recall one of my former students who threatened to bring a knife to school so he could injure his fellow classmates. Suddenly the fear of death becomes very real, even for third-graders.

No matter our age, though, we will all face death at some point. Try as we might to secure our lives, daily exercise, multiple vitamins, frequent doctor visits, the most advanced medical treatment available, death will finally come upon us all. Most of us worshiping here tonight either have been thinking about the topic or know a friend or a family member who is.

Although death is on David's mind, it does not overwhelm him with fear. Far from it. He knows that God will answer his prayer and keep him safe, not necessarily from death, but in the face of it. Listen again to the words of verses 9-11: "My heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure, because you

will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, nor will you let your faithful one see decay. You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.”

“God,” David is saying, “I am so excited, so ecstatic because you will not leave my soul among the dead nor leave me to rot in the grave. You, O God, will take me to be with you so that I can have the joy and pleasure of forever living with you.” What is it that gives David such contentment, such confidence in God’s plan for eternal life? It’s his understanding of who God is and the plan he has for our lives.

At the beginning of verse 9, in most translations, is the word “therefore.” As commentators have long said, when you see a “therefore,” you should look what it’s there for. And in this case, its purpose is to link the preceding verses with verses 9-11. So let’s take a closer look at some of those earlier verses that lead us to the later ones.

In verse 2, David writes: “I say to the LORD, ‘You are my Lord; apart from you I have no good thing.’” The first “LORD” in this verse is the word Yahweh, the word God gives himself as the promise-keeping God, the one who wants a relationship with us, the one who takes us by the hand and walks with us. As one commentator said, he is personal, present, and faithful.

Author Max Lucado illustrates it this way: One afternoon I found myself walking behind an orthodox Jewish family, a father and his three girls. One of the daughters fell a few steps behind and could no longer see her father. “Abba!” she called out. The father spotted her and immediately extended his hand. Lucado writes, “Isn’t that what we all need? An Abba who will hear when we call, who will take our hand when we are weak, who will swing us up into his arms and carry us home?” What a fine example of our Lord, the one who gives us peace and security because of his tender-loving care.

And we will not experience that security unless we also view him as Adonai, the other “Lord” in that verse, as the Master to whom we belong, body and soul, in life and in death. If we view God simply as a therapist or a dispensing machine during our times of need, we will live our lives in fear, but if we know that we belong to him completely, no matter what comes our way, we will be able to trust that he will make our lives secure.

This strong belief and trust in God enables David to say in verses 5 and 6 that “You are my portion, and you make my lot secure. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places. Surely I have a delightful inheritance.” Land and property, in ancient Israel, were foundational to economic stability. But in these verses the psalmist is saying in essence that even if I don’t have the valuable land or anything built upon it, I still have you, God, and that is more than enough, for you are my refuge, my portion, my prized possession both now and forever.

It is upon that prized possession that David fixes his eyes and from which he finds security. In our world today, people are always searching for more ways to make things more secure: bullet-proof glass, surveillance cameras, safe and secure entrances. Everyone is looking for answers, especially after tragic events, and that’s not necessarily a bad thing, but the psalmist finds his security not in human ways but in the Lord’s ways.

Verse 7 tells us that it is God who guides and counsels him. In fact, even at night David’s conscience is instructed by God’s Holy Spirit. In a lost world where so many are trying to find their own way, it is a great source of security to know that the living God will lead us, speaking to our hearts in the reading of his Word and by the moving of his Spirit. “With him right beside me,” David says, “I will not be shaken.”

When we get to the end of all this good news, that God is our loving Lord who provides all we need and who guides our steps, it’s no wonder. No wonder! (the words of one translation) that David’s heart is glad and that his tongue rejoices, for this covenant-keeping God has also given the gift of eternal life.

That gift from God, of course, has encouraged Christians for centuries, including one of our members who passed away last year. During the later years of her life, she suffered from a number of health issues, including difficulty walking (which resulted in a number of falls), sciatica on her right side, and somewhat impaired vision from a previous stroke. She even had to be fed through a feeding tube, a problem caused by the polio she had contracted in the 1950s (she referred to her formula as her “manna”). Through it all, though, God gave her the grace to carry on and to do so with an amazingly positive attitude.

I recall visiting her once at Covenant Living, when she was there for rehab, and we talked about her longing to go back to her house. Before I left, though, she told me what she really longed for was to go home

with Jesus. In fact, during most visits, she said she was ready for heaven, but realized that apparently her “room wasn’t ready yet”, referring to Jesus’ words in John 14.

During my last visit with her when she was back in her house, I entered the bedroom, and she immediately said to me, even in her weakened state, “I think my room is ready now.” We agreed that the time for Jesus to call her home was likely coming soon. God blessed that visit richly as we sang, prayed, and read from some of her favorite scripture passages about eternal life including Psalm 16.

Some scholars have wondered over the years what to make of these last three verses of the passage. After all, to what is David referring and what did he know about eternal life? But Peter and Paul in the New Testament knew exactly what he meant. In Acts 2 (verses 24-32) and 13 (verse 34), both of these prominent early church leaders quote Psalm 16 and declare that these verses are prophesy, that they are actually looking forward to the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and the gift of eternal life that would be a result of it.

Though David would not have known all the details, the early church did because of their encounters with the risen Christ. As Peter proclaimed in that first sermon just before he quoted from this Psalm, “God raised Jesus from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him” (Acts 2:24).

Dear friends, may God enable our hearts to be glad and our tongues to rejoice, may he fill our spirits with eternal optimism, with hope for the future, because it is impossible for death to keep its hold on all who place their trust in him. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen. ©Chad Boorsma