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Psalms and Work

Theology of Work Project

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Introduction to Psalms

The Book of Psalms is part hymnbook, part prayer book, part wisdom literature, and part anthology of poems concerning Israel and God. Its subject matter is astonishingly broad. On one hand it proclaims praise and prayer for God Most High (Psalms 50:14), and on the other, it embraces human experience as intimate as lamenting a lost mother (Ps. 35:14). Psalms is distinctive in the Old Testament in that most of it consists of people talking to God. Elsewhere, the Old Testament is mostly God talking to people (as in the Law and the Prophets), or it is narrative.

Although thousands of years old, virtually all the psalms, in one way or another, mirror our own struggles and our joys today. Whatever a particular psalm's subject may be, each gives voice to the emotions we feel as we grapple with life's issues. Some psalms capture our delight in God as we experience the divine presence with us through a tough situation that has had a good ending. Others express raw emotions of anger or grief in a struggle to understand why God has not acted as we thought he would when "the wicked triumph." In some, God speaks. In others God is silent. Some find resolution, while others leave us with unanswered questions.

The psalms were not all written by one person at one time, as the variety of attributions in the superscripts indicates. In fact, the study of the Book of Psalms authorship—as well as its dates of composition, settings, purposes, uses, and transmission—is a major field in biblical studies. The tools of form criticism and comparative literary analysis (especially comparisons to Ugaritic literature) have figured highly in Psalms scholarship.^[1] We will not attempt to delve into these studies in general, but will rely on such research as necessary to help us understand and apply the psalms to work.

WORK IN THE PSALMS

Throughout the 150 psalms, work appears regularly. Sometimes the psalms' interest in work lies in individual ethics, including integrity and obedience to God in our work, dealing with opponents, and anxiety about the apparent success of unethical people. Other psalms take an interest in the ethics of organizations—whether as small as a household, or as large as a nation. Modern themes to which these

psalms apply include business ethics, handling institutional pressure, globalization, and the consequences of workplace failings and national wrongdoings. Another major work-related theme in Psalms is God's presence with us in our work. Here we find topics such as God's guidance, human creativity grounded in God (who undergirds all productivity), the importance of doing truly valuable work, and God's grace in our work. The psalms take a particular interest in the work of marriage, raising children and caring for parents. Lying underneath all the particular topics is Psalms' proclamation of God's glory in all of creation. The wide variety of work-related themes in Psalms is no surprise.

THE FIVE BOOKS OF PSALMS

The most obvious structural feature of the Psalter is its division into five books, Book 1 (Psalms 1-41), Book 2 (42-72), Book 3 (73-89), Book 4 (90-106), and Book 5 (107-150). The reasons for and history of this division are not fully known. Book 1 focuses heavily on the experiences of David, and Book 2 speaks of David and the Davidic kingdom. Book 3 is grimmer, having a good deal of lamentation and complaint. It ends at Psalm 89 with the Davidic Covenant in tatters and the nation in ruins. Book 4 speaks soberly of human mortality (Psalm 90), but it also speaks triumphantly of God as the great king who rules all (Psalms 93 and 95-99). Book 5 is a mixture, but it ends in celebration, as the nations and all creation worship the God of Israel (see Psalm 148).

Thus, we see a general movement going from the man David to the Davidic kingdom, and next to the end of the Davidic dynasty, and then to the praise of God himself as king of the earth, and finally to the triumph of the kingdom of God. This gives a narrative direction to the Psalter as a whole. But many psalms in the collection do not fit this arrangement. To a degree, the reason for the current order of the psalms remains a mystery. If there is a single, grand structure, either we don't fully understand it or it is not rigidly followed.

INTERPRETIVE STRATEGIES FOR THE PSALMS

The unique nature of the psalms can make it difficult to understand them in their original context, much less to apply them to life and work today. Psalms is a highly diverse collection, and this makes it hard to generalize. Should we study the psalms for instruction? Read them for history? Pray or sing them alone or with others? The Bible itself does not tell us the answer to these questions. Before we can delve into applying the psalms to work, we need to develop interpretive strategies to help us make the most of the psalms.

Our approach here will be to explore a selection of psalms chosen because they seemed to say something significant about work or something significant about life that applies significantly to work.

In practice, this generally means that psalms have been selected because the Theology of Work Project's contributors, steering committee or reviewers found them particularly meaningful in their own study or experience. This is an admittedly unsystematic selection method. The resulting commentary is not meant to be exhaustive, or even necessarily *right*. Instead, it is meant as a series of examples of how Christian groups or individuals can faithfully employ the psalms as they seek to integrate their faith and their work.

Book 1 (Psalms 1-41)

Book 1 consists largely of psalms spoken by David individually, rather than by Israel as a nation. They address matters that concern David, personally, and this makes them applicable to the situations we face at work on our own. Later books bring in the social and communal aspects of life and work.

Personal Integrity in Work (Psalm 1)

The two opening psalms establish themes that run through the entire Psalter. Psalm 1 describes personal integrity, indicating that this is how every reader should live. It specifically applies this to work and to our desire for success. It says of the righteous, "They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper" (Psalms 1:3). Work done ethically tends to prosper. This is a general truth and not an infallible rule. Sometimes people suffer because of acting ethically, at work or elsewhere. But it is still true that people who fear God and have integrity will likely do well. This is both because they live wisely and because God's blessing is upon them.

Obedience to God (Psalm 2)

Psalm 2 focuses on the house of David. God has chosen this kingdom and its temple, Zion, to be the focus of the kingdom of God. Someday Gentiles will submit to it or face God's wrath. Thus, Psalms 2:11-12 says, "Serve the Lord with fear, with trembling, kiss his feet, or he will be angry, and you will perish in the way; for his wrath is quickly kindled. Happy are all who take refuge in him." Jesus fulfilled the promises to David. For us, the lesson is that we must value Christ's kingdom above all things. A good work ethic is valuable, but we cannot make prosperity our priority. We cannot serve God and money (Matthew 6:24).

Foes and opponents (Psalms 4, 6, 7, 17)

After Psalms 1 and 2, Book 1 has many psalms in which David complains to God about his enemies. These psalms can be difficult for readers today since David sometimes sounds vengeful. But we should not miss the fact that when foes are around him, he commits the problem to God. He does not take matters into his own hands.

These psalms have application to the workplace. Frequently conflicts and rivalries will appear among people on the job, and sometimes these fights can be vicious. Occupational battles can lead to depression and loss of sleep. Psalm 4:8 is a prayer about personal enemies, and it says, “I will both lie down and sleep in peace; for you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety.” When we commit a matter to God, we can have tranquility. When we are in the midst of such a battle, however, our prayers for help may seem futile. But God hears and responds: “Depart from me, all you workers of evil, for the Lord has heard the sound of my weeping” (Psalm 6:8). On the other hand, we must be careful to maintain our integrity when in the midst of such conflicts. It will do no good for us to call out to God if we are being mean, dishonest, or unethical on the job. “O Lord my God, if I have done this, if there is wrong in my hands, if I have repaid my ally with harm... then let the enemy pursue and overtake me... and lay my soul in the dust” (Ps. 7:3-5). Psalm 17:3 makes the same point.

Authority (Psalm 8)

Psalm 8 is an exception in Book 1, as it does not pertain specifically to David. Its concern is with *all* human authority, not only David’s rule. Although God created the entire universe (Ps. 8:1-3), he chose to appoint human beings to rule over the creation (Ps. 8:5-8). This is a high calling. “You have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet” (Ps. 8:5-6). When we exercise authority and leadership, we do so as God’s delegates. Our rule cannot be arbitrary or self-serving, but must serve God’s purposes. Chief among these are caring for the creatures of the earth (Ps. 8:7-8) and protecting the weak and vulnerable, especially children (Ps. 8:2).

If we gain authority in work, it is tempting to regard our position as a reward for our hard work or intelligence and to exploit our authority for personal gain. But Psalm 8 reminds us that authority comes not as a reward, but as an obligation. It is right that we should be accountable to superiors, boards of directors, trustees, voters or whatever earthly forms of governance we serve under, but that alone is not sufficient. We must also be accountable to God. Political leaders, for example have a duty to pay attention to the best environmental and economic science available when considering energy policy, whether or not it accords with current political winds. Similarly, business leaders are called to anticipate and prevent possible harm to children —whether physical, mental, cultural, or spiritual—from their products and services. This applies not only to toys, movies, television, and food, but also to retailing, transportation, telecommunications, and financial services, among others.

Business ethics (Psalms 15, 24, 34)

The Psalter says a good deal about workplace ethics. Psalm 15:1 and 5 say, “O Lord, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill?...[Those] who do not lend money at interest, and do not take a bribe against the innocent. Those who do these things shall never be moved.” If we allow that interest is not necessarily prohibited in the contemporary context (see “[Does the Bible Prohibit Charging Interest?](#)” at www.theologyofwork.org), the application of this Psalm is that we are not to take advantage of others in the workplace. Loans that put distressed borrowers into greater debt would be an example, as would credit cards that intentionally entrap unsavvy cardholders with unexpected fees and interest rate escalations. In an expanded sense, any product or service that targets vulnerable (or “innocent”) people and leaves them worse off is a violation of the Psalter’s ethics. Good business ethics—and its counterparts in other fields of work—requires that customers genuinely benefit from the goods and services offered to them.

Psalm 24:4-5 adds to this that God accepts “Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully. They will receive blessing from the Lord, and vindication from the God of their salvation.” The falsehood described here is perjury. As in the modern world, so also in the ancient world, it was difficult to be involved in business without sometimes getting ensnared in lawsuits. The passage moves us to testify honestly and not pervert justice by fraud. When others are unscrupulous, our honesty might cost in lost promotions, business transactions, elections, grades and publications. But in the long run such setbacks are trivial in comparison to God’s blessing and vindication (Ps. 24:5).

Ethics also comes to the fore in Psalm 34:12-13: “Which of you desires life, and covets many days to enjoy good? Keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit.” This could refer to any kind of deceit, slander or fraud. The reference to “many days to enjoy” simply points out that if you swindle people or slander them, you are likely to create enemies. In extreme cases, this could lead to your death at their hands, but even if not, life surrounded by enemies is not enjoyable. If life is your chief desire, trustworthy friends are far more profitable than ill-gotten gain. It is possible that a life of integrity will be costly in worldly terms. In a corrupt country, a business person who does not give bribes or a civil servant who does not take them could be unable to make a steady income. “Many are the afflictions of the righteous,” the Psalm acknowledges. “But the Lord rescues them from all,” it adds (Ps. 34:19). Working with integrity may or may not result in prosperity, but integrity in God’s eyes is its own reward.

Trusting God in the face of institutional pressure (Psalm 20)

Psalm 20 teaches us to trust God rather than human power, such as military might. “Some take pride in chariots, and some in horses, but our pride is in the name of the Lord our God” (Ps. 20:7). Financial assets, no less than military assets, can be the basis for a false faith in human power. For that matter, we should recall that in the ancient world only the upper class soldiers would have horses and chariots. The ordinary soldiers would be drawn from the peasants and be on foot. It is a disturbing reality that even modest wealth and power often draw us away from God.

God’s presence in our struggles at work (Psalm 23)

“The Lord is my shepherd” (Psalm 23:1). If we trust God, we have the tranquility of knowing that God watches over us, like a shepherd watching over the sheep. This is a reminder to see our work from God’s perspective—not primarily as an instrument for our gratification, but as our part in God’s mission in the world. “He leads me in the right *for his name’s sake*” (Ps. 23:3, emphasis added). We work to honor him and not for our own glory—a powerful reminder that we need to hear on a regular basis.

Such a godly perspective on our work generally drives us *into* our work more deeply, not away from it. In Psalm 23, we see this in the way the narrative of the Psalm is driven by the details of the work of shepherding. Shepherds find water, good grazing and paths in the wilderness. They ward off predators with sticks and staffs, and comfort the sheep with their words and their presence. Psalm 23 is first of all an accurate representation of the shepherd’s work. This gives it the grounding in reality needed to be meaningful as a spiritual meditation.

While we seek to honor God in our work, this does not mean the road will be easy. We sometimes may find ourselves in the “darkest valley” (Ps. 23:4). This could come as the loss of a contract, a teaching assignment that has gone bad, or feelings of isolation and meaninglessness in our work. Or it could come as a longer-term struggle, such as a toxic office environment or inability to find a job. These are things we’d prefer to avoid. But Psalm 23 reminds us that God is near in all circumstances. “I fear no evil for you are with me” (Ps. 23:4a). His work on our behalf is not hypothetical, but tangible and real. A shepherd has a rod and staff, and God has every instrument needed to bring us safely through the worst of life (Ps. 23:4b). God will take care of us even in a sometimes-hostile world, “in the presence of my enemies” (Ps. 23:5). It is easy to remember this when things are calm, but here we are called to remember it in the midst of the challenge and adversity. While we would often rather not think about this, it is through the challenges of our lives that God works out his purposes in us.

[Will Messenger: What does calling mean if you hate your job? \(Click to listen\)](#)

Psalm 23 concludes by reminding us of the destination of our journey with God. “I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever” (Ps 23:6b). As in Psalm 127 [WGM1] and elsewhere, the house or household is not only a shelter where people eat and sleep, but the basic unit of work and economic production. Thus, dwelling in the house of the Lord does not mean waiting until we die to so that we can cease working and receive our reward. Rather it promises that the time is coming when we will find a place where our work and life can thrive. The first half of the verse tells us directly that this is a promise for our present lives as well as eternity. “Goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life” (Ps. 23:6). The promise that God will be with us, bringing goodness and love in all of the circumstances of our life and work is a deeper kind of comfort than we can ever get from hoping to avoid every adversity that could befall us.

God’s guidance in our work (Psalm 25)

Human life is a series of choices, and many of these involve vocation. We should develop the habit of taking all such decisions to God. Psalm 25:12 teaches, “Who are they that fear the Lord? He will teach them the way that they should choose.” How does God teach us the way to choose? Psalm 25 notes several ways, beginning with “Make me to know your ways, O Lord. Lead me in your truth, and teach me” (Ps. 25:4-5). This requires reading the Bible regularly, the primary way we get to know God’s ways and learn his truth. Once we know God’s ways, we need to put them into practice without needing special guidance from God in most cases. “The paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness for those who keep his covenant and decrees” (Ps. 25:10). His covenant and decrees are found, of course, in the Bible.

“Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions,” adds Psalm 25:7. Confessing our sins and asking God’s mercy is another way we receive guidance from God. When we are honest with God—and ourselves—about our sins, it opens the door for God’s guidance in our hearts. “Pardon my guilt,” and “forgive all my sins” the psalm asks (Ps. 25:11, 18). When we are forgiven by God, it frees us to cease trying to justify ourselves, which otherwise is a powerful barrier to God’s guidance. Similarly, humbleness in our dealings with God and people gets us beyond the defensiveness that blocks God’s guidance. “He leads the humble in his way,” Psalm 25:9 informs us.

“My eyes are ever toward the Lord,” continues the psalm (Ps 25:15). We receive God’s guidance when we look for evidence about the things God cares about, such as justice, faithfulness, reconciliation, peace, faith, hope and love. (The psalm does not name these particular items—they are examples from other parts of the Bible.) “May integrity and uprightness preserve me,” says Psalm 25:21. Integrity means living all of life under a coherent set of values, rather than, for example, being honest and compassionate with our families, but deceitful and cruel with our customers or co-workers. Thinking clearly about how to apply our highest values at work thus turns out to be a means of God’s guidance,

at least to the degree that our highest values are formed by scripture and faithfulness to Christ.

Although these means of guidance may seem abstract, they can be very practical when we put them to use in workplace situations. The key is to be specific in our Bible study, confession, prayer, and moral reasoning. When we bring our actual, specific work situations to God and God's word, we may find God answering with the specific guidance we need. For more about God's guidance in relation to our vocation or calling in work, see "[Discerning God's guidance to a particular kind of work](#)" in *Vocation Overview* at www.theologyofwork.org.

Book 2 (Psalms 42–72)

All of us suffer from feelings of insecurity, and financial ruin is high on our list of worries. In the second book of the Psalter we see a number of texts that relate to the fears that beset people and the paths to which they turn for help. We thus learn about the true and the false grounds for hope in a world of uncertainty.

God's presence in the midst of disaster (Psalm 46)

At times, disaster threatens our places of work, the work itself, or our sense of well-being. These disasters include the natural (hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, typhoons, wildfires), the economic (recessions, bankruptcy, collapse of major financial institutions), and the political (sudden change in policy, priorities, war). Psalm 46 highlights the world-spanning breadth disaster can take, and we see this today in the global economy. Currency decisions made in London and Beijing impact the price farmers from Indiana or Indonesia get for their crops. Political turmoil in the Middle East may affect the price of gasoline in a small town anywhere in the world, and this in turn, through a chain of events, may determine whether a local restaurant stays in business. Even if the ancient economies were not so "global," people knew full well that what happened among the nations could sooner or later change their lives. The melting of the earth implies that someday all the powers of the nations will be seen to have been as ephemeral as castles made of wax. Turmoil in the world means uncertainty for trade, government, finance and every kind of work.

No matter how great the disaster, God is greater still.

God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
though its waters roar and foam,

though the mountains tremble with its tumult. (Ps. 46:1-3)

God's help during the collapse of Arthur Andersen

Arthur Andersen, the auditing firm handling Enron, began to unravel as a result of the Enron scandal. Robert Wright was a senior partner who decided that his primary goal would be to get jobs elsewhere for the people in his division when Andersen collapsed. He began looking to sell the division to a firm that would agree to retain the employees, and he discovered he needed to rely on God. Click [here](#) to continue reading.

In the middle of difficult, threatening circumstances, we can approach our work and our co-workers calmly, confidently, even gladly. Our ultimate trust is in God, whose own self provides a refuge of strength and well-being when our strength runs out. Not just us individually, but our communities and the whole world come under God's grace. Global disaster is no match for God's providence. Reviewing the way God has taken care of us in previous circumstances—our own and the people of God's—assures us that God is with us "in the midst of the city" (Ps. 46:5) and everywhere on earth (Ps. 46:10). At times, we may even have the privilege of serving as one of God's means for helping other people in the midst of disaster.

Anxiety when unscrupulous people succeed (Psalms 49, 50, 52, 62)

Sometimes the godly have a skewed perspective on how God governs, and this causes them needless anxiety. They think that the righteous should obviously do well in life while the wicked just as obviously fall into ruin. But things don't always follow this script. When the wicked thrive, Christians feel that the world has turned upside down and that their faith has proven vain. Psalm 49:16-17 answers this: "Do not be afraid when some become rich, when the wealth of their houses increases. For when they die they will carry nothing away; their wealth will not go down after them." Godliness does not ensure commercial success, and impiety does not ensure failure. Those who devote their lives to making money must finally fail, for they have made a treasure of something they must lose (Luke 12:16-21). See "[Concern for the Wealthy \(Luke 6:25; 12:13-21; 18:18-30\)](#)" in *Luke and Work* at www.theologyofwork.org.

It is not merely a matter of the wicked having to face God's judgment after death. When someone who is evil but successful finally falls into ruin, people notice. They understand the connection between how that person lived and the calamity that ultimately swamped him or her. Psalm 52:7 describes such a situation: "See the one who would not take refuge in God, but trusted in abundant riches, and sought

refuge in wealth!" For this reason, Psalm 62:10 tells us not to seek security by following the path of the wicked or in the acquisition of wealth: "Put no confidence in extortion, and set no vain hopes on robbery; if riches increase, do not set your heart on them." In hard times we are apt to look to those who have prospered by corrupt practices or by cronyism and believe that we must do the same if we are to escape poverty. But we in fact only guarantee that we will share in their disgrace before people and their condemnation before God.

On the other hand, if we do decide to make God our trust, we must do so fully and not superficially. Psalm 50:16 declares, "But to the wicked God says: 'What right have you to recite my statutes, or take my covenant on your lips?'" It is a bad thing for someone to use fraud in order to gain wealth. It is a terrible thing to do this while feigning allegiance to God.

We would do well to ask what others see when they observe our work and the way we do it. Do we justify taking ethical shortcuts, or discrimination, or treating people badly by babbling about "blessing" or "God's will" or "favor?" Perhaps we should be more reluctant to ascribe our apparent successes to God's will and be more ready to say simply, "I don't deserve it."

Book 3 (Psalms 73–89)

Book 3 of Psalms contains a great deal of lamentation and complaint. Divine judgment—both positive and negative—comes to the fore in many of the psalms here. Contemplating these psalms gives us a mirror in which to explore our own faithfulness—or lack of it—as well as to express our actual feelings to the God who is able to reconcile everything to himself.

The workplace consequences of personal failings (Psalm 73)

Psalm 73 depicts a four-fold journey of temptation and faithfulness, playing it out in the psalmist's work. [2] In the first stage he acknowledges that God's favorable judgment is a source of strength. "Truly God is good to the upright, to those who are pure in heart" (Psalms 73:1). Yet quickly (stage two) he becomes tempted to forsake God's ways. "But as for me," he says, "my feet had almost stumbled and my feet had nearly slipped, for I was envious of the arrogant" (Ps. 73:2). He finds himself preoccupied with the apparent success of the wicked, which he describes in obsessive detail over the next ten verses. He notes in particular those who "speak with malice" and "threaten oppression" (Ps. 73:8). In his envy, he begins to think his own integrity had been pointless, "All in vain I have kept my heart clean" (Ps. 73:13) he says, noting that he has come to the edge of joining the wicked himself (Ps. 73:14-15).

At the last minute, however he goes "into the sanctuary of God," meaning he begins to "perceive" things from God's point of view (Ps. 73: 17). He sees that God will make the wicked "fall to ruin" (Ps.

73:18). This begins the third stage, in which he sees that the success of people who lack integrity is only temporary. All of them eventually “are destroyed in a moment,” and become “like a dream when one awakes” (Ps. 73:19-20). He realizes that when he was thinking of joining the wicked he had been “stupid and ignorant” (Ps. 73:22). In the fourth stage, he re-commits himself to God’s ways. “I am continually with you,” he says, and “you guide me with your counsel” (Ps. 73:23, 24).

Do we also follow this four-stage journey to some degree? We also may begin with integrity and faithfulness to God. Then we see that others seem to be getting away with deception and oppression. Sometimes we become impatient with how long God is taking to execute his judgment. While God tarries, the wicked seem to be “always at ease,” and “they increase in riches,” while the upright seem to be “plagued and punished” by the unfairness of life (Ps. 73:12, 14). But the timing of God’s judgment is God’s business, not ours. In fact, because we are not perfect ourselves, let us not be eager for God to judge the wicked.

Paying too much attention to the undeserved success of others, we become tempted to seek unfair advantages for ourselves too. It is especially tempting to succumb to this impulse at work, where it may seem like there is a different set of rules. We see arrogant people (Ps. 73:3) gain recognition and bully others into giving them an undue share of the rewards (Ps. 73:6). We see people commit fraud, yet prosper for years. Those with power over us at work seem foolish (Ps. 73:7), yet they get promoted. Maybe we should do the same ourselves. Perhaps God doesn’t really know or care how we act (Ps 73:11), at least not at work.

Like the Psalmist, our remedy is to remember that working alongside God—that is in accordance to his ways—is a delight in itself. “For me it is good to be near God” (Ps. 73:28). When we do this, we open ourselves again to God’s counsel, and return to his ways. For example, it may be that we can climb the ladder of success faster—at least at first—by taking credit for others’ work, blaming others for our mistakes, or getting others to do our work for us. But will the promotion and the extra income be worth the feeling of hollowness and the fear of being exposed as a fraud? Will success make up for the loss of friendships and the inability to trust anyone around us? If we take care of the people around us, share credit for success, and take our share of blame for failures, it may seem like we get off to a slower start. But won’t our work be more enjoyable? And when we need support, when we need trust in co-workers, and them in us, won’t we be in a better position than the arrogant and abusive? Truly, God is good to the upright.

The economic consequences of national wrongdoings (Psalm 81, 85)

Despite the attention to personal judgment we have seen in Psalm 73, in most of Book 3, it is the nation of Israel that comes under judgment. The topic of national judgment, per se, is relevant to this article to

the extent that it establishes the context for people carrying out their work in that nation. It also suggests an important type of work the Christians can engage in while representing the Kingdom of God, namely national policy making. But we can note that when a national government becomes evil, the country's economy suffers. Psalm 81 is an example, for it begins with God's judgment against the nation of Israel. "My people did not listen to my voice; Israel would not submit to me. So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts" (Ps. 81:11-12). Then it goes on to describe the economic consequences. "O that my people would listen to me....I would feed you with the finest of the wheat, and with honey from the rock I would satisfy you" (Ps. 81:13, 16). Here, we see how national violations of God's covenant bring about scarcity and economic hardship. Had the people been faithful to God's ways, they would have experienced prosperity. Instead they have abandoned God's ways and find themselves going hungry (Ps. 81:10).

Likewise, Psalm 85 describes the economic benefits that accrue when Israel is faithful to God's commands. The people experience peace and security, productive work, and increased prosperity (Ps. 85:10-13). Without good government, none of us can hope to prosper for long. In many places Christians are highly visible in opposing government policies we disagree with, but constructive engagement is needed too. What can you do to help establish or preserve good government in your town, region or nation?

God's grace in the midst of judgment (Psalm 86)

Although God's judgment takes the fore in Book 3 of the Psalms, we also find God's grace. "Be gracious to me, O Lord," Psalm 86 implores, "for you, O Lord are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call on you" (Ps. 86:2, 5). The psalm comes from someone feeling worn down by opposition from those more powerful. "I am poor and needy" (Ps. 86:1). "The insolent rise up against me; a band of ruffians seeks my life" (Ps. 86:14). "Those who hate me" are a constant threat (Ps. 86:17). "Save the child of your serving girl" (Ps. 86:16b).

The psalm does not claim righteousness, but rejoices that God is "slow to anger" (Ps. 86:15). It asks only for God's grace. "Turn to me and be gracious to me" (Ps. 86:16a). "In the day of my trouble I call on you, for you will answer me" (Ps. 86:7).

At times all of us face opposition at work. Sometimes it is very directly personal and dangerous. We may be oppressed by others, or we may be at fault, or a mixture of both. We may feel unworthy in our work, unloved in our relationships, incapable of changing either our circumstances or ourselves. No matter the source of opposition to us—even if we have seen the enemy and it is us—we can ask for God's grace to save us. God's grace cuts through the ambiguity that surrounds our life and work and shows us a sign of God's favor (Ps 86:17) beyond what we deserve.

Of course, God does not save anyone—neither ourselves or our enemies—for the purpose of inflicting further harm. With grace comes reform. “Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth” (Ps. 86:11a). The psalmist’s petition is for him- or herself, but accepting God’s grace means turning ourselves to him ahead of ourselves. “Give me an undivided heart to revere your name. I give thanks to you O Lord my God, with my whole heart” (Ps. 86:11-12).

With God’s heart, we also become merciful, even to those who oppose us. The psalm asks that opponents “be put to shame” (Ps. 86:17) for their hatred, but that in doing so they will “come and bow down before you, O Lord” (Ps. 86:9) and so also come into God’s grace. Grace means mercy not only for us, but also for our opponents, to show God’s power to his enemies so that his name is glorified (Ps. 86:9).

Book 4 (Psalms 90–106)

Book 4 of Psalms places the brokenness of the world—including human mortality—in the context of God’s sovereignty. None of us is able to make our own life—let alone the whole world—as it should be. We suffer, and we cannot shield those we love from suffering. Yet God remains in charge, and our hope for all things to be put right rests in him.

Working in a fallen world (Psalms 90, 101)

Book 4 begins with the somber Psalm 90. “You turn us back to dust...our years come to an end like a sigh” (Ps. 90:3, 9). This psalm focuses our attention on the difficulty and the brevity of life. “The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong; even then their span is only toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away” (Ps. 90:10). The brevity of life shades every aspect of our life and work. We have only so many years in which to earn enough to support our families, save something for times of hardship or old age, contribute to the common good, do our share in God’s work in the world. When young, we may be too inexperienced to get the kind of work we want. When old, we face declining skills and abilities and sometimes age discrimination. In between, we worry whether we are on a fast enough track to achieve our objectives. Work was meant to be a creative co-laboring with God (Genesis 2:19). But the pressure of time makes work feel like “toil and trouble.”

What then are we to do? Invite God to inhabit our work, no matter how toilsome it may seem. “Let your [God’s] work be manifest to your servants....Prosper for us the work of our hands—O prosper the work of our hands!” This does not mean merely placing reminders of our Lord in our places of work. It means getting God into the “work of our hands.” This includes our awareness of God’s presence at work, our recognition of God’s purpose for our work, our commitment to work according to God’s principles, and our service to those around us, who after all are made in God’s image (Genesis 1:27; 9:6; James 3:9).

Psalm 101:2 illustrates how we become equipped for doing God’s work. “I will study the way that is blameless. When shall I attain it? I will walk with integrity of heart within my house.” Cultivating good character before God and people is our first task. If we have children, one of our jobs is to help them learn the knowledge of God’s ways and grow in godly character. We are doing God’s work when we manage our homes well and give our children the chance to grow up strong and be prepared for the hardships of life. For the nihilist and the cynic, the cruelty of life justifies immorality and selfishness. For the believer, it is all the more reason to cultivate character.

Human creativity with God (Psalm 104)

From the beginning, God intended human work as a form of creativity under or alongside God’s own creativity (Genesis 1:26-31; 2:5, 15-18). Human work is meant to fulfill God’s creative intent, bring each person into relationship with other people and with God, and glorify God. Psalm 104 gives a delightful depiction of this creative partnership. It begins with a broad canvas of the glory of God’s creation (Psalms 104:1-9). This leads naturally to God’s active work in sustaining the world of animals, birds and sea creatures (Ps.104:10-12, 14, 16-18, 20-22, 25). God provides richly for human beings as well (Ps. 104:13-15, 23). God’s work makes possible the fruitfulness of nature and humanity. “From your lofty abode you water the mountains; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work” (Ps. 104:13).

The work of humans is to build further, using what God gives. We have to gather and use the plants. “You cause the grass to grow for the cattle and plants for people to cultivate” (Ps. 104: 14, alternate reading from NRSV footnote f). We make the wine and bread and extract the oil from the plants God causes to grow (Ps. 104:15). God provides so richly, in part, by populating his creation with people who labor six days a week. Thus, while this psalm speaks of all creatures looking to God for food, and God opening his hand to supply it (Ps. 104:27-28), people still have to work hard to process and use God’s good gifts. Psalm 104 goes so far as to name some of the tools used for the work of God’s world—tents, garments, beams, fire, ships (Ps. 104:1, 2, 3, 4, 26, respectively). Intriguingly, the Psalm happily ascribes use of such tools to God himself, as well as to human beings. We work *with* God, and God’s ample provision comes in part through human effort.

Even so, remember that we are the junior partners in creation with God. In keeping with Genesis, human beings are the last creatures mentioned in Psalm 104. But in distinction from Genesis, we come on the scene here with little fanfare. We are just one more of God’s creatures, going about their business alongside the cattle, birds, wild goats, coney, and lions (Ps. 104:14-23). Each has its proper activity—for humans it is work and labor until the evening—but underneath every activity, it is God who provides all that is needed (Ps. 104:21). Psalm 104 reminds us that God has done his work supremely well. In him our work may be done supremely well also, if only we work humbly in the strength his Spirit supplies, cultivating the beautiful world in which he has placed us by his grace.

Book 5 (Psalms 107-150)

The psalms in Book 5 have less of a common theme or setting than those in the other books. However, amidst the diversity of forms and settings, work appears more directly among these psalms than in other parts of the Psalter. Issues of economic creativity, business ethics, entrepreneurship, productivity, the work of raising children and managing a household, the proper use of power, and the glory of God in and through the material world all emerge in these psalms.

God undergirds all work and productivity (Psalm 107)

Psalm 107 relates human economic endeavors to the world of God's creation. It is worth citing at length.

Some went down to the sea in ships, doing business on the mighty waters; they saw the deeds of the Lord, his wondrous works in the deep. For he commanded and raised the stormy wind, which lifted up the waves of the sea. They mounted up to heaven, they went down to the depths; their courage melted away in their calamity; they reeled and staggered like drunkards, and were at their wits' end. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he brought them out from their distress; he made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed. Then they were glad because they had quiet, and he brought them to their desired haven. Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind. (Psalm 107:23-31)

Then as now, people went to sea for fishing and trading. Their ships were fragile, and they had little warning before storms surged. Their lives and livelihood depended on the weather. Notwithstanding our technological advantages, we, too, depend upon a multitude of factors beyond our control in much of our work. Perhaps the most honest thing anyone can say about success at work is, "I was fortunate." As Bill Gates remarked about the amazing success of Microsoft, "I was born at the right place and time." [3] To the believer, "fortunate" is a term to describe God's constant provision for our needs. Wringing success from the uncertainties inherent in our work depends a bit on skill (a gift from God in itself), a bit on hard work, and a lot on God's providence. Whatever our "desired haven" in life and work, "let us thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind." Perhaps James had this psalm in mind when he said, "You ought to say, 'If it is the Lord's will we will do this or that'" (James 4:15).

A bit later, Psalm 107 adds further insight to this.

God turns a desert into pools of water, a parched land into springs of water. And there he lets the

hungry live, and they establish a town to live in; they sow fields, and plant vineyards, and get a fruitful yield. By his blessing they multiply greatly, and he does not let their cattle decrease (Psalm 107:35–38).

God creates the conditions for life to thrive on earth. He can turn a desert into a pasture (or a pasture into a desert). Agriculture, including sowing crops and managing livestock, depends on God-given growth. Where agriculture prospers, towns arise. With the emergence of towns every kind of work appears. The urban economy provides all kinds of goods and services to a growing and diverse population. In an ancient economy, in addition to farmers and shepherds, a community would need potters, metalworkers, and scribes (to record commercial agreements and transactions, as well as laws and religious texts). The whole economy of any city, past or present, depends upon agricultural abundance, whether home-grown or through trade. When the world's farmer can grow more than his needs for his own subsistence, complex communities can thrive. And this comes from God, who waters the dry land (Ps. 65:9, Genesis 2:5).

Psalm 107 thus covers economic activity on both land and sea, and asserts that God is over it all. And God is not hostile to our work. The psalm speaks of how he saves and provides. Our livelihood depends upon God's beneficent governance of natural forces.

Virtues for those in business (Psalm 112)

[Bob Walker on looking to the interests of others at Walker Mowers \(Click to watch\)](#)

Psalm 112 declares God's blessings on those who do business—dealing and lending, to use the psalm's terms—according to God's commandments. "Wealth and riches are in their houses," the psalm observes, and "they are not afraid of evil tidings" (Psalms 112:3, 7). The virtues that bring such blessings include graciousness, mercy, righteousness, generosity and justice (Ps. 112:4-5). Righteousness and justice may come as no surprise to us. People want to buy and sell from businesses that are upright and just, so these virtues can be expected, in general, to bring prosperity.

But what about graciousness, mercy, and generosity? Graciousness could mean informing a customer about a lower-cost solution that brings less profit to ourselves or our company. Mercy could mean giving a supplier another chance after they miss a delivery. Generosity could mean sharing specifications with others in the industry so they can make products that interoperate with ours—good for customers, but potentially creating competition for ourselves. Does Psalm 112 mean to say that such things lead to greater prosperity, not less? Apparently so. "They have distributed freely" the psalm says, yet they are firmer, more secure, steadier, and ultimately more successful than those who do not practice such virtues (Ps. 112:7-10). The psalm attributes this to the Lord (Ps 112:1, 7) but it doesn't

say whether this is because he intervenes on their behalf or because he has created and maintained the world in such a way that these virtues tend to bring prosperity. Perhaps he does both.

Then again, perhaps the Lord blesses the upright by giving them a different picture of prosperity. Wealth and riches are included (Ps. 112:3, as above), but the overall picture includes much more than wealth. Thriving descendants (Ps. 112:2) who remember (Ps. 112:6) and honor them (Ps. 112:9), stable relationships (Ps. 112:6), heartfelt peace (Ps. 112:7), and an ability to face the future without fear (Ps. 112:8) are equally important in God's view of prosperity. Is it possible when we follow the Lord's commandments in business, it is not only our fortunes that are changed, but also our desires? If we could come to want for ourselves what God wants for us, wouldn't we be guaranteed to find a happiness that endures forever?

Participating in God's work (Psalm 113)

Psalm 113 informs us "from the rising of the sun to the place where it sets, the name of the Lord is to be praised" (Ps. 113:2). Is it suggesting we should be in the temple (or in church) all day in order to praise the Lord? Or is it suggesting that in everything we do, including our daily work, we do it in praise to the Lord? From verses 7 through 9, we clearly see it is the latter. "He raises the poor from the dust, and lifts the needy from the ash heap to make them sit with princes." Although the psalm doesn't tell us how God accomplishes this, we know—as did the Psalmist—that it generally means through work. The opportunity for well-paying work brings the poor out of poverty, and generally God creates such opportunities through his people's work—those in business who create economic opportunity, those in government who ensure justice, those in education who instill the skills needed for good jobs. With its emphasis on lifting the poor and needy, Psalm 113 is calling for a whole life of practical praise to God.

Although the psalm could have named myriad kinds of work to illustrate its point, it selects only one—the work of bearing and rearing children "He gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children" (Ps. 113:9). Perhaps this is because childlessness in ancient Israel virtually doomed a woman (and her husband) to poverty in old age. Or perhaps it is for some other reason. Regardless, it reminds of us of two important matters today. Most obviously, when mothers (and fathers) conceive, feed, clean, protect, play with, teach, coach, forgive, train, and love children, it takes work! Yet many mothers feel that no one—even the church—recognizes that what they do is as valuable as the work that others do because they get paid. Secondly, God's relief for adults who lack children and for children who lack adults usually comes about through the work of other people. Medical professionals may be able to restore fertility. Adoption professionals and child welfare workers bring would-be parents together with children who need parents, and remain with families to provide training and supervision as needed. All families depend on the support of a wide community of other people, including the people of God. For more on the work of families, see "[The work of marriage](#),"

raising children, and caring for parents (Psalm 127, 128, 139)".

Producing true value at work (Psalms 127)

As Psalm 107 speaks of large-scale economic activity, so Psalms 127 and 128 speak of the household, the basic unit of economic production until the time of the Industrial Revolution. Psalm 127 begins with a reminder that all good work is grounded in God.

Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord guards the city, the guard keeps watch in vain. It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives sleep to his beloved. (Psalm 127:1-2)

Both the “house” and the “city” refer to the same thing, the goal of providing goods and security for the residents. Ultimately, all economic activity is aimed at enabling households to thrive. The passage obviously asserts that diligent labor alone is not enough (compare Proverbs 26:13-16, on laziness). Beyond the obvious point, there is a deeper meaning. Hard work can produce a large and beautiful house, but it cannot create a happy home. A zealous entrepreneur can create a successful business but cannot by work alone create a good life. Only God can make it all worthwhile.

In most economies today, work other than farming is not usually performed in households, but in larger organizations. But the message of Psalm 127 applies to today’s institutionalized workplaces much as it does to ancient households. To thrive, every place of work must produce something of value. Putting in hours is not enough—the work has to result in goods or services that others need.

Believers may be able to offer something of special significance in this regard. In every workplace there is a temptation to produce items that can turn a quick buck, but don’t offer any lasting value. Businesses can increase profits—in the short term—by cutting the quality of materials. Sales people may be able to take advantage of buyers’ unfamiliarity to sell dubious products and accessories. Educational institutions can offer classes that attract students without developing lasting capabilities. And so on. The more we understand the genuine needs of the people who use our goods and services, and the more we contribute to the true value of what we produce, the more we can help our work institutions resist these temptations. Because true worth is ultimately grounded in God, we may have a unique ability to serve this role. But it must be done with humility and constant listening. It will accomplish nothing to loudly throw around our half-baked opinions until people are sick of hearing from us.

The work of marriage, raising children, and caring for parents (Psalm 127, 128, 139)

The work of marriage, childbearing and caring for parents comes to the fore again in Psalms 127, 128 and 139. (The work of childbearing is an important element of Psalm 113, "[Participating in God's Work \(Psalms 113\)](#)".) "Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table" (Psalm 128:3). Husbands and wives together engage in production of the most fundamental kind—re-production! Needless to say, the wife performs more labor in this endeavor than the husband. In the Bible this is not a despised role—it is understood to be essential for survival and was honored in ancient Israel. Beyond the bearing of children, wives typically managed the household, including both domestic and commercial production (Proverbs 31:10-31).

The Bible honors those who go down to the sea and those who shepherd the sheep (traditional male occupations) as well as those who manage the household (a traditional female occupation). Today, work roles are much less divided according to sex—except for managing the family home, which still is performed mostly by women^[4]—but the honor accorded to marriage and to the work of families still applies.

Like every form of work—and bearing children is work! —child-bearing comes from God. "It was you [God] who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb" (Ps. 139:13). Likewise, as with every other form of labor, this does not mean that when tragedy strikes it is a punishment from or abandonment by God. Rather, child-bearing is a point of God's common grace to humanity throughout the world. In the womb God makes us, and he makes us for a purpose. Our birthright is to do work of value to God himself.

We return to Psalm 127 for the final element of this theme, that the work of a household includes caring for those whose age diminishes their work capacity. "Sons are indeed a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward" (Psalm 127:3). In the ancient world, people had no institutionalized pension plans or health insurance. As they became older, their sons provided for them. (The text speaks of "sons" because typically daughters would marry and enter the households of their husbands' families.) In effect, sons were a couple's retirement plan, and this bound the generations closely together.

It may seem stark to put the value of raising children in economic terms. Today, we might feel more comfortable speaking of the emotional rewards of raising children. Be that as it may, this verse teaches that adults need children as much as children need adults, and that children are a gift from God, not a burden. It also reminds us of all the investments our parents made in us—emotional, physical, intellectual, creative, economic, and many more. As we grow up and our parents come to depend on us, it is right for us to take on the work of caring for parents. There are a variety of ways this may be done.

The point is simply God's command to honor our parents (Exodus 20:12) is not only a matter of attitude, but also of work and economic care.

The right use of power (Psalm 136)

Power is essential to most work, and it must be exercised rightly. Psalm 136 lays out the proper use of power by showing four examples of how God uses power.

The first example comes in verses 4-9. It shows God's use of power to create the world, "who by his understanding made the heavens...who spread out the earth upon the waters" (Ps. 136:5-6). This takes us back to Genesis 1—to the God of creation, giving our world all that we need to flourish. But note the order in which God works, first creating systems (land, water, night, day, sun and moon) that were necessary for the survival of his later creations (plants, land animals, swimming and flying creatures). God did not create animals until there was dry land and vegetation to sustain them. When it is in our power to create tasks or systems, we use power properly when we create environments in which we and those around us not only survive but thrive. For more on God's provision in creation, see "[Provision \(Genesis 1:29-30; 2:8-14\)](#)" in *Genesis 1-11 and Work* at www.theologyofwork.org.

The second example comes in Psalm 136:10-15 when God delivers his people from slavery in Egypt. The third comes immediately afterwards, when God strikes down the Canaanite kings who oppose Israel in its journey to settle the Promised Land (Ps. 136:16-22). Together these show us that God uses power to free people from oppression and to oppose those who would keep others from the good God intends for them. When our work frees others to fulfill their destiny in God's design, we are using power rightly. When our work would re-enslave workers or oppose God's work in and through them, we are abusing power.

The fourth example comes at the end of the psalm. "It is God who remembered us in our low estate...and rescued us from our foes...who gives food to all flesh" (Ps. 136:23-25). God lovingly recognizes our weakness and supplies our needs. When we use power to do work that benefits others, we are using power as God would use it.

Finally, for the proper use of power, every verse of Psalm 136 reminds us to give thanks to God, "whose steadfast love endures forever."

God's glory in all of creation (Psalm 146-150)

The final five psalms each begin with the shout "Praise the Lord!" As our survey of the psalms has shown, work is intended to be a form of praise to God. These five psalms depict a variety of ways in

which our work can praise the Lord. In all of them we see that our work is grounded in God's own work. When we work as God intends, we imitate, extend, and fulfill God's work.

Psalm 146

God executes justice for the oppressed (Ps. 146:7a). So do we, when we work according to God's commandments, by God's grace. God gives food to the hungry (Ps 146:7b). So do we. God liberates people in chains, as do legislators, lawyers, judges and juries. God restores sight to the blind, as do ophthalmologists, opticians and glassmakers. God lifts up those who cannot rise on their own, as do physical therapists, orderlies, elevator makers, and parents of infants (Ps. 146:8). The Lord watches over strangers, as do police and security workers, flight attendants, lifeguards, health inspectors, and peacekeepers. He takes care of orphans and widows (Ps. 146:9), as do foster parents, elder care workers, family lawyers and social service workers, financial planners, and boarding school workers. Praise the Lord! (Ps. 146: 10).

Psalm 147

God gathers the outcasts (Ps. 147:2), as do Sisters of Charity, teachers in prisons, and community organizers. He heals the brokenhearted (Ps. 147:3), as do grief counselors, matchmakers, humorists, and blues singers. He counts the stars and gives them names (Ps. 147:4), as do astronomers, navigators, and story-tellers. He is abundant in power (Ps. 147:5a), as are presidents, chairpersons, admirals, parents, and political-prisoners-turned-statesmen. He has profound understanding (Ps. 147:5b) as do professors, poets, painters, machinists, sonar operators, and people whose autism gives them extraordinary powers of concentration on details. He lifts up the downtrodden, as do civil right activists and donors, and he breaks the power of the wicked, as do district attorneys, whistleblowers, and all those who walk away from gossip and speak up for co-workers being treated unfairly (Ps. 147:6).

God prepares the earth for the coming weather (Ps. 147:8), as do meteorologists, climate researchers, architects and builders, air traffic controllers. He feeds the animals (Ps. 147:9), as do ranchers and shepherds and boys and girls in rural villages. He strengthens the gates, protects the children, and preserves peace at the borders (Ps. 147:13-14a), as do engineers, soldiers, customs agents, and diplomats. He prepares the finest foods (Ps. 147:14b) as do cooks, chefs, bakers, winemakers, brewers, farmers, homemakers and two-career householders (mostly the women), recipe bloggers, grocers, truckers, and—in their own way—fast food workers, cafeteria ladies, and frozen dinner cooks. He declares his word—his statutes and ordinances (Ps. 147:19). Praise the Lord! (Ps. 147:20).

Psalm 149

The Lord takes pleasure in song, dancing, and the music of instruments (Ps. 149:2-3), as do musicians, dancers, composers, songwriters, choreographers, film scorers, music librarians, teachers, arts organization workers and donors, choir members, music therapists, students in bands, choruses and orchestras, garage bands, yodelers, laborers who sing at their work, music producers and publishers, YouTubers, hip-hop scratchers, lyricists, audio manufacturers, piano tuners, kalimba makers, acousticians, music app writers, and everyone who sings in the shower. Perhaps no form of human endeavor is more universal, yet more varied, than music making, and all of it derives from God's own love of music.

The Lord takes pleasure in his people (Ps. 149:4a), as do all good leaders, family members, mental health workers, pastors, sales people, tour guides, coaches, party planners, and everyone who serves others. If situations oppress people or systems make it impossible for people to take wholesome pleasure in others, the Lord vanquishes the oppressors and reforms the systems (Ps. 149:4b-9a), as do social and corporate reformers, journalists, ordinary women and men who refuse to accept the status quo, organizational psychologists and human resource professionals, and—if conditions are extreme and there is no other way—armies, navies, air forces and their commanders. When justice and good governance is restored, the music can begin again (Ps. 149:6). Praise the Lord! (Ps. 149:9b).

Psalm 148

Unlike Psalms 146, 147, and 149, Psalms 148 and 150 do not depict God at work, but skip directly to our response of praise for the work he has already done. Psalm 148 speaks of God's creation, as if the creation's very existence is a praise to God. "Praise the Lord from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps, fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command! Mountains and all hills, fruit trees, and all cedars! Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds!" (Ps. 148:7-10). His creation makes our work fruitful, so it is fitting that we offer all the work we do as praise to him. "Young men and women alike, old and young together, let them praise the name of the Lord!" (Ps. 148:13). Praise the Lord! (Ps. 148:14).

Psalm 150

The final psalm returns to music as our response to God's "mighty deeds", upon which all our activity and work are founded. Praise God with trumpets, lutes, harps, tambourines, strings, pipe, cymbals—both clanging and crashing— and dance. Coming as the climax of five songs full of work, and as the ultimate end of the entire collection of psalms, it gives the impression that music is very

important work indeed. Not music for its own sake alone, however, but because it allows us to praise the Lord louder. We can take this both literally and metaphorically. From the literal perspective, we might hold music, dance and the other arts in a bit higher regard than is customary in the Christian community, which is not always welcoming to music (except within narrow borders) and the arts (at all). Or at the least, we might hold *our own* music and art in a bit higher esteem. If we cannot seem to find time to express our own artistic creativity, is it possible that we are missing the value of the songs that God puts in our hearts?

Metaphorically, could Psalm 150 be inviting us to go about our work as if it were a kind of music? We could probably all do with more harmony in our relationships, a steadier rhythm of work and rest, an attention to the beauty of the work we do and the people we work among. If we could see the beauty in our work, would it help us overcome work's challenges, such as ethical temptations, boredom, bad relationships, frustration, and low productivity at times? For example, imagine you are so frustrated with your boss that you are tempted to stop doing your work well. Would it help if you could see the beauty in your work beyond your relationship with your boss? What kind of beauty does your work bring to the world? What beauty does God see in what you do? Is that enough to sustain you in difficult times or to lead you to make the changes you need to make in your work or the way you do it?

In any case, no matter how we perceive our work, God intends our work to praise him. The 150 psalms in the Bible cover every aspect of life and work from the darkest terrors to the brightest hopes. Some speak of death and despair, others of prosperity and hope. But the final conclusion of Psalms is praise. "Let everything that breathes praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!" (Psalm 150:6).

ENDNOTES

- [1] Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, vol. 19, 2nd ed., Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville, TN: Nelson Reference & Electronic, 2004), 45-55.
- [2] John E. Hunter, *Finding the Living Christ in the Psalms* (Zondervan, 1972) develops this idea in the article "The Man Who Looked Four Ways," although we have not followed his stages exactly.
- [3] "Bill Gates Answers Most Frequently Asked Questions" [document on-line]; available from http://download.microsoft.com/download/0/c/0/0c020894-1f95-408c-a571-1b5033c75bbc/billg_faq.doc; (12 February 2010).
- [4] Man Yee Kan, Oriel Sullivan, and Jonathan Gershuny, *Sociology*, April 2011; vol. 45, 2: pp. 234-251.