Psalms and Emotions

Guest: Courtney Reissig
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Michelle: When she was 32 weeks pregnant, author and Bible teacher, Courtney Reissig, found herself facing possible death.

Courtney: I remember thinking that hospital bed rest would be this like walk in the park; but for someone, who’s facing a life-threatening crisis that could kill them or their baby at any moment, you can’t relax. I couldn’t focus my mind on anything except the Psalms. I found words for how I felt.

Michelle: Find out how the Psalms give us words to our emotions on this edition of FamilyLife This Week.

Welcome to FamilyLife This Week. I’m Michelle Hill. You know, King David was a man who, well we would say was in touch with his emotions. But in some ways, he was self-aware. In fact, he wrote a good portion of Psalms; and in that book, we find a myriad of emotions: ranging from despair—you know, where he says, “My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?”—to the pleas—where he’s asking, “Don’t you hear me, God?”—to anguish to repentance. You know, David was honest with God about what he was feeling.

As we start this new year, I wanted to spend some time getting ahold of my emotions; and I’m noticing the pattern to David’s cries to God. He cries out; and he shares his pain/he shares his suffering; but by the end of most of the Psalms, he’s thanking God and he’s praising Him.

Courtney Reissig recently spent a lot of time in the Psalms. She wrote a book, a book that just hits the bookstores this week! It’s titled Teach Me to Feel: Worshiping Through the Psalms in Every Season of Life.

Courtney came into our studios, and we talked about how the Psalms inform our feelings. I was asking Courtney, “Just why do we have these emotions?”—because for a long time, while I was growing up, I just sort of stamped down my emotions—you
know, “Don’t even show them to anybody else.” I asked Courtney—I said, “Why emotions and why is this a good thing to share our emotions?” Here’s my conversation with Courtney.

[Previous Interview]

Courtney: I think the primary reason why we have emotions and feelings is because we are created in the image of God. God created us to bear His image/to tell a story about who He is to a watching world. One of the ways we do that—is that God feels; God feels something about His creation, so He loves His creation. He loves His created beings; He feels sadness when they sin against Him, when they face pain and difficulty.

When we look at Jesus, Jesus felt life deeply, both in His incarnation/His humanity but also in His deity. He felt what it meant to live in a broken world; He felt what it meant to be God living in a broken world. We feel and we have emotions, because God created us in His image.

Now, some of us have stronger emotions than others. [Laughter] I am one of those people who has—my husband always jokes that I have very high highs and very low lows; and usually everyone knows—in my sphere of influence—knows when I’m having those highs and those lows.

So those—obviously, living in a broken world, our feelings are broken and our emotions are broken by living in a broken world. But that does not mean that they’re sinful, in and of, themselves. We, as Christians, have to learn how to harness and have our emotions shaped by being created as His image bearers; and ultimately, shaped by the Word of God and by who God has first created us to be as image bearers but, also, who God’s making us more like Christ/more into His image through salvation.

Michelle: How do we go about shaping that? I’m thinking of almost like a clay pot, where God is trying to shape us and mold us.

Courtney: Yes; right.

Michelle: But how do we go about doing that?

Courtney: I think one of the ways that that happens is through the process of sanctification; so through the work of the Holy Spirit in our life, God is renewing us and making us more like his Son, Jesus. That is going to shape our emotions, and grow our emotions, and deepen our emotions, and make them more God-like emotions.
When you think of anger, anger is not sinful, in and of itself. We often sin in our anger; we are not God-like in our anger. God is angry. We should be angry about the things that God is angry about: like injustice, and sin, and the effects of living in a fallen world. Very often, our anger manifests itself in ways that are for our own glory and not God’s glory.

The way we’re re-made into the image of Christ—through Christ’s work on the cross and through the sanctifying work through the Holy Spirit, and the way that that happens is through the Word incarnate—we know what God is like. Through knowing God through His Word, and through knowing who Jesus is and how He displayed His emotions, we can be re-made into the image of Christ.

That’s where I think the Psalms are helpful because, in the Psalms, we see a full range of emotions. We see that process of sanctification in the Book of the Psalms. We see people responding to the reality of life in a broken world. I think that the way we grow in our emotions is staying as close to God as possible. The way we stay close to God is through His Word; the Psalms help us in that.

Michelle: Now, you have written a book on the Psalms—

Courtney: I have.

Michelle: —Teach Me to Feel. Congratulations; it’s just out this week. In fact, you’ve been able to pick up the hard copy that I was given.

Courtney: Yes.

Michelle: So that’s exciting to see your excitement over a book that has taken so long, I’m sure—

Courtney: Yes.

Michelle: —months and months of just pouring over the Psalms, and really taking the time to study and to figure out what David and these other players are saying.

You say that the Psalms are a mirror into our soul. Talk to us about that: “How are the Psalms a mirror for us?”
Courtney: I think the Psalms, unlike other—so we look at maybe narrative, and we get maybe an emotionless take on what’s happening in redemptive history. The Psalms give us a glimpse into what’s happening in redemptive history from the vantage point of poetry. If anyone’s familiar with poetry, we don’t read poetry like we read the newspaper. We are often intended to feel something; so if you think of songs on the radio as our modern form of poetry, many of us feel something deeply when we hear a song that is moving to us or has a lyric that we really like.

We need to look at the Psalms in the genre that they’re intended to be viewed as, which is poetry. By their very nature, we are intended to feel something when we come to the Psalms. Part of the reason of that is because God has left no stone unturned when it comes to giving us His Word. He’s given us narrative; He’s given us prophecy; and He’s given us poetry. Each of those give us a different way of viewing how He’s working in redemptive history.

One of the ways He’s working in redemptive history is helping us process life in a broken world. I think that the Psalms are incredibly helpful for the believer, who maybe feels delivered and is rejoicing in all that God has done for them; but also the believer, who feels stuck and is waiting for God to do something, and they haven’t seen that deliverance come yet. It allows them language to cry out to God, and to pray to God, and to ask God to deliver them; then allows them to know they’re not the first ones or the last ones who will ever sit in this waiting place/waiting for God to act on their behalf.

Michelle: It’s hard to wait.

Courtney: It’s incredibly hard.

Michelle: It’s extremely hard to wait.

Courtney: Yes!

Michelle: You know, Courtney, in the last couple of months, I have had a few significant life-altering disappointments and, really, almost feeling like explosions in my life. I have felt lost and alone and feeling like God’s not there/God doesn’t have my good right now, which I know are lies. I know all of those are lies, but those are still the feelings inside of me.

Courtney: Right.
Michelle: I’ve been trying to share with others; and some people will just say: “Stop complaining,” or they’ll listen once—I’m just trying to process. There’s been a few people, who have said: “What you have/are facing now is a lot. It is significant, and you need to continue to get this out.”

I have turned to Psalm 86. I have been trying to memorize Psalm 86 because—“Incline your ear to me, oh Lord, for I am poor and needy,”—and to continue to say, “God I’m crying out to you.”

Courtney: Right; right.

Michelle: You talk a lot about lamenting. That is becoming—in some churches, that is a new old tradition that some churches have picked up on.

Courtney: Right; right.

Michelle: But what is lamenting?—what is true lamenting?

Courtney: Lament is crying out to God—asking God to do what He promised to do—acknowledging that we’re not experiencing what He’s promised for us. You see that all throughout the Psalms. The Book of the Psalms are lament, which is crazy because the Psalms literally means “praise”; but the Psalms are mostly filled with lament, which leads many to ask, “Why?”

The reality is that/because most of us live in the lament. We might have pockets of up/of upswing; but the older I am, and the more I meet people, the more I realize we’re all limping all the way to glory; and we’re all living in this lament. Lament is—one of the hallmarks of Christian lament is not that you complain—as people may think that you are doing—I would say it’s not complaining; I would say you’re acknowledging God in it.

So lament is: “God incline Your ear to my testimonies,” or Psalm 89 talks about: “Are you going to forget everything that You’ve promised to me?”—that’s where most of us live. Psalm 77 is: “When I remember God, I moan,”—so even in crying out to God, we moan; we ache; we long; we feel the weight of living in a broken world. Lament is this feeling the brokenness of living in a fallen world and crying out to God, begging Him to make all things new.

Michelle: I was thinking about Chapter One, and you tell the story of two different women that you know.
Courtney: Yes; yes.

Michelle: Can you explain those two different women to us as we’re unpacking what Psalms really looks like?

Courtney: Yes, so the first woman is the woman who spent her postpartum days with twins, and she did not meditate on God’s Word. She didn’t—she didn’t even go open God’s Word. She spent all of her early morning hours feeding her twins, watching Netflix; and she was exhausted. She didn’t have the energy or capacity to meditate on God’s Word, and it bore bitter fruit in her life over the long haul.

The second woman is a woman, who vowed not to make the same mistake again; so she’s the same woman. She found that, while the circumstances were largely the same/the trials were largely the same, she meditated on God’s Word and found sustaining hope/sustaining grace. It didn’t remove the difficulty; and it didn’t remove the emotions and the pain; and it didn’t always remove her sinful responses to what God had brought her way; but it did anchor her and give her a leg to stand on when trials came.

That woman is me. I have four children: I have twins; then I had two children—two single children—after that. I can see, in both instances, where not rooting myself in God’s Word did bear a significantly bitter fruit in my own life.

That is the hope I want to lay out for women in this book—is that God’s Word will not return void in your life. It might not always feel like it’s not returning void in your life, but our feelings are not infallible; they can’t always be trusted. We can trust that the God, who gave us our emotions and who’s given us His Word, will work His Word into our life; it won’t return void.

[Studio]

Michelle: What a wonderful promise from the Word of God that His words will not return void—may not always feel that way—but I can promise you that, because God promises that.

Hey, we need to take a break; but when we come back, Courtney Reissig answers just where she finds time to study God’s Word in her busy schedule of raising toddlers. Two minutes—we'll be back.

[Radio Station Spot Break]
**Michelle:** Welcome back to *FamilyLife This Week.* I'm Michelle Hill. We’re in the middle of a show, where we’re talking about emotions and feelings and, really, how the Psalms in God’s Word should be informing our emotions. This is Part Two of my conversation with Courtney Reissig.

[Previous Interview]

**Michelle:** Where did you find time to read your Bible?—because the first time, when you had twins, life was chaotic and everything; so at the end of the day, you were just like, “I just want to numb my brain from what is going on.” Where did you find time, because your days were just the same?

**Courtney:** Right; right.

**Michelle:** You are *now* a mom of four little boys.

**Courtney:** Right; I think—so when I look back on the time with the twins, my husband and I both had different responses. When he would do middle-of-the-night feedings, he would listen to the Bible on his phone while he was feeding them. I would watch Netflix.

[Change made] But as I would just listen to a sermon; that sustained me. If I just replaced a Netflix episode of whatever show I was watching with a sermon, or a podcast, or an interview, or something that was going to get Scripture into my mind, then I would/that that would serve me. Sometimes I could read a Psalm or a chapter of the Bible on my phone while I was doing a feeding; but more often than not, it was listening to a sermon or a podcast while I was feeding the baby. Honestly, we have so much at our disposal now in this modern age, where we *can* redeem some of that time and listen to things or take things in.

There’s just so much available to us now that we can take in Scripture, and it won’t look the same way. It’s not going to be sitting down for an hour with a quiet time, where you’re journaling everything you learn; that’s just not possible. But you can find little bits of time, whether you’re drying your hair or things like that. I tried to find little ways where I could do it. I didn’t always do it perfectly; but I noticed that when I did, it made a difference.

**Michelle:** You know, you mentioned drying hair. I had a broken hair dryer for *years* that would only give a little bit of poof of the air that came out, but it still *dried*; so I kept it
because I was able to put Scripture on, and I could listen to it. Now I have a new hairdryer; it’s full-powered, and I can’t hear anything else.

**Courtney:** You could put headphones in!

**Michelle:** That’s a great idea!

**Courtney:** That’s what I do, because I can’t hear. I’ll put headphones in and listen if I want to listen to something while I’m drying my hair.

**Michelle:** [Laughter] That’s a great idea.

**Courtney:** I’ve tried to—I’ve tried to get creative.

**Michelle:** That’s a great idea.

We know that one of the purposes of the Psalms is to give us a language for our emotional responses to life’s difficulties and success. How did you see that play out in your life?

**Courtney:** I began studying the Psalms about a year before everything happened in our family that I talk about in the book. I was leading a Bible study on the wisdom literature and the Psalms. It was there that I got this understanding of: “Oh, the Psalms are fulfilling this larger purpose in Scripture that I wasn’t aware of before.” They kind of fit together as this unit; I always viewed them as like—you pull out a Psalm for however you’re feeling that day or whatever is going on in your life.

Once I started seeing them as this cohesive unit: with Psalm 1 and Psalm 2, setting the Psalms up; and then Psalm 146 through 150 closing our the Psalms of what life’s going to be like in the new heavens and the new earth, I was like: “Oh wow; they kind of tell the whole story of Scripture in poetic language.” That just really piqued my interest. I just started reading a lot about them, not knowing that God was using that to help prepare me for what was to come.

When I was 33 weeks pregnant with our fourth son, I had a placenta abruption, which is a life-threatening pregnancy complication. It was a partial abruption, so I was put in the hospital for three weeks. Every day was this: “You could deliver him today,” or “You could not deliver him today”; or “You could deliver him dead today,” or “You could not deliver him today”; and then it became this: “You could both die today,” or “You could
both not die today.” It was this constant up and down of not knowing what was going to happen.

**Michelle:** Your feelings are all over the map.

**Courtney:** —all over the map; all over the map—in a constant state of heightened awareness, heightened stress, heightened emotion. We had three other children at the time, so they had to be under constant care; we weren’t able to watch them. My parents had to come get them/take them home. It was a long/very long and arduous process and, really, emotionally taxing on my husband and me and our children as a whole.

I remember thinking that hospital bed rest would be like this walk in the park—like you get to watch TV; you can play games; you can really enjoy—like coast through your final weeks of pregnancy and then have a baby. I don’t know if it’s like that for some people; but for someone, who’s facing a life-threatening crisis, that could kill them or their baby at any moment, you *can’t* relax.

I couldn’t read books. People so graciously brought me so many magazines and books, and I wanted to read them so desperately and I—I couldn’t read. I couldn’t focus my mind on anything except the Psalms! I would read them; I would read them probably two or three times straight through in the hospital, and I found *words* for how I felt—words for how I was feeling about life and death; because life and death are all over the Psalms. As I faced trauma and trial, I saw the Psalms meet me there. As we faced deliverance, I saw the Psalms meet me there. Then we faced repeated setbacks and trials, as a family, for I mean—even still enduring some of that—the Psalms have repeatedly shown up and met me in the happy places and also in the sad places as well.

**Michelle:** Is there a point in time, where we’re taking lament too far?—or we’re taking that complaining to God too far? Or is He just such a big God that He—His shoulders can take it?

**Courtney:** I think it’s a case-by-case/person-by-person thing that probably only the person, who’s lamenting, can truly know in their own heart whether they’re taking it too far. I think a lot of people would impose that on a person, but I would say the Psalms are filled with a *lot* of really raw hard questions; and I think God is not surprised by our questions.

The reality is—we’re thinking it already; He knows it; so why not take it to the only one who can make a difference in it?—who can bear the weight of what we’re feeling in the
moment. I think we probably, as a culture, err far too much on the side of not lamenting, which is why we ask the question, “...if we’re taking it too far?” because we’re so afraid of lament.

Michelle: Right.

Courtney: I think we would do far better to be honest, because lament takes on many forms. It takes on repentance; it takes on brokenness of our sin: brokenness over the sins done against us, brokenness over corporate injustice, brokenness over our own personal suffering.

I think we need to be raw and honest for a long time before we start asking the question, “...if we’re...” because I think, as a Christian culture and the American West, we have failed to lament for far too long. I think we can do a lot more lamenting and a lot less questioning whether or not it’s okay. [Laughter] Maybe I'm wrong in that, but I would err on the side of the Psalmists—are really raw.

Michelle: —which gives me comfort in you saying that, because you’ve studied the Psalms so much. I was looking at Psalm 20 this morning; it said, “May the Lord answer you in the day of trouble,”—I was like, “Nope, has not yet.” “May the name of the God of Jacob set you securely on high,”—I was like: “Security? No; I’m still in the avalanche. I have nothing to hold onto.”

I just kept going through that, and I had such a callous attitude; and then it comes to the end and it says, “May the King answer us in the day we call.” I had to remember that He is still the King on high and that, one day, He will hear. I know that if I were to go through this Psalm again, in maybe next year/maybe even in a couple of months, I probably would have a different attitude, going through it.

Courtney: Right; right!

Michelle: I hope I would.

Courtney: You think—like I heard once, one commentator—his name is Mark Futato, who’s a really helpful Psalms scholar—he said, “We don’t know—we often read the Psalms as a quick resolution to trust. We use that as a prescription in the lives of people,” which is incredible unhelpful. He said, “We don’t know how long it took certain Psalms to be written. Maybe there’s this long period of lament that they wrote in May and then they didn’t get the resolution until November.”
Michelle: Good point.

Courtney: That’s true. It was incredibly helpful for me to realize, “No writer writes something in a day, usually.” We don’t know when they were written and over the course of which they were written. But like—for example, Psalm 22 has this quick, in the middle of it: “You answered me.” Sometimes God’s answering you when you’re stuck and you feel like you can’t take any longer—God answers in the immediate.

But then you’ve got some Psalms—where Psalm 88 ends with darkness. Sometimes that’s where we live, and we don’t get an answer. I think that’s what’s helpful to people, who are living in the real world—that sometimes in a few months, you might get an answer; and sometimes you might not.

The reality is—you look at Jesus in the Garden, who prayed the Psalms and fulfilled the Psalms. In the Garden of Gethsemane, He asks the Lord to take the cup from Him; and God did not answer. God did not remove the cup. He went all the way to the cross without that answer, and God forsook Him; but He doesn’t do it to us because of Christ—that’s the hope that we have.

We may not always feel incredibly hopeful in the moment, because we can’t grab our hands on it as a tangible deliverance; but it will one day be true that this light and momentary affliction that feels like an endless eternity will give way to glory; and He will deliver us, ultimately. We just don’t know when—if it’s in this life or the one to come.

[Studio]

Michelle: A wonderful reminder from Courtney Reissig on how, for those of us who place our trust and our hope in Christ, there is a day that is glorious waiting for us; and it will come, and how the Book of Psalms actually points us to that glorious day.

Courtney Reissig has written the book, Teach Me to Feel.

To close out our time today, I felt it best to read from the Psalms—from Psalm 23:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, He leads me beside quiet waters. He restores my soul. He guides me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil for You are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my
enemies. You have anointed my head with oil. My cup overflows. Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Hey, coming up next week, we are going to talk about money in marriage. You know, it should be simple; right? And yet, it’s the number-one starter of most fights between a husband and a wife: she wants to spend it one way; he wants to spend it another. Someone wants to save and invest; and the other one wants to, well, you know, it gets tricky. I hope you can join us for that.

Thanks for listening. I want to thank the president of FamilyLife®, David Robbins, along with our station partners around the country. A big “Thank you!” to our engineer today, Marques Holt, who is pulling double duty as he is also a producer and editor of this show. Thanks to Bruce Goff. Justin Adams is our mastering engineer. Megan Martin is our production coordinator.

Our program is a production of FamilyLife Today, and our mission is to effectively develop godly families who change the world one home at a time.

I'm Michelle Hill, inviting you to join us again next time for another edition of FamilyLife This Week.

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