

STABILITY IN THE STORM

7 DEVOTIONALS THROUGH THE PSALMS



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INTRODUCTION

I never thought much about race and ethnic identity when I was younger. I knew that my friends thought my lunch was smelly, and they attended soccer practice while I went to Chinese school. But, for the most part, I just focused on fitting in.

I tried to wear the right clothes and avoid the wrong ones, to listen to the right music and never bring up other music. I didn't want to be disdainfully labeled as "so Asian" like my friend, whom I talked to at Chinese youth group but avoided during school.

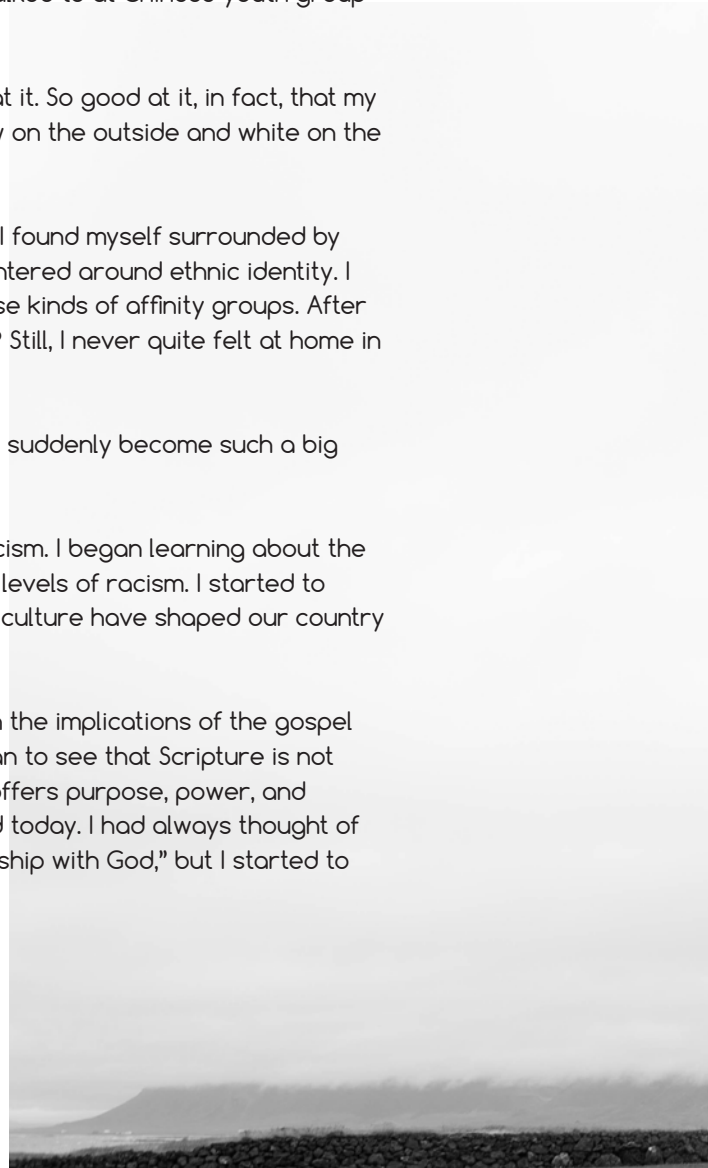
When it came to fitting in, I was pretty good at it. So good at it, in fact, that my friends jokingly called me a "banana"—yellow on the outside and white on the inside.

But things changed when I moved to college. I found myself surrounded by different groups of people, many of them centered around ethnic identity. I thought that, as a Christian, I didn't need these kinds of affinity groups. After all, "Christian" was my ultimate identity, right? Still, I never quite felt at home in the many separate spaces I joined.

Where did I belong, and why had my ethnicity suddenly become such a big deal?

Then I took a sociology class on race and racism. I began learning about the social construction of race and the different levels of racism. I started to understand more why and how ethnicity and culture have shaped our country and my own experiences.

Around the same time, I began wrestling with the implications of the gospel for my own life and for social injustice. I began to see that Scripture is not just guidance for getting into heaven, but it offers purpose, power, and hope for engaging in real issues of our world today. I had always thought of Christianity in terms of my "personal relationship with God," but I started to



see I wasn't saved just to know God, but to know God with others—to be a citizen in his kingdom, where our ethnic diversity serves to glorify Christ, build up his church, and pursue justice on earth.

It troubled me that, on my campus, discussions of Christian faith and racial justice rarely intersected. I found that Christian Asian American students often had trouble connecting Scripture to their ethnic experiences, while others were turning away from Christianity because of its apparent irrelevance to their ethnic identities.

If you relate to these tensions, this devotional series is for you. This resource will help turn our hearts and minds to the ultimate source of truth and wisdom—the Word of God. It's in his Word that we can begin to see God rightly, and, in turn, see ourselves rightly.

My hope is that these reflections and questions will lead you to understand God's Word in a deeper, more holistic, and more personalized way, and that this understanding will compel and empower you to reshape your life and pursuits around the character of Christ. I believe the Scriptures have the power to speak personally and specifically to our unique ethnic experiences. I invite you to come, see, and be transformed by the loving hand of our God.

Grace Liu, Vanderbilt University '21, Events Coordinator, AACC



psalm 139:

DOES GOD KNOW WHAT IT MEANS TO BE ASIAN AMERICAN?

Sean Kim

Like many Christians, I was taught to pray at a young age. I memorized the Lord's Prayer in both English and Korean and was told that God would open doors for me so long as I had the will to knock on them. So I prayed for many things—my family's health, good grades, the desires of my heart.

Often, the subject of my prayers was grounded in some facet of my identity. I was a student, a son to my parents, and of course a friend of Jesus. But I realized that my prayers rarely spoke to my experience as an Asian American.

Part of the reason for this might have been cultural. Younger Asian-American Christians are often discouraged from injecting too much of our ethnic background into our Christian practice. Naturally, we are taught to put our identities as Christians above everything else. However, I suspect that because of my effort to downplay my ethnic background, I developed a faint impression that God does not really deal with specifically Asian-American concerns.

Thankfully, a faithful reading of Scripture reveals the opposite to be true. Psalm 139 demonstrates that not only does God know what it means to be Asian-American, but he also knows more about it than even we ourselves do. God knows the most ordinary things about us (v. 2) as well as the most intimate (v. 13). He watches over every aspect of our lives as a perfect Father and cares for us with a loving hand (v. 5). How could such a Father ignore the unique joys and anxieties of our Asian-American identity? Though we may be tempted to find self-worth within ourselves and our identities, let us remember that true confidence comes from recognizing God's work in our creation (v. 14).

Living in a finite world, we can easily lose grasp of the infinity of God's majesty. But God does not operate in a singular time and place, limited in his reach by culture, language, or heritage. He does not ask us to shed our ethnic identities but instead to submit them underneath our new identities in Christ. Therefore, rather than hiding or ignoring our heritage, we can rest in the peace of being fully known by God, with every part of our cultural identities reflecting more of God's goodness and glory.

reflection questions

1. Where do you find your identity and self-worth?
2. What "anxious thoughts" (v. 23) are you feeling related to your ethnic heritage?
3. How do you perceive and engage with people of other backgrounds and cultures? Are there any "offensive" ways (v. 24) in your heart that you can bring before the Lord?
4. What truths in Psalm 139 can reshape how you view yourself and others?

Sean is a recent graduate of Columbia University, majoring in biology and concentrating in jazz studies. He serves as a graphic designer for the AACC and is also pursuing a career in medicine.

BEFORE AND BEHIND

Hannah Sy

Turns out that my rain jacket was not made for twelve-hour trekking days through the Himalayas. Rain had been falling in sheets for over four hours. My mud-caked boots offered no traction on the slick trail. And my rain coat, I discovered, was permeable.

On sunny and beautiful days, our team was tight knit and passed the hours by chatting and marveling at the views together. On downpouring days like these, conversation was absent, replaced by an unspoken urgency to get to the next village as quickly as possible. My cadence slowed as my legs grew tired, and each time I paused to dislodge the leeches from my pants, the distance between my team and me grew.

I approached the fork in the trail and took a moment to analyze the map posted at the junction. Which way did my team go?

“Noah?” No reply. “Vienna?” No reply. I yelled a few more names at the top of my lungs. Still no reply.

I had been aware I was falling behind, but I did not realize that my team was out of earshot. I analyzed the map—both forks eventually re-convened at a village down the trail. If I took the right fork, I would go straight to that village. If I took the left fork, I would trek an extra five kilometers through another village before reaching the point in which the trails reconvened. If I choose the wrong fork, I could end up several hours behind my team. I was alone, in the Himalayas, without cell service. The scariest part? No one was behind me.

“You hem me in—behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain” (Psalm 139:5-6).

As an Asian-American woman, I was told explicitly and implicitly that success requires doing everything with excellence, even perfection. So, in everything I did--sports, academics, and music--I strove to be the best. If I could not be the best, I aimed to not be the worst.

My assurance came by way of performance. As long as I was performing better than my peers, I had the assurance of not getting left in the dust. By putting standards before me and other people behind me, my identity and security were limited to how well I performed.

In situations where my performance is not up to standard, or where performance is irrelevant, this paradigm falls apart. And when it falls apart, it is disorienting and painful.

I eventually chose to take the fork to the right, and it led me straight to my team. But the experience of being left behind stayed with me.

It was not until that moment in the Himalayas, when I felt the distinct fear of getting dropped off the back end, that I came to a deeper understanding of the profound assurance of a God that not only goes before, but also comes behind.

Understanding that God goes before and behind does not only reorient what I do or how I pursue my daily activities, careers, and goals—it fundamentally reorients who I am. It means that who I am is not determined by what I do relative to those around me. It means that my security and value do not hinge on my relative performance to others. In a world that tells me that I will get dropped off the back end if I do not perform to a certain standard, a God that comes behind is radically good news.

reflection questions

1. In what areas of your life do you stake your identity?
2. In honor-shame cultures, the accomplishments of children reflect on their parents. Have you ever felt the pressure to meet standards set forth before you by others?
3. How does a God that goes before and behind reorient how you understand yourself?
4. How does a God that goes before you challenge you to change how you pursue things such as relationships, academics, career, and extracurriculars?

Hannah Sy was born and raised in Los Angeles, California. As a Chinese-American woman and daughter of Philippine-Chinese immigrant parents, she is continuously learning what it means to delight in the fullness of her hyphenated identity. Hannah is a recent graduate of Azusa Pacific University and is on her way to pursuing a doctorate of physical therapy.

psalm 119:

SEEING & CELEBRATING OUR CULTURAL IDENTITIES

Michelle Reyes

"Your hands made me and formed me; give me understanding to learn your commands. May those who fear you rejoice when they see me, for I have put my hope in your word." - Psalm 119:73-74

I'll never forget the first time I read these words. I ferociously highlighted them over and over again with my yellow highlighter. Even now the words are etched in my mind. They give voice to my soul.

God made me. He formed me. And he intended for people to see me just the way I am—and rejoice.

These two sentences from Psalm 119 speak powerfully into and over the lives of Asian Americans—our joys and struggles of hyphenated identities and being caught between two worlds.

As a second-generation Indian-American woman, I've spent much of my life not fitting into any category. I'm not quite Asian, but not really white, either. My own mother, who is 100 percent ethnically Indian, was born and raised in an Indian village in Uganda, Africa, so India isn't even her home country. Both of us, in our own ways, are like no one else, a reality that caused me to struggle with a sense of belonging growing up.

What am I? Who am I? Why am I so different?

The more I read these words from the psalmist, the more I'm reminded that who I am is not a loss. I wasn't created to be silent and invisible. I wasn't created to be the misfit. Rather, there was divine intent and even blessing in being born into a liminal space. My in-betweenness is all part of God's plan, and I've learned to see my cultural hybridity as an Indian-American woman is part of what makes me uniquely me.

The world might not always see that, but that is why I put my hope in God's word. When society shames me for the color of my skin or profiles me simply because of my appearance, I can respond by drowning out these lies with the hope of Scripture. God promises to give us understanding for our cultural realities at times, and at other times, to simply gift us with his peace that surpasses all understanding.

For me that is enough.

reflection questions

1. Have you ever experienced the tension of “in-betweenness” or feelings of not belonging?
2. What challenges have you faced when trying to express your culture?
3. What is one way you can choose to celebrate your cultural identity today? How can this reflect a hope in God's word?

Dr. Michelle Reyes is the vice president of AACC as well as a church planter, pastor's wife, author, speaker, and activist in Austin, Texas. In 2014, Michelle and her husband co-planted Hope Community Church, a minority-led multicultural church that serves low-income and disadvantaged communities in East Austin. She also serves as the local CCDA Austin Networker. Michelle has a forthcoming book with Zondervan on cross-cultural relationships. Her writings on faith and culture have appeared in Christianity Today Women, ERLC, Missio Alliance, Faithfully Magazine, and Patheos, among other publications. She and her husband have two young kids aged four and one.

psalm 73:

SITTING IN THE TENSION

Rachel Leong

Growing up, I felt like I had to squash down feelings of anger.

My Japanese-American mother raised me to avoid stirring up conflict and to take on the blows if it meant keeping the peace. It was a sacrificial mindset: absorb the pain to stay in good graces with everyone. Though I wanted to right wrongs and confront what I thought was unjust, I was told it was best to keep quiet, that I just needed to change my attitude about the situation. I thought anger was sinful.

It was not until I went to college that I started to understand righteous anger. Though it felt contrary to what I'd been taught, I began to understand that my God is a God of justice. He does not ask us to remain compliant in the face of injustice, suffering, and racism; for righteous anger at injustice is an acknowledgement of God's goodness and holiness. We must only not allow bitterness to set in or let our anger lead to sin (Eph. 4).

In this time of crisis when hope is hard to find, and political figures are hard to trust, I find myself struggling to understand the balance of this anger. I relate to Asaph's words in Psalm 73:3-8—my frustration is pent up against those in the world who abuse their privilege during this time. I am angry at those who turn a blind eye to the black and brown bodies disproportionately lost, those who participate in the discrimination, hate crimes, and xenophobia against Asians because of COVID-19.

I resonate with Asaph's exhaustion in his seemingly futile attempts to do right, his weary relent to find sanctuary in moments with God, and his acknowledgement of his imperfections and limited understanding of the world.

*Lord, how should I process the anger I feel towards injustice in the world?
How do we sit in this tension—loving our neighbors while standing firm against
injustice?*

This is when I draw close to God, crying out to him in my confusion, and I'm reminded of my mother's peace in the midst of turmoil. I might never fully grasp why these events happen—a pandemic, countless lives lost, economic upheaval—but my mother's quiet and steady trust in God has always convicted me. It's a reminder in the lesson of *abiding*. How can I relinquish these pains to the Lord? How can I draw near to God? Do I trust that his redemptive story is at work, even when I don't see it?

"But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord God my refuge, that I may tell of all your works" (Psalm 73:28).

reflection questions

1. Spend time in silence, asking the Lord to help you surrender your thoughts, feelings, and burdens to him.
2. How can you enter the sanctuary of God, drawing near to him (Psalm 73:17, 28)?
3. What promises from Psalm 73 can you hold onto in the midst of turmoil, and how can these offer hope?
4. Spend time asking the Lord to fill you with his peace, discernment, and hope.

Rachel Leong is a Japanese-Chinese American from Honolulu, Hawai'i. She recently received her B.A. in Organizational Communication with a minor in Sociology at George Fox University and will be attending Azusa Pacific University for graduate school. Rachel has a strong heart for restoring the dignity and humanity to the marginalized, oppressed and underprivileged to see themselves as a part of the image of God.

psalm 22:

WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?

Satoshi Seth

I have often felt invisible.

When I first came from India to the US at age six, other kids were initially fascinated by me, asking questions about elephants and the caste system. But the novelty quickly wore off, and I was left feeling like a forgotten animal at the zoo. I felt like others only saw me as “the kid from India.” It was like a stamp on my forehead that denied my belonging.

As I've grown older, I have also felt forsaken by God, just as David writes in Psalm 22:1-2. I wonder: Lord, if you are powerful enough to bring justice and righteousness to the world, why do you wait and let so much suffering continue? If you so loved the world, then why does that love seem so hard to find? Why have neighbors turned against each other? Did you give of the gift of your son only to take him back? This feeling of disconnect has been so internalized that I have often felt like no one can understand my forsakenness and loneliness.

David's crying out to God is interrupted in verse three: “But you are holy.” When I consider the declaration of God's holiness in the face of frustration about suffering, I realize that I have often treated holiness as a permission slip for injustice, thinking that if God is holy, he can do what he wants without consequence.

But I believe I have often misunderstood holiness. Holiness does not mean that God can get away with being unjust because of his power or identity, holding privilege above truth. At the same time, holiness is not a brute force to make evil simply disappear.

Nevertheless, when I see others forsaken and oppressed, it is easy to blame God. When I feel forsaken and unseen, it is easy to blame God.

In the face of my doubt and frustration, to declare that God is holy is to resolve not to hold my anger against God in bitterness. I am choosing in my heart not to blame God for my suffering, hurt, and anger. This does not resolve these intense feelings, but it allows me to reckon with the secret

place of my heart where I judge God to be evil, harsh, and unjust. It is the cry of desperation saying, "God, I need you to soften my heart and open my eyes to your justice."

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" are words with which I am familiar. They are the first words in Psalm 22, the words I have groaned out in pain, and the last words of Jesus before he gave up his own life (Matt. 27:46). When I feel forsaken by God, it is often because I want him to be a powerful conqueror and immediately vanquish my suffering. My image of Jesus is much more in line with the Western imperialists who violently stole the land that we call America from those who called it home. It's easy to see him as someone who shapes the world with raw power and force. It's much harder to see him as someone like me, crying out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

I forget that the ultimate victory of Jesus and the kingdom he is establishing are wildly different from the world's conception of victory and kingdom. The way that I view Jesus needs to be reshaped, and I hope that Jesus, through his tender love and grace, may also unveil himself more fully to you today and in the days to come. As you see Jesus more fully, may your trust in his beautiful holiness bloom.

reflection questions

1. By whom have you felt abandoned, and how have you felt forsaken?
2. How might you be bitter and blaming toward God and others?
3. Read through Psalm 22:9-11 and Matthew 27:46 and meditate on how Jesus' experience of being forsaken on the cross reveals God's holiness and brings ultimate justice.

Satoshi Seth identifies as mixed heritage: Indian, Japanese, and American. He grew up in New Delhi, India, and is currently pursuing a BA in sociology at George Fox University.

psalm 89:

THE MOST STEADFAST FOUNDATION

Dorcas Cheng-Tozun

Like many second-generation Asian Americans, I spent a decent portion of my childhood and adolescence arguing with my parents. We disagreed on grades, friends, clothes, parties, and even food. “We’re having Chinese food again?” was a frequent refrain around dinnertime.

I was convinced that my parents understood nothing about me. I was too immature and proud to admit that I also understood little about them.

When I was twenty-nine, I moved to mainland China to live and work. I hoped to discover my cultural roots and perhaps begin to understand my parents better.

Then I made a shocking discovery: my parents, and even my grandparents, barely resembled modern Chinese Nationals. My mom’s parents had left China during World War II; my dad’s parents had left around the Communist Revolution. Despite our shared history, heritage, and genetic makeup, mainland Chinese are as different from Chinese in the diaspora as much as—if not more than—American-born Chinese diverge from their immigrant parents.

Humanity is an ever-shifting landscape. Who we are, what we believe, and how we act are in a constant state of transformation, impacted by personal crises, current events, political movements, and social change. Even an entire culture, which I assumed to be as permanent as the Great Wall of China, can change in the span of a single generation.

Rapid technological development, increasing globalization, and this coronavirus pandemic are profoundly reshaping culture across every country and people group. I can already see how my young children are growing up in a vastly different world from that of my childhood. What it means to be Asian American to them will be distinct from what it means to me.

These tectonic shifts in cultural identity are unsettling and conflict-inducing. We all instinctively want to hold on to what we know and encourage others to do the same. But that’s not possible.

“I will sing of your steadfast love, O Lord, forever; with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations,” writes the psalmist in Psalm 89.

"I declare that your steadfast love is established forever; your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens" (vv. 1-2, NRSV).

The author of Psalm 89, Ethan the Ezrahite, is considered a contemporary of King David and Solomon and was celebrated for his great wisdom. Ethan is very aware of the great trials his country is enduring, including raging seas and myriad enemies (vv. 9-10). Israel will emerge out of these hardships a different nation and a different people. Still, God's love is steadfast.

Even when people do not follow his commands (vv. 30-32), the Lord says, "I will not remove from him my steadfast love, or be false to my faithfulness" (v. 33). *Steadfast* means resolutely firm and unwavering. God has made a covenant with his people, and nothing will cause him to turn from it.

In ever-changing cultures and societies, I find it immensely comforting that God's love for us remains unwavering. I am Chinese; I am Asian; I am American; and I am many things in between. Those are beautiful realities of my identity, but they are also shifting realities. They do not make for a reliable foundation of who I am.

But God is steadfast through the generations. He was faithful and loving to my grandparents and parents; he remains faithful and loving to me today, and will be for my children and their children. It does not matter how Chinese or American we are. It does not matter what it means to be Asian American in our particular generation.

What matters is that we are all children of God, recipients of his unwavering, steadfast love—the most reliable foundation that exists for who we are.

reflection questions

1. How is your sense of ethnic and cultural identity different from that of your parents?
2. How do you see your own culture shifting in recent years?
3. If God's love never changes and never wavers, what does that free us from? How does that empower us?

Dorcas Cheng-Tozun is a writer, editor, communications consultant, and the editorial director of AACCC. She is a former Inc.com columnist and the author of two nonfiction books. She lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with her husband and two hapa boys.

psalm 112:

GOOD NEWS IN A BAD NEWS WORLD

Grace Liu

“They’re just benign shadows.”

In the 2019 film *The Farewell*, this is how the family hides from their grandmother her diagnosis of terminal cancer, maintaining that the news of her diagnosis would be worse than the illness itself. As the saying goes: ignorance is bliss.

These days, however, bad news is unavoidable. Never before have I felt so discouraged and debilitated by the state of the world, because it’s not just the news—it’s the reality of immense suffering of people made in the image of God. As my social media feed and email inbox fill with reports of coronavirus-related crises, racial injustice, and political and cultural division, I find myself shutting off my phone and occupying my time with work in an attempt to avoid despair.

While the story of *The Farewell* was outlandish and even comical for many of my non-Asian friends, it landed differently among my Asian friends and family. The notion of hiding bad news is commonplace, expected even, for the Asian American. Whether out of fear of burdening our relatives or a desire to save face, we’re acculturated to take the blows but to not talk about them. We can boast about our accomplishments but never discuss our personal struggles and shortcomings.

So when it comes to issues of justice (v. 5), righteousness (v. 4), and caring for those in need (v. 9), we tend to disassociate from conflict and suppress discomfort. After all, it’s difficult for us to even process bad news, much less do something about it.

This is why Psalm 112 is so striking in our time and culture. It describes a different way of life, one of steadfast faith and confidence (vv. 7-8). The person depicted in this Psalm does not fear bad news, for it does not phase her.

How can we reshape our hearts and lives to reflect this kind of courage and conviction? We trade our fleshly fear for a Spirit-empowered fear of the Lord (v. 1). We delight in his word and trust in his promises (vv. 1, 7)—the assurance that he took on our suffering to triumph over it, working all things together

for good (Rom. 8:28); that his power is made perfect in weakness (2 Cor. 12:9); that suffering is real but temporary (Rev. 21:4); that he withholds judgement of evil not out of indifference but out of love for those who have yet to know him (2 Pet. 3:9).

If it feels like the world is falling apart; that's because it is. But we shouldn't be surprised, for chaos wasn't initiated with the onset of a pandemic or the development of systemic injustice. Evil began when sin entered the world, and the good news of the gospel—the indestructible hope of the Christian—is that while evil began at the fall, our Heavenly Father had set in motion a plan for the redemption of our hearts and of our world that was guaranteed by the cross. Even then in the garden, his kingdom was coming, and it's coming today still. *He is the light that dawns in the darkness* (v. 4).

So when we come across the next bad news, let's not shield our eyes or settle for vague aphorisms to mask the pain. It's only when we lament the reality of our present that we can begin to recognize our desperate need for a better future. And it's only when we find this future hope in Christ that we can be freed from cynicism, inaction, and despair.

With a steadfast trust in the Lord, we can be gracious, merciful, and righteous (v. 5) in the midst of a world filled with hate, vengeance, and corruption. We can be generous with our time, energy, and resources (v. 5) caring for those in need (v. 9). And we can conduct our affairs with justice (v. 5), not because we think we can fix the world, but because we trust that only God can.

reflection questions

1. When you encounter bad news, how do you normally respond?
2. How can fearing the Lord transform your earthly fears?
3. How might God be calling you to grace, mercy, justice, and righteousness in your own life and sphere of influence?

Grace Liu is a current student at Vanderbilt University, studying Human & Organizational Development and Violin Performance. She serves as Event Coordinator for the AACC, Marketing Assistant for the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, and contributor for Novel Hand, writing about issues of justice and community development.

ABOUT THE AACC

Old Testament scholar Walter Bruggemann suggested that “the life of faith expressed in the Psalms is focused on the two decisive moves of faith that are always underway.” These two moves consist of moving from a settled orientation into a season of disorientation, and moving from disorientation into a fresh orientation or reorientation.

The Asian American Christian Collaborative was born of a season of disorientation as we dealt with a global pandemic and the ensuing anti-Asian discrimination that came from the need of some to assign blame.

In the months since AACC was formed, Asian American Christians have continued to experience disorientation as we wrestle with our own experiences with racism as well as our complicitness in racial injustice toward the Black community. As I work with undergraduate Asian American Christian students from across the nation, a question I hear repeatedly is, “How do I make sense of my racial identity, faith, and a desire for racial justice?”

This devotional is the first of several resources that AACC hopes to provide for Asian American Christian students as they move in their faith.

Dr. Jenny Elsey, Director of Mobilization, AACC

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