

# Living with Questions of Purpose

BY KYLE REESE

“I wonder what sort of tale we have fallen into,” Sam asks in *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*. As the people of God, are we willing to live with questions of purpose that arise in our lives? Will we walk with each other as we discover answers that lead to our vocation in God’s world?

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A daughter catches the last available flight, arriving at her parents’ home early in the morning. Her grief-stricken father who has just returned home from the hospital greets her. A few hours earlier he called his daughter with the tragic news. The doctor spoke of a massive heart attack. His wife, her mother, died instantly. Now as the father and daughter stand face-to-face, they must address the questions arising from their tragic loss.

A husband and wife are still in shock. The news came quickly and unexpectedly. When the couple completed the required paperwork, the case-worker said it could take up to a year. Yet, here they are, traveling to the agency to meet their new child. Leaving home, their minds are filled with all kinds of questions: Will he like us? What kind of parents will we be? Are we really ready for a son?

The starting point for questions of meaning is always in the middle.<sup>1</sup> In the middle of a family loss, we wonder how we will live without her. In the middle of receiving an unexpected gift, we question how life is going to change.



O Lord, our Sovereign,  
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

You have set your glory above the heavens.  
Out of the mouths of babes and infants  
    you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,  
    to silence the enemy and the avenger.  
When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
    the moon and the stars that you have established;  
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,  
    mortals that you care for them?  
Yet 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,  
all sheep and oxen,  
    and also the beasts of the field,  
the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,  
    whatever passes along the paths of the seas.  
O Lord, our Sovereign,  
    how majestic is your name in all the earth!

*Psalms 8*

The psalmist asks a question of meaning directed to God: "What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?" (8:4). The psalmist's question does not arise in a vacuum. Instead, it comes in the midst of God's creation, surrounded by the celestial bodies that are a result of God's hands.

Psalms 8 will not allow us to move too quickly to address its penetrating question. Before we consider the place of human beings in the divine order of things, we first must learn something about this God who created the heavens and "established the moon and the stars" (8:3).

In introducing God, the psalmist tells of a God whose name is sovereign over all the earth. Yet the greatness of God is not only seen in the works of creation, but also in the transformation of words, uttered by helpless babes and infants, into defense against God's own foes.



Cassie was a member of a congregation I served. Each Sunday, our group of sixty worshipers gathered in the tiny sanctuary. Cassie sat on the sixth row from the front, on the right side, next to her mother and grandmother. At the time, Cassie was still learning the difference between her "inside" and "outside" voice.

One particular Sunday, I shared what I thought was a very clever children's message. I could tell that Cassie was less than pleased with the content of the message. She went back to her seat between her mother and

grandmother. She showed her displeasure by quickly crossing her arms in anger. Cassie's mother asked her what was wrong. Cassie, despite her mother's best efforts, used her outside voice so all of us could hear, and said, "He didn't say one thing about Jesus!"

Another time, our congregation lost a beloved member who happened to live next door to Cassie. The family scheduled visitation at the local

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funeral home. When I arrived, Cassie was waiting for me at the front door. She grabbed my hand and we walked to the casket together. Pointing to the corpse, Cassie said, "I'm too young to understand this." She then waited for a response from her pastor.

Cassie's simple faith gave her the freedom to

ask any question which came to her mind. In a very profound way, Cassie also viewed the church and its ministers as those charged to hear her questions, while at the same time helping her fashion a faithful response. Her words were so meaningful to me that I continue to tell her story thirteen years later.



Psalm 8 introduces us to a complex God. God is the sovereign Lord whose name is known throughout the earth. At the same time, God seems willing to risk God's work and words by sharing power with human beings, even babes and infants. What a risk!

By exploring the risk taken by God, as described in Psalm 8, we begin to find our identity and answer the question, "What are human beings that you are mindful of them?" (8:4).

In my brief ministerial career, I have had the privilege of following two ministers who invested most of their careers in one congregation. I remember the first time I met with each one of these ministers. While each conversation was different, the theme was the same. Each minister shared his love, admiration, and good wishes for the congregation he served. As my predecessors shared their pilgrimages with me, I tried to put myself in their shoes. One gives the very best years of one's life to a local church and then hands the role of pastor to someone new. I was overcome with a sense of humility as I attempted to carry on the work of those who had gone before me.

In a sense, Psalm 8 describes a similar conversation between God and humankind. Human beings are reminded of and even surrounded by the works of God. In this conversation, God seems to hand over a portion of God's work to human beings. The psalmist says it this way: "You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet" (8:6). It is in this charge that human beings find their call, vocation, and ultimately an answer to the psalmist's previous question. What is articulated in these few short verses takes a lifetime to fulfill.



I love the scene in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* where hobbits Frodo and Sam talk about the nature of adventures. Prior to their perilous journey, Sam had believed adventures were something that famous heroes or heroines went looking for in order to cure their boredom. Now he has learned that rather than looking for their adventures, these individuals landed in the midst of their tales, which brought with them a host of unsettling questions. Sam's insight leads him to this pressing question in the midst of his and Frodo's journey, "I wonder what sort of tale we've fallen into?"<sup>2</sup>

Questions of meaning and purpose are asked in the middle of life's troubles and opportunities. Are we, as the people of God, willing to live with those questions? Are we willing to walk with each other as we discover answers that lead to our vocation in God's world?

## NOTES

1 Dow Edgerton, "Asking About Who We Are," *Theology Today*, 50:4 (January 1993), 564.

2 J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1994), 696.



**KYLE REESE**

is Senior Pastor of Hendricks Avenue Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Florida.