

“We know that God intends to change how we think and how we behave, but we don’t always expect that God intends to change how we feel. But, as *Teach Me to Feel* so beautifully shows, God has given us a whole book—the Psalms—to guide us into feeling rightly. With profound insights tucked into short chapters, Courtney’s book helps us apply the words of the psalmists to our own souls—leading us into honesty with God, confidence in God, and joy with God.”

NANCY GUTHRIE, Author, *The Wisdom of God: Seeing Jesus in the Psalms and Wisdom Books and Even Better Than Eden*

“A good book will teach you about biblical truths, but a great book will lead you to know and love Christ and his word more deeply. *Teach Me to Feel* does just that. Chapter after chapter, I found myself reading the Psalms in a fresh way.”

SARAH WALTON, Author, *Hope When It Hurts and Together Through the Storms*

“The church has had a rich and right return to the study of God’s word and the value of a transformed mind in recent years, but God also gave his people emotions and feelings. How does one navigate feelings faithfully in the midst of suffering, transition, or hurt? Courtney walks us through the Psalms and her own story. She is less a teacher and more a friend on the journey.”

LORE FERGUSON WILBERT, Author, *Handle with Care*

“How gracious God is to include in his word a book of songs that gives us the language we need to express the emotions we feel! Courtney Reissig encourages us to slow down and feel, with the psalmists, the realities of life in our broken world. Each reflection helped me to see and savour the goodness of God.”

CAROLYN LACEY, Author, *Extraordinary Hospitality (For Ordinary People)* and *Say the Right Thing*

“We are told that ‘emotional intelligence’ is essential. But can we rely on it? Courtney presents us with the richest possible source from which to manage our feelings—the Psalms. Whether praising God or challenging sin, each chapter is a balm for the soul. I would have happily worked through another dozen psalms with Courtney!”

LENI-JO MCMILLAN, Women’s Network and Training,
City Bible Forum, Perth, Australia

“I love the Psalms, and Courtney Reissig has made me cherish them even more. She shows us how to honestly process our feelings with God, using psalms to express our deepest emotions. If you’ve ever felt misunderstood, lonely, or overwhelmed and wondered how to biblically process your feelings, this book is for you. You’ll discover how to lament, find hope, and rejoice through all of life, drawing you closer to the God of all comfort.”

VANEETHA RENDALL RISNER, Author, *Walking Through Fire*

“This book comforted, encouraged, and taught me so much. It had the rare quality of making me reach for my Bible, and I read each chapter with the Psalms open alongside. Courtney Reissig gives us keen insights learned through her own personal suffering, so her words are poetic and laden with meaning, yet grounded in reality.”

LINDA ALLCOCK, Author, *Deeper Still*

“If we’re honest, most of us would admit that few aspects of our lives can seem as chaotic and unpredictable as our emotions. Courtney Reissig, a gifted and wise writer, shows us how the Psalms can help us to take our feelings before the throne of God, and how to see them reordered by the ongoing life of Christ. This book can change your thinking and your feelings for the better.”

RUSSELL MOORE, Editor in Chief, *Christianity Today*

“I’ve always had a difficult relationship with my emotions. I have suppressed them in shame, or I have let them loose with reckless abandon. Neither approach has served me well. This is why I so appreciate this book. Through her own wrestle with emotions, Courtney points us to the place where the Lord taught her how to feel them well and wisely—the Psalms. I found great comfort in her words and the insight she brings to these ancient songs. There’s nothing like a friend—modern or ancient—to tell us, ‘I’ve been there too.’”

LAUREN CHANDLER, Songwriter; Author, *Steadfast Love* and *Goodbye to Goodbyes*

Courtney Reissig

Teach
me to
Feel

The Goodbook
COMPANY

To my sons: Luke, Zach, Seth, and Ben

*We walked through the valley of the shadow of death and
felt His nearness every step of the way.*

May you come to call Him good all of your days.

Teach Me to Feel

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INTRODUCTION

HOW I LEARNED TO FEEL
(OR, MEDITATIONS IN
A HOSPITAL BED)

I've always been a feeler. From a very early age, I experienced the highest of highs and the lowest of lows (think Anne Shirley from *Anne of Green Gables*).

But in the space of a single month, my emotions went from the children's roundabout at the theme park of life to the tallest rollercoaster imaginable.

Pregnancy has always brought out my worst fears. I have a history of miscarriages and infertility, so I am well aware that seeing those pink lines doesn't mean a happy ending at the labor and delivery unit. Instead, for me pregnancy is a months-long battle with intense anxiety.

So when I found myself pregnant with our fourth child, I was nervous. And when I began experiencing all the familiar signs of miscarriage, I was certain: *I am losing a baby—again.*

But God had other plans for this boy; so instead of a blank ultrasound screen, we saw a heartbeat. And my fears began to abate. *Maybe we will get to keep this baby after all,* I thought. I scheduled my c-section and began to settle into the final stages of my last pregnancy—I was in the home-stretch of the anxiety and started to look beyond it.

And then it all changed.

I JUST WANTED US TO LIVE

When I was 33 weeks pregnant, my placenta partially abrupted. If you aren't familiar with obstetrics (as I was not), this is life-threatening for both the mom and the baby. It is rare, random, and completely terrifying. In a matter of hours, my entire life was turned upside down. If I had feelings, I didn't know how to express them. My emotions often came out in a jumbled mix of anger, terror, grief, and occasional hope. I just wanted my baby to live. I just wanted me to live.

For reasons only known to God, the placenta stopped abrupting, which bought my son three more weeks of time in my womb. But it also bought me a stay in the high-risk unit in the hospital.

I used to think hospital bed rest would be like a mini-vacation. You would get to nap when you wanted. Your food was prepared for you every day. And you never had to clean.

It was nothing like that.

And still the feelings flooded me.

One moment I would feel hopeful. An evening of calm from all the monitors meant we just might be ok. I would feel peace—but it would slip through my fingers. By the next morning, they would be prepping me for an emergency delivery. Then things would stabilize, putting us back in the waiting game. More fear. More anxiety. More confusion. More questions. I couldn't focus on anything of substance for more than a moment, because in a moment everything could change.

When things were hard, my husband, Daniel, and I sat in silence, fearing that just speaking our feelings out loud meant they actually would come true.

In the end, Ben was born. He was ok. But I was not.

When we came home, the feelings only intensified. Sure, we were safe. A stranger on the street would have said we were

one, big happy family. But if you go through trauma, you don't get to just come home to the old normal. You have to find a new one. That was the hard task before us. What does normal look like when you now know that life can be snuffed out in an instant? I was grateful, but scared. Sobered, but relieved. I was joyful, yet weepy. I was a walking paradox.

I needed to learn how to feel.

BETWEEN SUPPRESSION AND DIRECTION

Many of us Christian women—in times of crisis, but in normal life too—aren't sure what to do with our feelings. We struggle to know how to feel “Christianly.”

So, often, we are prone to suppress our emotions, worried that we are being ungodly. It's the idea that “Christians should feel like this...” and “Christians definitely should not feel like *this*...” So we don't tell anyone how we feel, we hardly admit it to ourselves, and we certainly won't take it to God. We have no idea what to do with fear, anger, envy, and so on... so we try to ignore them and hope they go away.

On the other hand, many of us are much more in tune with our feelings—and much better at expressing them. But then there is the opposite danger, of being so directed by our feelings that how we feel directs what we believe about God and ourselves. We are always up and down. If the wheels fall off, then our faith falls apart.

We need to learn how to feel Christianly. And, though I hardly realized it at the time, in that month on the roller-coaster, I found my teacher. I found the psalms.

A LANGUAGE FOR MY FEELINGS

In the hospital, and in the many months after, the Psalms were my lifeline. Everything else felt meaningless. Everything else was too heavy and exhausting. The Psalms gave me words. The Psalms were, as some have called it, “a mirror

into my soul.” The Psalms got me, in all my raw emotion over the possibility of losing my son and my own life. They got my joy and my pain. They got my praise and my tears. They understood me when I didn’t understand myself.

In the Psalms, I wasn’t only understood, but I also had language for my fears. In the Psalms, I had language for my distress. But in the Psalms, I also had language for God—I saw him for who he is, and I was able to trust him. The Psalms sustained me in my darkest moments. The Psalms became as necessary to my health as the hospital-prepared tray that was delivered to me three times a day. The Psalms taught me to feel the reality of life, in all its complexities, and they brought healing in the process.

For three weeks, the Psalms were pretty much the only thing I read. So when the moment came for delivery, I hoped they would sustain me. If it all went south quickly, at least I had been storing up the word—I prayed I could cash in on the deposits.

But in the moment I needed it most, I couldn’t remember anything.

My mind went blank. I couldn’t remember a single psalm. Not a word. I panicked.

Where was the hope? Where was the life-sustaining truth of God’s word that I was banking on?

As they wheeled me into the operating room on the day of Ben’s birth, I forgot every single thing.

Except Psalm 23.

As they prepped me for surgery, line after line came to mind:

*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow
of death, I will fear no evil.*

As they looked again for Ben’s heartbeat...

For you are with me.

As they worked hard to get him out...

Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

As we heard his first cry coming from lungs that worked...

*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the
days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the
LORD forever.*

He lived. I lived. As the doctor pulled our screaming baby from my body, all I could do was weep. I trembled over the fragility of life—it could be gone in an instant. But I also rejoiced—death was not the final word that day. And, looking back, I am grateful that God brought to mind the psalm that my heart most needed. I needed a psalm—I needed that one. God knew what I was feeling, which in that moment was overwhelming fear, and he brought a word for that fear. That psalm gave me language, and that psalm shaped my feelings.

CREATED TO FEEL

In this book, I want us to walk together through our feelings, asking God, through the psalms, to teach us to feel—to see that we have permission to feel, to see that he gives us language for our feelings, and to understand how God shapes us in our feelings.

Unlike the narrative parts of the Bible, the Psalms speak into a static time in Israel's history—the narrative of God's work among his people is not advanced in the Psalms. Instead, we get a behind-the-scenes look at the mental processes and emotions of real people in that story. The Psalms are the backstory of the biblical narratives, which we may or may not be familiar with (the stories of Israel's history,

David, and other kings). Instead of providing new details, they slow us down and tell us how God's people are to feel about the stories happening all around them. Old Testament scholar, Derek Kidner, says that the Psalms are intended to "touch and kindle us rather than simply address us" (*Kidner Classic Commentaries, Psalms 1 – 72*, page 42). In the Psalms we get real feelings about real life in this beautiful yet broken world. So if you struggle with knowing how to feel rightly—how to process your feelings instead of suppressing them or being directed by them—and want to know how your feelings can grow your faith, this book is for you. The Psalms are speaking to you.

In the Psalms, we meet people just like us—weak, scared, tired, and hopeless at times; and at other times content, grateful, and praising. In the Psalms, we see stories like ours and feelings like ours. But in the Psalms, we see the end of the story. We see that God always shows up: not always in the way we expect, but he never leaves us or forsakes us. The Psalms remind us that God is always working, even when he seems absent. That's hopeful for us. That's healing for us.

Of course, the Psalms are not primarily about our feelings; they are first and foremost about God. And this book is not any kind of full insight into the Psalms. But the Psalms are poetry, and so they are meant to make us feel something. God's word should make us think, but God's word should also make us feel—and feel deeply. Mark Futato says that, "Since God feels and you are created in God's image, feelings are part of your human experience" (*Joy Comes in the Morning*, page 60).

I surely won't be able to cover every feeling you may be experiencing right now, far less every emotion you will one day experience—but I hope you will find words for your pain or sorrow, joy or praise. By seeing a particular feeling displayed in a particular psalm, you will be inviting God to

teach you to feel. You will be letting him give you language to cry out to him or praise him, giving you a way to grow in your faith and through your feelings. God cares about every part of his image-bearers—including our feelings.

The best way to read this book is slowly, and prayerfully! And it's good to start with Chapters 1 and 2, focusing on Psalms 1 and 2, first. These psalms set the context for the entire book of Psalms—they are a prologue of sorts to the book and will help you understand what the rest of the psalms are doing. Then, from chapters 3 to 23, you can plot your own route through, depending on where you are in life right now. But I'd encourage you not to only read about the feelings you are walking with right now—because, if we have lived any time at all, we know that tomorrow things can change, and it's good to learn how to feel well ahead of time. Then chapter 24 is the conclusion.

At the end of each chapter I have included some additional psalms, if you would like to dig further into the way the psalms help you with that particular feeling. Some chapters will have more “extras” than others, because some of the feelings are addressed more frequently in the psalms. Some of the psalms I point you to will be darker than the one we focused on in the chapter, and some will be lighter—drawing you out of darkness, towards hope. Again, remember the truths of Psalms 1 and 2 as you read!

I don't know where you are at today with your feelings. But I do know this: that those feelings can lead you to appreciate your Lord and Savior more, and help you grow in your faith. More than anything, I hope you will see that God hasn't left you, that he cares for you, and that he is ready to meet you in the Psalms.

Reflection Questions

1. What is your relationship with your feelings? Do you consider yourself to be someone who knows what you feel or someone who struggles to identify your feelings—or both?
2. How well do you know the psalms? Have you spent time in them before this book? Why, or why not?
3. If God is the one who created us to feel (and he is), what do your feelings—or lack of feelings—teach you about him?
4. In what ways do you need your feelings to be shaped by God?

HAPPY IS THE WOMAN WHO... *PSALM 1*

Blessed is the one ...
whose delight is in the law of the LORD,
and who meditates on his law day and night.

Psalm 1 v 1-2 (NIV)

Have you ever had a recurring dream where you walk into a situation completely unprepared? Maybe you find yourself in a classroom and you forgot to study for the test. Or you have a big presentation to give and you forgot to change out of your pajamas.

I have such a dream before every big or out-of-the-ordinary thing I do. When I was a waitress, I would dream that I was the only waitress in the entire restaurant on a busy Saturday night. When I travel, I dream that I miss my flight or forget my luggage. When I was pregnant, I would dream that the baby came and we weren't ready (that dream came true in real life each time). When I'm supposed to get up early to run with a friend, I dream that I miss my alarm and wake up to the sunlight.

Can you tell that I don't like being unprepared?

I want to tell you a story about two women and their preparedness.

The first woman is a new mom, and like many new moms she is overwhelmed. Her transition to having small children is proving harder than she expected. She has less time than ever before. She is more tired than she had thought possible. She is overwhelmed.

And she doesn't read her Bible anymore.

It's not that she has stopped following Christ. It's that life has seemed too hard and too complicated since having a baby. What began in the chaos of the first days after childbirth has become practice out of habit. She just doesn't read God's word.

Her husband tries to encourage her to find pockets of time for Bible-reading during naptime or when the baby goes to bed at night. But she just can't bring herself to do it. It's been too long. It's not familiar to her anymore. It's lost its luster. So she fills her days with other things, like social media and television, in the vain hope that she might be able to will herself out of her new-parent exhaustion.

She once promised herself that she would never become like those other women who abandoned the word when their babies were born—but pride goes before a fall, and now she is one of those women: alone, empty, and trying to fix her situation apart from God and his word.

She wouldn't admit it, but her lack of time in the word shows. Her relationships suffer. Her marriage suffers. Even her mothering suffers. Her feelings are all over the place, and everyone (including her) bears the brunt of them. As she looks at what her life has become, she realizes she is woe-fully unprepared for her new life as a mother.

Let me tell you about another woman not too far away from this new mom. She has been in this same place before: exhausted, overwhelmed, and unable to find a new routine.

But she has emerged with a new purpose. She has seen the bitter fruit that comes from not meditating on God and has vowed to avoid that situation again at all costs. God has been faithful, even in the midst of great difficulty. God has made his word her delight, in the scary moments before her son's birth and in the exhausting newborn days. Meditating on the word doesn't change the difficulty of her days, but it does give her perspective. It keeps her grounded in her relationships. It gives her strength for her role as a mother. It gives her hope. Her circumstances are not dissimilar to those of the first woman, but what she is doing with God's word in those circumstances has made all the difference.

Life isn't necessarily easier for her than for the first woman. But this woman is prepared for the hurricane of difficulty, because she has a weighty anchor.

You guessed it. Each of these women is me.

My early days of motherhood were not my finest moments. I didn't read my Bible for six months—and it was obvious by my every word and action. But as you have read in the Introduction, that wasn't the final word in my life. God is faithful to his people, and he brought me back around. And in my moments of great distress, God showed up through his word. I still remember those days in the hospital, waiting for Ben to be born, anxious about the outcome for his life and mine. In those days, God's word was so sweet to me, not because it removed the difficulty or the fear but because in those very moments of my distress I had the promises of God staring me in the face as I read the words on the page, and imprinted in my mind as I recalled them through the day and night.

In other words, I had learned from experience that Psalm 1 is true.

Psalm 1 tells us where the blessed (the Hebrew word for "happy") life is to be found. This theme of being "happy/

blessed” will come up again and again in the psalm, and in this book. But blessedness is not our usual notion of happiness—the feeling produced when everything works out in our favor. Instead, it is a happiness rooted in something outside of us. The happy life the psalmist experiences is rooted in God, his word, and his purposes. The same is true for us.

And blessing is found in meditating on God’s word day and night (Psalm 1 v 1-2). If one of the purposes of the Psalms is to give us language for our emotional responses to life’s difficulties and successes and drive us back to God, then to start by talking about God’s word makes perfect sense. The Psalms begin with the value of the word (the Bible) because God wants us to be prepared for what is to come.

PREPARE BY DOING SOMETHING NOW

Many people (rightly) think of laments when they think of the Psalms. The Psalms are filled with a lot of sadness and difficulty (which we will talk about soon). How do you prepare for things like physical suffering, injustice, envy, your friend disowning you, depression, or even feeling that God has left you?

You start with the Bible.

But on the flipside, the Psalms are also filled with testimonies of God’s faithfulness, of prayers answered, and of deliverances accomplished. How do you respond to the joys, successes, triumphs, and answered prayers of life without boasting in your own strength?

You start with the Bible.

The best way to prepare for such seasons is to start now. This is why Psalm 1 tells us that the blessed man or woman makes God’s word his or her meditation day and night. Do you want to live a blessed life, a happy life? Know God through his word. The first step to preparing for the waves of suffering that break upon all of us at some point is to lay

the foundation of God's word in your soul. The first step to preparing for the highpoints in life is to lay the foundation of God's word in your soul. If you don't want to abandon him in despair in your greatest distress or turn from him in self-reliance in your greatest triumph, you're going to need the word.

THE RESULT OF YOUR PREPARATION

Sometimes it can seem that I am reading my Bible and getting nowhere. Sometimes it seems that I am reading my Bible and it is not doing anything in my soul. Sometimes, as I said in the Introduction, I read my Bible and forget everything I have read. But God has promised to work through his word, so we can trust that even if we don't feel like he is working, he is.

The psalmist says that spending time in God's word does something for the believer. The Christian who is rooted in the word will be like a fruitful tree that doesn't wither and die (v 3-4).

I live in a part of the US where pine trees are everywhere. When a tornado comes through town, the pine trees are devastated. The needles are all blown off, and then the trees themselves fall to the ground. Why don't they stand? Because their roots are shallow. But do you know what kind of tree isn't leveled when a tornado comes through town? Hardwood trees. They have deeper, stronger roots—and they stand firm.

This is the type of tree that the psalmist has in view. A hardwood tree starts small, in seed form, but over time (sometimes a very, very long time) it grows. It starts with the roots. The roots are planted, firm and deep, and cannot be moved. And then flowers bud on the branches, and leaves grow, and then it's a tall, mature tree. But this is a process. It takes time. It doesn't happen overnight. But it is steady. It

is secure. It is rooted and grounded and cannot be moved—not by storms, not by tornadoes, not by floods. Its roots dig deep. Sometimes in our town a hardwood tree grows right next to a pine tree, and they can look equally sturdy when all is going well—but the truth is in the roots. The hardwood stands firm, like the one who is rooted in God’s word.

Like the hardwood tree, the woman who delights in God’s word, meditating on it day and night, will prosper in the fiercest storm and in the favor of spring. You are nourished deep in your roots by the streams of water that you are planted near. This is the fruit of God’s word in your life. It’s a process. It takes work. It takes time. But it will happen. This is the image we need to keep in mind as we look at how the Psalms speaks to our emotions. The woman who is able to stand in times of lament is the one rooted in God’s word—she is like a hardwood tree. This doesn’t remove the difficulty of life or even take away the deep feelings we have (as we will see in other psalms), but it does give us a foundation to fall back on. We may feel as if we are being torn limb from limb, but if we are rooted in God’s word, we still stay standing.

When the tornado comes, the tree’s roots are a matter of life and death. And so it is for us. Psalm 1 talks of living and dying (v 5-6). There is a lot of contrast in the psalm between the wicked and the righteous. The wicked die, and they will have no leg to stand on in the judgment to come. The righteous prosper and grow because they are rooted deeply in the word. The wicked, verse 4 says, are like “chaff.” Why? Because chaff has no weight and no root. It’s the leftover from wheat, separated out in the winnowing process and lying on the threshing floor. Chaff is useless. It is waste. It has nothing grounding it, and it will blow away on even the smallest gust of wind.

I get that. This is how I felt when I didn’t make God’s word my delight.

But contrast that with the one who meditates on God's word. The one who meditates on God's word doesn't perish, failing to stand in the tornado of God's judgment (v 5-6). The one who trusts in God lives. What an incredibly hopeful truth as we walk right into the great emotional ups and downs to come in the Psalms, and in our lives! Death may be around us, and one day will be right before us, but we know the end from the beginning.

Blessed is the woman who makes God's word her delight: who meditates on it day and night. In all that she does she prospers (v 3). The prosperity that the psalmist is talking about is not having all your prayers answered in the way you want—having a full bank account or even lots of friends. It's a prosperity of a different kind. It's a prosperity of fruitfulness; it's a prosperity of sustaining grace in difficulty; it's a prosperity of holiness as you spend time in the word; and, most importantly, it's a prosperity of life everlasting. Amazingly, this prosperity is something that doesn't end but only grows forever and ever (John 4 v 14). The prosperity that this life offers is temporary and fleeting. But the prosperity that the psalmist is talking about can't be ripped from you even in death.

ONE MESSAGE, ONE BOOK

This is the message all throughout the Psalms. Knowing the end from the beginning sustains us all throughout the middle. We will see this again and again throughout this book.

This is the message not just of the Psalms, but all throughout the Bible. Think for a moment about what the New Testament says about Jesus. He is the Word made flesh in John 1. He is, as *The Jesus Storybook Bible* puts it, everything that God reveals about himself, in a person. Jesus loved the word. Jesus taught the word. Jesus fulfilled the word. And Jesus is revealed to us in the word. The Bible has no category for loving Jesus but not loving his word.

Jesus embodied Psalm 1. He was prepared for the darkest suffering, and he was prepared for the greatest joys, because he knew and delighted in God's word. He quoted from the psalms because he knew the psalms and saw his life in light of the psalms. So if we love Jesus, we will love the psalms; and if we love the psalms, we will grow in our love for Jesus. In the next chapter we will look at Psalm 2, which talks more about Jesus specifically, and helps set up the whole psalter (along with Psalm 1). It talks about a promised king and the Son of God. It will help us fix our eyes on Jesus' certain victory and prepare ourselves for the hardships and joys of life.

This is what it means to be prepared. You know the end from the beginning, so you have hope in the middle. And you know the way of blessing, so you're ready for the tornadoes as well as the sunshine. The Psalms can only be understood in light of Psalm 1. Each, as we meditate on it, will strengthen and secure your roots as you take up its water. You won't understand lament, suffering, sorrow, repentance, or any other thing that comes your way if you don't first see that God's word has to be your delight. You won't have language to cry out to God in your suffering if you don't let him teach you through his word.

If you are reading this in the midst of great suffering, and sense that you don't have a strong foundation in God's word, it is not too late. It's never too late. This is why I wrote this book. You could start in the Psalms today and find sustaining hope even if God's word hasn't been your foundation up until now. Even if you are coming into this book unprepared for the suffering that you are enduring, God hasn't left you and is able to meet you in the pages of the Psalms.

Blessed is the woman who treasures God's word. She will find she is able to stand, even in adversity. She will know what it is to be blessed, even in difficulty. And she will not perish.

Reflection Questions

1. How does being prepared for things help you to face uncertainty? How does Psalm 1 prepare you for a life of uncertainty?
2. Can you think of a time in your life when you spent time in God's word and it didn't make a difference right away, but it did later on?
3. Can you think of a time in your life when you didn't spend time in God's word? What effect did that have in your life?
4. How does knowing God's promise that "The Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish" (v 6) change how you view your circumstances right now?
5. How has Psalm 1 changed or expanded your understanding of a blessed life?

