

# Pop Psalms

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How our favorite pop, rock, hip hop,  
and country songs echo the wisdom  
literature of the Bible.



*think*  
CHRISTIAN



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# Introduction

by JOSH LARSEN

In the introduction to his study guide, [\*Psalms: Prayers of the Heart\*](#), Eugene Peterson wrote, “People look into mirrors to see how they look; they look into the psalms to find out who they are.”

Sometimes, they also listen to pop music.

That’s the guiding idea behind this collection of essays from some of *Think Christian*’s best writers: that like the wisdom literature of the Bible—not only Psalms, but also Proverbs and Ecclesiastes—our favorite pop, rock, hip hop, and country songs reflect the wide range of the human experience. These “pop psalms,” as we’re calling them, run the gamut from joy to sorrow, ecstasy to angst. And even if they’re not intentionally directed at God, as the biblical songs are, we believe that God hears each one.

This means God hears when Alicia Keys offers a silky ode of devotion like “No One”—a romantic song, to be sure, but one that also recalls the soulful adoration of David’s love for his Lord in Psalm 86. God hears when Bruce Springsteen’s scratchy voice strains on “Badlands” to reach for the saving grace promised in Psalm 126. And God hears when Lizzo, with a freshly broken heart, drops a bit of wisdom known by all the psalmists: “Truth Hurts.”

Those are just three of the 12 songs we discuss in detail, dissecting both their timeless artistry and their biblical resonance. You’ll encounter some artists you might expect—Kendrick Lamar, U2—as well as a few surprises. (Hello, Dolly Parton.) And of course, Lizzo is in a category all her own. There are links to each song in the individual essays, but we’ve also put together a Spotify playlist that includes them all. [You can find that here.](#)

“We use a mirror when shaving or applying makeup to improve, if we can, the face we present to the world,” wrote Peterson. “With the psalms we bring into awareness an ancient sorrow, release a latent joy. We use the psalms to present ourselves before God as honestly and thoroughly as we are able.”

Hopefully, in light of these essays, your favorite pop hits will help you with that too.

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# Truth Hurts

by CHAD ASHBY

No one could have predicted it: the summer of 2019 belonged to a rapping flautist.

The artist known as Lizzo enjoyed a [record-breaking run](#) atop the Billboard Hot 100 as her carefree, boldly embodied persona captured the attention of the world. Equal parts tears and self-confidence, Lizzo's debut album *Cuz I Love You* is anchored by the smash hit "[Truth Hurts](#)," an earworm that kick starts with this painful truism: "Why are men great until they gotta be great?"

Simply put, "Truth Hurts" is a breakup anthem. From Beyoncé's "Irreplaceable" to Adele's "Someone Like You," Kelly Clarkson's "Since U Been Gone" to Gloria Gaynor's "I Will Survive," breakup anthems have been wildly popular since the dawn of the pop era. Why is it that we all know these songs by heart? And why have we all belted them at the top of our lungs at some point? Because pop artists like Lizzo aren't the only ones who process pain through song. We all do.

Between repetitions of her opening thesis, Lizzo spends the verses of "Truth Hurts" enumerating her methods for getting over the men who never fail to let her down. Trips to the salon. New bling. Revenge pics on Instagram: "Fresh photos with the bomb lighting." Claiming she's better off alone: "I put the 'sing' in single / Ain't worried 'bout a ring on my finger." Passive-aggressive digs about other romantic

## Lizzo

interests: "He already in my DM." All shameless attempts to rub in what these men "coulda had."

It's curious that Lizzo would want to sing about being dumped via text and "crying crazy" over "boy problems" in front of thousands of strangers. Perhaps even more curious is the fact that an adoring public would want to join in. Yet this is the paradoxical reality borne out in our human experience: healing and hope are found where gathered people sing the painful truth.

The Bible is filled with these kinds of songs—psalms of lament. Often, they don't present a tidy solution to our problems. Rather, they give God's people words to sing the truth. The truth about their pain. The truth about their suffering. The truth about the state of their hearts. The truth about their feelings toward God. And the truth hurts.

[Psalm 44](#) is a prime example. The song begins by acknowledging that the glory of the people is their God and King, the one who fights their battles: "Through your name we trample our foes." However, the present is not characterized by glorious victory. Its contours are heavy with pain: "But now you have rejected and humbled us." The verses lament becoming a taunt, a byword, a disgrace, a laughingstock, a shame. The truth hurts, particularly because it makes no sense: "All this came upon us, though we had not forgotten you; we had not been false to your covenant." The psalm comes to no comforting resolution. Wave after wave torments

God's people, precisely because they faithfully cling to their God: "Yet for your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." The song ends with unanswered pleas: "Awake! Why are you sleeping, Lord? Why do you hide your face? Rise up; come to our help! Redeem us!"

We naturally associate laments like Psalm 44 with the downtrodden, the cheated, the oppressed—not the victor, the triumphant, the conqueror. But maybe it's both.

In the New Testament book of Romans, the apostle Paul spends eight chapters patiently building toward a climax. As he nears the summit, he evinces a chest-thumping bravado. Flush with imminent victory in Christ, mid-crescendo Paul can't help but sing the song of Psalm 44: "[For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.](#)"

Hold on. What?

Being killed? Sheep to be slaughtered? Of all the songs, of all the anthems, of all the psalms that could have sprung to Paul's mind in that moment, he chooses a line from Psalm 44? Surprisingly, this psalm of lament doesn't kill his vibe; it perfectly embodies it. It's his "hair toss, check my nails" (from Lizzo's "Good As Hell") before the rush of an undefeatable chorus: "[No, in all these things, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.](#)"

Can we sing songs of lament with swagger? Apparently Paul could. It comes naturally to Lizzo, too. "Truth Hurts" begins with jaunty keys similar to Beyoncé's vicious "Hold Up," the kind that puts a strut in your step. By the time the boom bap lands, Lizzo's infectious confidence has already taken firm root. She whoops and scats her way through the pain of rejection, being treated as second choice, and heartbreak: "We just keep it pushing like aye, aye, aye!" These are badges of honor. This is the essence of the breakup anthem: lament with swagger.

## Can we sing songs of lament with swagger?

"Truth Hurts" is not defeatism, nor is it truly Christian lament. This is not a song of a beaten people. But it is a battle song of one who is bent and broken, yet who nonetheless fully expects to confidently cross the finish line. So it is for the Christian. Through him who loved us, we will not barely manage to survive—we are more than conquerors. There is an air of triumph when God's people "[lift every voice and sing](#)," despite whatever oppression, pain, or struggle may currently surround us. On the seventh day, we know the walls of Jericho will fall.

Truth hurts. But when Christians join our voices in singing the truth, what was meant to hurt us becomes the anthem of our eternal victory.

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# (What's So Funny 'Bout) Peace, Love, and Understanding

Nick Lowe

by ABBY OLCESE

In an interview with AARP Magazine, Nick Lowe mentioned that the song “[\(What's So Funny 'Bout\) Peace, Love, and Understanding](#)” has become such a part of the pop-music songbook that he barely even recognizes it as his own work anymore. “I feel like I had nothing to do with it,” he [said](#). “It really does feel like it's ‘Auld Lang Syne’ or ‘Happy Birthday to You.’”

It's true that, more often than not, Lowe's best-known song is associated with other artists rather than with the man who wrote and first performed it. Lowe originally recorded the song with his band, Brinsley Schwarz, in 1974, but its most recognizable version is the cover by Elvis Costello & The Attractions on the 1979 album *Armed Forces*, which Lowe produced. It's gone on to generate hundreds of versions by other artists across a wide swath of musical genres. There are soul covers, bluegrass covers, and doo-wop covers. Wilco has recorded it. So has blues legend Keb' Mo'. Early in 2020, rockers Sharon Van Etten and Josh Homme teamed up to perform a duet of the song.

The reason Lowe's song has such staying power isn't only that it's been covered by countless artists (though certainly that keeps it relevant). It's because the song addresses a timeless desire for justice and *agape* love in a world that projects selfishness and fear, while still, in some corners, maintaining a sense of hope. The song's message is so universally applicable that it doesn't feel like the work of a single person. It feels like it's always existed. In that sense, “Peace, Love, and Understanding”

is its own kind of psalm, addressing the same feelings and crying out with the same desires that are present in these passages of biblical wisdom literature.

Lowe's song is written from the perspective of a weary traveler who appears to be stuck in a dark, seemingly hopeless state of mind, a witness to the world's many injustices and unfair treatment of others. Lowe sings:

*As I walk through  
This wicked world,  
Searchin' for light in the darkness of insanity,  
I ask myself  
Is all hope gone?  
Is there only pain and hatred and misery?*

In the second verse, he continues:

*So where are the strong?  
And who are the trusted?  
And where is the harmony?  
Sweet harmony.  
'Cause each time I feel it slippin' away,  
it just makes me wanna cry.  
What's so funny 'bout peace, love and understanding? Oh...  
What's so funny 'bout peace, love and understanding?*

Those lyrics get at a recognizable feeling of frustration that spoke to the time Lowe wrote them, but could also be applied to any number of situations in our world today: systemic racism, the COVID-19 pandemic,

and confusion regarding the nature of truth in public discourse. The sentiments Lowe's song expresses may also be familiar to anyone who's spent time reading the psalms.

Many of the psalms, particularly those of David, address the writer's spiritual anguish over injustice, slander by enemies, and the prosperity of the wicked. In [Psalm 55](#), David begins by writing "My thoughts trouble me and I am distraught because of what my enemy is saying, because of the threats of the wicked; for they bring suffering on me and assail me in their anger." [Psalm 62](#) addresses comfort found in the Lord, while also asking of David's enemies, "How long will you assault me? Would all of you throw me down—this leaning wall, this tottering fence?"

Just as often, however, psalms give us reassurance of God's overarching narrative of justice. In [Psalm 37](#), David writes, "The wicked plot against the righteous and gnash their teeth at them; but the Lord laughs at the wicked, for he knows their day is coming." [Psalm 119](#) addresses both justice and inner turmoil, with the writer asking for God to give him strength to continue living a life of righteousness and faith in the face of worldly wickedness. It also includes this line of testimony: "I run in the path of your commands, for you have broadened my understanding."

That reassurance also exists in "(What's So Funny 'Bout) Peace, Love, and Understanding?"—not through the song's lyrics, but in its music. In most versions of the song, including Lowe's, the instrumental portions aren't

downbeat and dirge-like, as the words might suggest. Rather, they're energetic and fast-paced. The opening chords feel empowering, not disheartening. Lowe's song addresses the singer's pain and disappointment with the world, but it remains a happy pop song throughout.

That's because, like the psalms, "(What's So Funny 'Bout) Peace, Love, and Understanding?" isn't a complaint. It's a call. Lowe's lyrics ask, "Where are the strong? Who are the trusted?" His music, with its bright chord progressions, rhythmic piano, and splashy drums, suggests an answer: it's *us*. If the righteous people of the world stand together and act with selflessness and integrity, the song's plea for "peace, love, and understanding" can be heard and met.

## Like the Psalms, "(What's So Funny 'Bout) Peace, Love, and Understanding?" isn't a complaint. It's a call.

Like the psalms, "(What's So Funny 'Bout) Peace, Love and Understanding?" tempers lament and yearning with a sense of spiritual optimism. The singer, like the psalmist, is wracked with sorrow at the state of the world, but the song's arrangement suggests a reassurance that there are larger forces at work than the wickedness of humanity. Lowe's song empowers the listener to go and be the change we wish to see, even as we remember that our empowerment is divinely directed.

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# All Falls Down

Kanye West

by D. MARQUEL

Kanye West is no stranger to vanity.

[“All Falls Down,”](#) the third single off his 2004 debut album, *The College Dropout*, reflects the themes of aspiration and disappointment that run through much of his earlier work. The song’s title and memorable hook are borrowed from Lauryn Hill’s bluesy, acoustic ballad “Mystery of Iniquity,” an interesting sample choice in retrospect given the reclusive Hill’s own struggles with money and stardom. Sung on “All Falls Down” by Syleena Johnson, the refrain replicates Hill’s soulful, even mournful melody, which is layered with a catchy, clapping, drum-machine beat that invites listeners to nod along. This contrast might reflect Kanye’s own emotional conflicts—then and now, both in and out of the public eye. It might also complement the song’s message about the duality of success: every high point is a reminder of how far we could fall. “All Falls Down,” then, is a song not just about vanity in the sense of arrogance or pride, but also one about emptiness and futility—a dirge for the limits of earthly acclaim.

## **“All Falls Down” is a dirge for the limits of earthly acclaim.**

The song expresses this through parables. The first is about a nameless, aimless, “single Black female addicted to retail” who leaves college because “that major that she majored in don’t make no money.” She stays in town

to “do hair,” which earns her just enough to buy “a few pairs of new Airs,” though not enough to purchase a car (“so she named her daughter Alexis”). Kanye, a proud college dropout himself, appears to empathize with her; for both of them, “the concept of school seems so secure,” but it nonetheless left them lost. The second verse features Kanye name-dropping designer watches and coveting Versace goods. Yet even though he can spend “25 thou” on jewelry, he does so before he buys a home (“And I’d do it again”). Both he and the woman are driven by frivolity and admitted insecurity; they remain “so self-conscious” despite their flashy distractions. This juxtaposition is apparent throughout the track, as Kanye—in the role of lyricist and producer—infuses pep into these scenes of perpetual defeat.

Beyond failing to deliver personal fulfillment, Kanye observes that money and status are also helpless in overcoming society’s broader ills. Crime, inequity, racism, and injustice still persist, no matter what we can afford. “We buy our way out of jail,” he says, “but we can’t buy freedom.” So, if it’s all vanity—if “it all falls down” in the end—what’s the point of the grind in the first place?

The book of Ecclesiastes poses the same dilemma. Its central message is that life is [vanity](#). That’s the word used in the King James Version, while “meaninglessness” appears in other translations. The original Hebrew term, “hebel,” means “breath” or “smoke.” Something that lacks real substance; you can see it, you can feel it, but you can’t hold onto it. Ecclesiastes emphasizes



our ephemeral nature: “[Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever.](#)” The book’s [third chapter](#) outlines this further. All that lives will die, all that’s built will fall—joy and sorrow, war and peace, to everything, there is a season.

This impermanence renders all pleasure vanity as well. The voice of Ecclesiastes—“[the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem](#)”—tells us that he’s experienced [wealth and status](#): houses, orchards, gold, silver, and singers. We could say the same for Kanye, a pop icon and [certified billionaire](#) known for his elaborate live performances. But although the king of Ecclesiastes reached a measurable level of greatness, he, like Kanye, wonders what all the labor was for; “[everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind.](#)” In the end, [his money does not grant him peace](#). Similarly, he declares that [death finds the foolish and wise alike](#). What are we to make of this message? Does the inevitability of loss leave us nothing to gain? Does the specter of death deprive life of all meaning?

The answer may be in how both Ecclesiastes and Kanye answer the question posed by the chorus: “When it falls down, who you gonna call now?” While the overt biblical allusions of Kanye’s later work are absent on this early single, it’s interesting to consider his gospel pivot in

light of the bleak (but boppy) vision offered by “All Falls Down.” Perhaps it’s the fleeting nature of this world that should inspire us to look beyond it. Ecclesiastes reminds us that, while we may encounter oppression, not to marvel at it, “[for one official is eyed by a higher one, and over them both are others higher still.](#)” While the power of any earthly ruler relies upon the question of labor and land, [God is sovereign and constant](#), and thus a refuge from the vanity of life.

Still, this is not a call for austerity. On the contrary, Ecclesiastes instructs us to eat, drink, and enjoy the good things in life because it’s [a gift from God](#). Relish this world, but reserve your worship for what’s *greater* than this world. Otherwise, you will find yourself wanting, grasping for smoke, desperate for stability. To that end, “All Falls Down” provides an insightful prelude to the erratic, enigmatic, and complex Kanye West we see today: indulgent, yet introspective; prideful, yet pained; as likely to use his platform to gas himself up as he is to glorify God. Only time will tell how he, or any of us, will respond when repeatedly faced with the vanity of this world. Perhaps our goal is to simply enjoy what this life has to offer while it lasts, while still making sure that, when it all falls down, we’re left holding on to [something real](#).

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## Bruce Springsteen

# Badlands

by ROGER NELSON

In the popular mind Bruce Springsteen is a big-stadium-anthem-rocker. With his fist raised high, his neck muscles strained, and his voice a husky holler he leads the faithful in full-throated sing-alongs. His guitar is both prop and clarion call. The opening chords of a handful of songs signal the ritual of thousands raising their voices in unison. It is an expression of exuberance and hope and deep longing.

One of those anthems is "[Badlands](#)," the first song on side one of 1978's *Darkness on the Edge of Town*. There's a machine-gun drum opening, then a catchy hook that rides a guitar slide into the chanted opening lyrics:

*Lights out tonight, trouble in the heartland  
Got a head-on collision smashin' in my guts, man  
I'm caught in a crossfire that I don't understand  
But there's one thing I know for sure...*

What follows is a series of confessional statements about the nature of the world. And night after night, in concert venues all over the world, for better than 40 years, millions of people have sung and yelled along with Springsteen those essential truths about life, work, politics, and love. Those affirmations culminate in these lines:

*Well I believe in the love that you gave me  
I believe in the faith that can save me  
I believe in the hope and I pray that someday  
It may raise me above these*

*Badlands, you gotta live it every day  
Let the broken hearts stand as the price you've gotta pay  
We'll keep pushin' till it's understood  
And these badlands start treating us good*

*For the ones who had a notion, a notion deep inside  
That it ain't no sin to be glad you're alive  
I wanna find one face that ain't looking through me  
I wanna find one place, I wanna spit in the face of these  
Badlands....*

What's lost in that description is the rock-and-roll theater and learned responses of the audience. What's lost is the interplay between Bruce, his bandmates, and the energy of a sold-out crowd dancing, bouncing, and singing with unrestrained joy. I'm not a hand raiser in church, but I'm a believer who can't get his hands up high enough when Bruce is leading us in "Badlands."

**I'm not a hand raiser in church,  
but I'm a believer who can't get  
his hands up high enough when  
Bruce is leading us in "Badlands."**

Underneath many of Springsteen's anthems, there is a longing for some expression of healing that is just over the ridge, just out of reach, just around the bend in the road. We live in these badlands, but together we seek after a love, a faith, a community that will raise us into

being more fully who we're intended to be. In Bruce's words, it's about "[going someplace where there is community and fraternity and spiritual sustenance.](#)"

In the Bible, a number of the psalms are entitled songs of "[ascents.](#)" They were sung by worshippers as they made their way up to Jerusalem for the annual feasts. I like the image of a caravan of Hebrews coming from all over Galilee and the West Bank marching toward Jerusalem singing lyrics [like](#):

*I lift my eyes to you,  
to you who sit enthroned in heaven....  
Have mercy on us, Lord, have mercy on us,  
for we have endured no end of contempt.  
We have endured no end  
of ridicule from the arrogant,  
of contempt from the proud.*

[Or:](#)

*When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,  
we were like those who dreamed.  
Our mouths were filled with laughter,  
our tongues with songs of joy.  
Then it was said among the nations,  
"The Lord has done great things for them."  
The Lord has done great things for us,  
and we are filled with joy.*

For both Springsteen and the psalmist, there is a tension between the angst and anger in the living of these days and the hope of a saving grace, wherein we trade our

brokenness for laughter and our grieving for joy. We may not know that reality today, but joined in song with our fellow pilgrims we catch a glimpse of it. There is also, in both anthem and psalm, the recognition that our healing will come in spite of or outside of our efforts. There is the confession that we need some other power, some other reality, some other God to raise us up, to show us mercy.

Springsteen has been transparent in these last few years about his own faith and what it meant to grow up in the bosom of the Catholic church. While his lyrical imagination has long been littered with images from scripture and church tradition, he has only recently begun to reflect on that intersection. When asked about how his faith informs his writing he [offered this](#):

*I reference my Catholic upbringing very regularly in my songs. I have a lot of biblical imagery, and at the end of the day, if somebody asked me what kind of a songwriter I was, I wouldn't say I was a political songwriter. I would probably say a spiritual songwriter. I really believe that if you look at my body of work, that is the subject that I'm addressing. I've addressed social issues. I've addressed real-life issues here on Earth. I always say my verses are the blues and my choruses are the gospel. And I lean a little heavier on the gospel than the blues. So, I would categorize myself as ultimately a spiritual songwriter.*

"Badlands" is one of those spiritual songs. It rings with a great gospel chorus, not unlike a "song of ascents." And whether at 16 or 60, it has helped me lift up my eyes and sing a song of joy.

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# Royals

by KATE MEYRICK

The book of Ecclesiastes is famously depressing and dramatic. Right from the opening lines, the royal philosopher who authors the book does not [mince words](#): “I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.” Interestingly, “[Royals](#)”—the 2013 song by Lorde—articulates some of these same themes, albeit from a strikingly different perspective.

The author of Ecclesiastes describes how to live when we know our fate is ultimately death: don’t seek [wealth or fame](#) with the belief that it will give you meaning and purpose; have [compassion](#) for the oppressed; have [empathy](#) for our fellow humans. At the same time, we’re encouraged to rejoice with those who have learned to enjoy the blessings God has given and with those who find [contentment](#) with the small things in life.

This was and remains a countercultural way of living: denying power; seeking a life of hard work full of empathy and sacrifice, modeled on Jesus; removing attachment to our earthly riches. This is a way of life that orientates us to the heart and kingdom of God. In our modern-day culture, Ecclesiastes seems to speak against the large life lived by so many of our celebrities—Hollywood royalty. Which is why it was a bit ironic when, in 2013, 16-year-old Ella Yelich-O’Connor, known as Lorde, released “Royals” and it became one of the [best-selling singles of all time](#).

The mysterious voice of the young New Zealand

indie-pop artist spoke deeply to my alternative-loving heart. With black lipstick, a beat machine, and not an ounce of rehearsed choreography, she offered a countercultural response to the bubble-gum sweetness of other female pop artists that I would skip through on my Pandora playlists. I find that pop music by young female artists influenced by rock, grunge, and emo culture has a catchy way of commenting on the consumerism that has dominated our culture. Lorde, to me, embodies the voice of the Old Testament teacher in Ecclesiastes as she lilt through her critique of “royalty” (think the Kardashians, *Bachelor* stars, sports legends, and other super-celebrities). Just a kid from a small town in New Zealand, Lorde [has said](#) that everything she knew about being rich was from rap and hip-hop music videos; personally, she had “never seen a diamond in the flesh,” and counts her “dollars on the train to the party.”

“But everybody’s like Cristal, Maybach, diamonds on your timepiece,” she sings in the song’s chorus. “Jet planes, islands, tigers on a gold leash.” This crazy, wild display of wealth baffles her. She doesn’t find it appealing because she has her own way of indulging her desire of the finer things in life: “We don’t care, we’re driving Cadillacs in our dreams!” Instead of wishing that she could party like a rich person, she is seemingly content to be ruler of her suburban clique: “We’re not caught up in your love affair, and we’ll never be royals.” A breathy choir echoing her sentiments can be heard throughout the track, perhaps symbolizing her leadership of her suburban mates.



What I think is fascinating about Lorde, as an artist and as a person, is that even as she makes fun of a wealthy lifestyle, she is also aware that she *desires* some aspects of it: she wants authority and love, belonging and purpose. But she obtains it by being herself. “Royals” did not attempt to fit into the Top 40 female pop genre: upbeat, sugar-sweet. Instead, it highlights what Lorde loves about herself: her unorthodox vocal range, her penchant for minor keys, her love of minimal production, and her emo-girl sarcasm.

Through her music, Lorde is writing her own book of wisdom for the young millennials of the 21st century. She is subconsciously referencing an ancient, biblical way of thinking about existence and happiness. However, she does this a bit more hopefully than the author of Ecclesiastes. While the royal philosopher encourages people to be content with the blessings presented to them in this lifetime because what

follows is death, Lorde revels in seeking the small pleasures of being young that are within her grasp, simply because she knows seeking anything more

will only bring her discontent and disillusionment. “We’re bigger than we ever dreamed,” she tells her generation, “and I’m in love with being queen.”

## Lorde is writing her own book of wisdom for the young millennials of the 21st century.

In their own distinct ways, both of these philosophers tell us that while we should find joy in what we have now, we shouldn’t put our faith in worldly treasures. Both philosophers are, in their own way, countercultural. And both point us to a larger countercultural way of living: a life of following Jesus and seeking the kingdom of God. They ultimately point us to the realization that everything we have in life is a gift: any semblance of wealth, power, talent, or community in our lives is a blessing to be thankful for and to be used for the glory of God. And we know that when our work and worship is done in the name of Christ, it will never be done in vain.

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# Ms. Jackson

OutKast

by AARIK DANIELSEN

OutKast's "[Ms. Jackson](#)" is as public as apologies come.

A number-one song on a quadruple-platinum album, "Ms. Jackson" avoids the artful dodges celebrities offer at press conferences convened in the harsh light of the morning after. Instead, the hip-hop titans step to the microphone to say "sorry" smoothly, specifically. The song, written after the famous fracture of Andre 3000's relationship with singer Erykah Badu, documents how such a severing can ripple through the generations of a family, affecting innocent children and other beloved bystanders.

"Ms. Jackson" anchors 2000's *Stankonia*, a record which represents the Atlanta duo at its peak powers. Yes, OutKast would rule the world with 2003's *Speakerboxxx/The Love Below*, but that release amounts to a bundling of solo records. *Stankonia* finds Big Boi and Andre 3000 sharing the spotlight, still mutually influencing each other's creative genius.

Neon synths, glitchy beats, and a slightly stuttered piano prime listeners for Andre 3000's introduction; his every invocation of the word "mamas" takes on new meaning and hints at hurts that date back and cut deep: "Yeah, this one right here goes out / To all the baby's mamas' mamas / Mamas, mamas, baby mamas' mamas."

Gliding into the song's chorus with syrupy charisma, he addresses the mother of his child's mother. Pleading for understanding, he underlines each word: "I'm sorry,

Ms. Jackson / Ooh, I am for real / Never meant to make your daughter cry / I apologize a trillion times."

That "ooh" does so much heavy lifting. Calling back to gospel music and punctuating the lyric, the syllable covers a multitude of sins, imparting a from-the-hip, from-the-heart authenticity.

From there, he and Big Boi trade verses, modeling very different approaches to navigating this particular type of conflict. Badu testified in an [interview](#) that Big Boi's more unsympathetic verses pressed further on the "sore spot," whereas Andre 3000's rang with truth—and even impressed her mother, who "bought herself a Ms. Jackson license plate."

Unlike Andre 3000, Big Boi leans into bravado, protecting his pride—and perhaps his heart—at every turn. Referring to his "baby's drama mama," he casts a shadow over his ex's motives. Faithful to his child, he pays for musts but wonders aloud if he's bankrolling a gratuitous lifestyle. Insisting "I love your mom and everything," he launches into a litany of complaints. He concludes his final verse with a kiss-off: "And you can go on and get the hell on, you and your mama."

Every time he re-enters, Andre 3000 blows through the song like fresh air. Unlike his running mate, he digs around the roots of sweet memories and bitter grief. Before pledging to stick by his child for life—"And, yes I will be present on the first day of school and

graduation”—he delivers the song’s most heartfelt lyric: “Ms. Jackson, my intentions were good / I wish I could / Become a magician to abracadabra all the sadder / Thoughts of me, thoughts of she, thoughts of he.” Wringing real regret from “could” and “good,” Andre 3000 stretches each word to its limits.

The most public apology in recent music history resembles one at the heart of a perpetual bestseller. In [Psalm 51](#), King David finally reckons with the damage done by his sexual predation of Bathsheba—which results in pregnancy—and the murder of her husband. Instead of doubling down, he learns that apology opens the door to a lifestyle of repentance and restitution.

David expresses awareness of his sin and acknowledges that his choice affects more people than himself and the immediately aggrieved party. Rather than seeking out Bathsheba’s mother, he approaches God, the one he ultimately wronged: “Against you, you only, have I sinned.”

He concedes that only grace—and not his good intentions—can make him clean. Assured that he will be forgiven (“forever, forever ever”), he submits to the process of being remade: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.”

The process unfolds before David: healing turns us from something old, toward something new. David commits

## Assured that he will be forgiven (“forever, forever ever”), King David submits to the process of being remade.

to guiding other pilgrims around errors and cliff faces, worshipping God—the opposite of sin—with every step. Both soothsaying lyricists recognize a need to transcend mere apology, to make things right, to make others whole. But David alone acknowledges that, before we can make others whole, we must be made whole, our hearts realigned with the desires and delights of God.

In verse 17, David expresses his ultimate hope: God “will not despise” his offering of “a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart.” Andre 3000 leans on this too. Kneeling at the altar or before Ms. Jackson, the presence of a pliable spirit—willing to listen, to learn, to repair— demonstrates that our confession is remaking us from the inside out.

Saying “I’m sorry” is supremely difficult. Andre 3000 could have defended himself to the bitter end, burning Badu on the permanent record. David could have continued using his social station to avoid revelation and repercussion. But these popular psalms drive home a greater truth: dealing with sin means dealing with ourselves. As we do, divine beams light the way.

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## 9 to 5

by JOHN J. THOMPSON

I bought my first 7" single with my own money in the fall of 1980, at the age of 10. It was a quirkily comedic lament called "[9 to 5](#)," written and performed by country-music superstar Dolly Parton for the hit comedy of the same name. I had been forced to see the film at a birthday party my mom made me attend, and while watching working women Parton, Jane Fonda, and Lily Tomlin tie up their sexist boss Dabney Coleman seemed meaningless to me at the time, it planted the seeds for a new appreciation of country music—and Parton's particular brand of wisdom.

Though I could not relate to the workaday office culture depicted in the song or the movie, the meticulously crafted and righteously indignant lyrics of Dolly's song somehow appealed to me. It was ubiquitous on the radio and something about it struck a chord. I was definitely not a normal kid, I know. My musical tastes were undisciplined by social constructs. I was often as moved by the ideas in a song as I was by the music. The style of "9 to 5," which blended elements of pop, disco, rhythm and blues, and country, seemed to imply that Dolly's grievance was universal. Her effervescent brand of country also suggested that while her circumstances sucked, she would not let The Man get her down. I played that little record hundreds of times, studying the musical track, the lyrics, and the delivery. As cheesy as it seemed on the surface, it also seemed profoundly true.

Parton herself may have never worked an office job, but her skills as a writer have always allowed her to

transcend her own experiences. Tomlin and Fonda were already known as activists by the time "9 to 5" came out, but Parton had been more careful about her social and political positions. She came from the country music scene, after all. She knew that it was still a man's world, and if she wanted to have any influence, she'd have to be smart about it. Her male counterparts—artists like Johnny Cash, Merle Haggard, and Willie Nelson—had been singing about workers' rights for decades. But many in her audience still preferred their women at home instead of out in the workplace.

"9 to 5" kicks off with a frenzy of typewriter clicks (actually achieved by clicking her long fingernails against each other) and a pulsing rhythm that sounds like something from a *Rocky* movie. Dolly paints a picture of the life of an underpaid and underappreciated cog in a corporate machine. Others up the chain were getting rich or climbing the ladder off of her work without giving her credit, let alone fair compensation. This was no fantasy grievance, either. In 1979 the [Bureau of Labor and Statistics](#) confirmed that, on average, women were paid just two-thirds of what men were paid for the same jobs. They were also [less likely to be promoted](#) to executive positions. And this was not merely a contemporary problem. Though not explicitly addressing gender equality, themes of labor injustice are dominant throughout the book of Ecclesiastes. Dolly's quirky little song, it turns out, hit on some timeless, biblical truths.

In Ecclesiastes, the Hebrew word "hebel" is used to



describe work—as well as wealth, pleasure, wisdom, and more. While hebel is often translated as “vanity” or “meaninglessness,” it may be better understood as “breath” or “fleeting.” While it makes a certain kind of sense to say that something as small and temporal as a breath might not have much meaning in the grand scheme of things, it certainly is important. Try skipping your next few hebels (breaths) and see how you do. When the author of Ecclesiastes describes work as hebel, might he be saying that although the impact we make with our work is small and seemingly insignificant, when added up over time, it leads to something big?

Parton’s grievances, including her admonition that “it’s all taking and no giving,” are about the hebel of it all. We get up every day and hustle until we drop, but it’s never quite enough. While Ecclesiastes’ author measures life in breaths, Dolly measures it in eight-hour workdays. Women had been fighting for the right to work for decades, and in 1980 they had seemingly arrived, en masse, into the workforce. Was it the Promised Land they had been hoping to find or just another kind of bondage? On a deeper level, are all those days really meaningless or do they add up to something?

The frustrating beauty of the wisdom found in Ecclesiastes is its refusal to tell us what we want to hear, or really to give us any kind of clear-cut answer. In [chapter 3](#), after that poetic “a time for everything” opening, we are given a wonderfully bleak meditation on the meaninglessness of all things based on how we see them. We also have a reminder that God, who set all

of this in motion and remains engaged with his creation and in ultimate control, is not subject to its limitations at all. While there is a limited time and designated place for everything we do, everything God does “stands forever.” The best we can do, according to this sage, is to enjoy what we have and find whatever meaning in our work that we possibly can, because we cannot hope to see any of this from God’s point of view. We are stuck down here, “under the sun.” He is not. He made the sun.

## While Ecclesiastes’ author measures life in breaths, Dolly measures it in eight-hour workdays.

“9 to 5” was one of Parton’s biggest hits. It dominated the country and pop charts and remains one of her most popular songs to this day. There’s no denying its power on a purely musical level. Still, I’m convinced that the reason it has transcended trends, genres, and the film that launched it is the profound resonance of the lyric. Yes, women deserve to be paid 100% of what men are paid. Yes, women should not be discriminated against when it comes to promotions. Some 40 years on, we still have work to do on those fronts. According to [Ecclesiastes 5](#), we should not be surprised when we see oppression, injustice, and rights being denied. There is nothing new under the sun, after all. I suppose our only answers are to be found somewhere that is not under the sun at all.

**“JJT” has been chasing the thread dangling between eternal truths and temporal creative experiences for nearly three decades. He is a writer, a businessman, a father, an artist, and a seeker. Read more about him at [True Tunes](#).**

# No One

by JOYLANDA JAMISON

Everyone wants to be loved by someone. Maybe even more accurate is the fact that everyone *needs* to be loved by someone. That is how we were created. God placed an unquenchable need for him in each of us. Even when we try to reason away the desire for intimate relationships, our innermost thoughts often betray us.

**Every once in a while, an artist creates a romantic tribute that reflects the love that exists between us and God.**

There is no shortage of love songs, as countless artists have tried to capture love's essence. Every once in a while, an artist creates a romantic tribute that reflects the love that exists between us and God. A tender confession of how we are made complete in him. This soul-satisfying love is captured in Alicia Keys' 2007 song "[No One](#)," which echoes David's words of prayer in [Psalm 86](#).

The opening scene of Keys' [video](#) for the song sets an intimate tone as she sits in a fairly empty room bathed in warm, golden light coming from an open window. The upbeat piano melody and softened clash of cymbals combined with images of bronzed gears help create a timeless nostalgia. Keys' initial lines make no doubt as to the affections she has towards her beloved:

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## Alicia Keys

*I just want you close  
Where you can stay forever  
You can be sure  
That it will only get better*

She is bold and has no shame in declaring her desires; likewise, David is transparent in his initial pleas to the Lord. While the opening lines of his prayer are laced with sadness about his "poor and needy" state of being, David speaks with assurance that God will "save (his) servant who trusts in (him)." He continues to put his faith in God during times of uncertainty by praying:

*You, Lord, are forgiving and good,  
abounding in love to all who call to you.  
Hear my prayer, Lord;  
listen to my cry for mercy.  
When I am in distress, I call to you,  
because you answer me.*

These lines are akin to Keys' own woeful declaration:

*When the rain is pouring down  
And my heart is hurting  
You will always be around  
This I know for certain*

She is no longer in the sun-bathed room from before but now sits in a darkened backdrop surrounded by rain. Keys' tone becomes fuller as her pitch deepens. She draws out her words to emphasize the angst she

is experiencing as she plays at a rain-stained piano. Her black-and-gray outfit and the muted lighting help further convey her emotional pain. Yet even when shrouded in uncertain circumstances, she manages to hold onto hope that her lover will be with her during times of heartache.

God validates this type of unwavering hope multiple times throughout scripture. He makes promises to be there for his people when they call on his name. Knowing this, David asks the Lord to “give (him) an undivided heart.” Oftentimes, instead of standing firm in Christ, the inclination is to turn to someone or something else when circumstances become rocky. Keys puts her full assurance in her partner when she sings:

*People keep talking, they can say what they like  
But all I know is everything's gonna be alright*

And a few lines later she acknowledges the outside temptations that can add strain to a relationship.

*I know some people search the world  
To find something like what we have  
I know people will try, try to divide something so real*

No matter what others may say, a person must learn to put their full faith in God by remaining faithful to him, even when experiencing heartache or misfortune. What makes true love so appealing is not the joy-filled moments when life is going smoothly. What makes true love appealing is the fact that one person says to the other that they are committed even when there are long periods of pain and suffering.

God makes the commitment to be our solid ground through every season of life. No person truly experiences joy until they have gone through the depths of sadness. No one can truly understand love until they have gone through a period of time without the fulfillment love brings. David's experiences with unfaithful relatives and friends, in comparison to the Lord's own faithfulness, prompt him to praise God by saying “among the gods there is none like you, Lord; no deeds can compare with yours.” And out of the depths of her heart, Keys belts the soulful chorus that all Christians can sing to God:

*And no one, no one, no one  
Can get in the way of what I'm feeling  
No one, no one, no one  
Can get in the way of what I feel for you, you, you*

**JOYLANDA JAMISON** prefers the term “Sanctified Cat Lady.” Her love of animals is in no way related to her decision to become a vegetarian. She's an enneagram 1w2. Follow her on Instagram [@itsjoylanda](https://www.instagram.com/itsjoylanda).

# One

by SARAH WELCH-LARSON

It is difficult to pin down which U2 song is their most well-known.

The band has a reputation for stadium-rock anthems and general bombast, an identity that was cemented as early as their first Joshua Tree tour in 1987. *The Joshua Tree*—perhaps their most adored album—launched the band to global stardom. But their success was closely followed by *Rattle & Hum*, one of their less-loved albums, and a period of bitter creative differences. By the time the band reached the studio to record songs for *Achtung Baby*, they were on the edge of breaking up—unable to let each other go, but unable to find a way forward together. It was in the middle of this mess that 1991’s “[One](#)” was written. Through the course of recording the song—one of their best and most beloved—the band was reborn.

“One” feels like a lovers’ quarrel, starting quietly before piling on injury after injury, until a breaking point is reached and the two people in the relationship reach a truce, if not a reconciliation. The song is angry, sad, and messy; imperfectly written and endlessly memorable. The tone complements that of [Psalm 42](#). The two mirror each other, each one enriching readings of the other.

It might feel uncomfortable to hold a pop song up to scripture, but it is precisely within the discomfort and friction of “One” that the song reads like a psalm. In [Praying the Psalms](#), Walter Bruggemann notes that the psalms are distinct in the Christian tradition because they are not God’s words to people, but people addressing

God from wherever they might be: in places of joy, sadness, anger, or pain. For Bruggemann, psalms are important because they express “experiences of dislocation and relocation . . . experiences of being overwhelmed, nearly destroyed, and surprisingly given life which empower us to pray and sing.” In the psalms, there is room for grief and anger. Psalms ring true specifically because they speak honestly about the human experience, with all its rough edges.

**Both “One” and Psalm 42 turn from bitter disappointment to bittersweet truce, without sacrificing the discomfort within which both dwell.**

“One” certainly has rough edges. The lyrics are imperfect. (“Did I ask too much? / More than a lot? / You gave me nothing / Now that’s all I’ve got.”) Bono’s voice is raw, as though he’s been arguing all night. The song is cyclical, as though it’s just one part of a much larger conflict. The song feels almost off-balance, quiet at first but building in momentum and tempo as it goes on.

The same could be said of Psalm 42, which oscillates between longing, grief, and security in God’s love. Though “One” is half a dialogue and Psalm 42 feels like the speaker’s inner monologue, the two could be sung in similar situations. The psalm recounts a time



when the speaker was joyful in God's house, at a time when the speaker "thirsts for God" but is overcome by grief, crying and downcast. "One" begins with the line, "Is it getting better / Or do you feel the same?" The line implies a long and wearying conflict, in harmony with the song's slow pace and minor key.

"One" starts quietly, with just a guitar and Bono's voice. It sets the scene with discomfort. There are no smooth edges here, just sitting in an opening verse about the speaker's position in conflict with another. No background is necessary; the song's lyrics tell us just enough to know that whatever happened, the breach between speaker and addressee is an intimate and painful one. "You say one love, one life / It's one need in the night . . . but it leaves you, baby, if you don't care for it." More instruments—drum, bass, keyboard—pick up as the song gains momentum, layering on more complex sounds in parallel with its increasingly complicated mood.

As the song grows, its complaint gets more raw: "Did I disappoint you, or leave a bad taste in your mouth? / You act like you've never had love, and you want me to go without." Like the angry psalms, "One" is both irate and honest. The situation feels awful and unfair, and in both song and psalm, the speakers have given up on dancing around the issue and chosen to air their grievances.

"One" has lyrics that are remarkably open-ended; the

conflict at its center could be a lovers' quarrel, a fight between family members, or between the members of a band. The inciting argument—and even the players in the struggle—do not matter. What matters is the core of hurt that sits at its center: hurt between two people who are clearly surprised that they have been hurt by the other, and yet who continue to wound each other if only because they themselves have been wounded. The song builds to a crescendo with the words: "You say love is a temple, love the higher law. . . / You ask me to enter, but then you make me crawl / And I can't be holding on to what you've got, 'cuz all you've got is hurt." The downhill end of the song recognizes that people will continue to be hurt and continue to hurt each other, because they are human and therefore broken.

Both psalm and song turn from bitter disappointment to bittersweet truce, without sacrificing the discomfort within which both dwell. Neither one has a happy conclusion; they each resolve on a minor note. "One" ends where it began, repeating the line, "One life, but we're not the same / we get to carry each other." Like the ending of Psalm 42, in which the psalmist commits to praise the Lord despite not understanding his own discouragement, "One" recognizes that living in relationship with others is both a burden and a privilege. Both works live in the tension of the real world—Bruggemann's "dislocation"—and in so doing, express truths both difficult and beautiful.

**SARAH WELCH-LARSON is a linguist by training and in media by trade. She lives, works, and writes in Chicago. In her spare time she enjoys reading, knitting, and shouting about science fiction. Follow her on Twitter [@dodgyboffin](#).**

# Run the World (Girls)

Beyoncé

by KATHRYN FREEMAN

The Proverbs 31 woman has always been intimidating. She has become the woman every Christian woman is measured against. She's an entrepreneur, a mother, a seamstress, a wife, a fashionista, a cook, and a caregiver to the impoverished. She rises before dawn to tend perfectly to her many roles. The Proverbs 31 woman runs her world, just like Beyoncé Knowles-Carter—entertainer, creator, wife, mother—runs hers. This parallel is especially clear on Beyoncé's hit 2011 song, "[Run the World \(Girls\)](#)."

Despite the catchy beat, the women in "Run the World (Girls)" can seem to be living a life as unattainable as the [Proverbs 31 woman](#). The girls in "Run the World" can do everything. They "bear the children" and "then get back to business." They have "endless power" and can "build nations." They "rock the latest fashions," but do not tolerate disrespect from men. The idealized version of womanhood presented in "Run the World," alongside Proverbs 31, seems to belie most of our realities. So while we might read along in our Bibles and join Beyoncé in shouting "Girls, we run this motha, yeah!" we do not feel very powerful; we mostly feel tired and inadequate.

It can be tough to consider a field and buy it when you only [make](#) 80 cents (White women), 62 cents (Black women), 54 cents (Hispanic women), 57 cents (Native-American women) for every dollar a man makes. In the midst of a global pandemic, [studies](#) show that the increased burden of household chores, children's education, and full-time jobs fall mostly on working

mothers. The sheer weight of all these responsibilities is threatening to crush a generation of working mothers mentally and emotionally, on top of the potential to permanently derail their career prospects and earning potential. Just like the Proverbs 31 woman, [70 percent](#) of mothers with kids under 18 are participating in today's workforce, yet there seems to be diminishing returns.

**The idealized version of womanhood presented in "Run the World (Girls)," alongside Proverbs 31, seems to belie most of our realities.**

In "Run the World," Beyoncé empowers women through the confidence in her voice and the driving, electronic drumbeat, reminding them of all the extra, sometimes hidden work women do behind the scenes to make their families, their communities, their countries better. As the median age for marriage and the number of never-married women continues to rise, the view of idealized womanhood tied to motherhood and marriage can feel tortuous to the single and childless (especially those who are not single and childless by choice). A woman who is not married or a mother is forever on the JV team, not really a "#girlboss" because she is not juggling soccer practice and ballet classes on top of board meetings and balance sheets. If the modern

woman is constantly asking herself if she can have it all, the Proverbs 31 woman seems to give a taunting yes. After all, she managed to clothe her children in scarlet before the invention of sewing machines—as effortlessly as Beyoncé turns her 24 hours in a day into jaw-dropping visuals, project after project.

But what if songs like “Run the World” and Proverbs 31 are not meant to be seen as impossible checklists where every box must be checked to measure up? Perhaps “Run the World” is meant as a counterweight to the narrative of women as the weaker sex. It reminds us of all the ways women, like Ginger Rogers, do everything men do, only “[backwards and in high heels](#).”

Likewise, Proverbs 31 is a countercultural allegory of the value of women. First, the poem itself comes to King Lemuel from his mother. The implication is that men can learn from women, whether it is theology or the qualities that make a good wife. Women are capable teachers and their words are to be heeded. Though she is nameless, King Lemuel’s mother is an important influence in his life, and her words about the model woman of God have survived (to the consternation of some) for generations. Further, the woman she describes is “worth more than rubies” not because she is beautiful, but because she is wise.

Throughout Proverbs, wisdom is portrayed as a woman. In [Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary](#), Lindsay

Wilson provides a number of parallels between the Proverbs 31 woman and Lady Wisdom. Wilson highlights that both are [worth more](#) than [precious jewels](#), both [bring praise](#) at the [city gates](#), and both begin with a [fear](#) of the [Lord](#). If the Proverbs 31 woman “is wisdom exemplified, she reminds us that biblical wisdom is not just head knowledge,” but a guide for living what is considered a good and fruitful life. Wisdom is not a gendered gift. It should be sought by men and women alike.

The Proverbs 31 woman, like “Run the World (Girls),” celebrates the unique and varied contributions of women to their families, their neighbors, their communities, and the world. She teaches all of us that part of the blessed life is using our skills in practical ways to serve beyond just our nuclear families. She is generous with those who labor for her and with the poor. She is honored at the city gates. She makes the most of every opportunity. She is strong, but she uses her strength in the service of others.

The Proverbs 31 woman runs the world, and while most of us are aiming to run much smaller real estate, we can be encouraged rather than condemned. Bottom line, even if you are not a #girlboss, a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised, not for what she does, but because of who she is—a daughter created in the image of God her Father, with a unique purpose and plan for her life.

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# Once in a Lifetime

## Talking Heads

by JOEL MAYWARD

The questions irrupt into your mind, like being startled awake from a vivid dream. Perhaps long-gestating doubts and anxieties have led you to this moment of crisis: *Why do I exist? Is there really a God? Does any of this matter? What's the meaning of it all?* Or, as Talking Heads' lead singer David Byrne intones on 1980's "[Once in a Lifetime](#)," "Well . . . how did I get here?"

Byrne's query echoes a similar existential crisis expressed by the author of Ecclesiastes, a perturbing book of wisdom literature which contains some of the most provocative declarations in all of scripture:

*"Meaningless! Meaningless!"  
says the Teacher.  
"Utterly meaningless!  
Everything is meaningless."  
What do people gain from all their labors  
at which they toil under the sun?*

*Everything is meaningless.* This is not the typical proof text to argue for God's existence, nor does it make for very comforting devotional material. The Hebrew word for "meaningless," also translated as "vanity," essentially means "vapor." Ecclesiastes is not suggesting that nothing really matters, but that our existence is fleeting, a temporary mist or breath. The biblical teacher continues: "What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun." This evanescent existence is marked by repetition; nothing lasts forever except our unvarying

embeddedness in reality. Or, as Byrne the preacher sings over and over and over again, "same as it ever was."

I mainly knew of "Once in a Lifetime" from movie soundtracks and [Kermit the Frog's performance](#) on *Muppets Tonight*. I wasn't a true Talking Heads fan until I watched Jonathan Demme's spectacular 1984 concert film, *Stop Making Sense*. Byrne's bizarre jerky motions while performing "Once in a Lifetime" are absolutely captivating, even hypnotizing—it is as if he is having a self-induced seizure, and it is strangely beautiful. Such is the paradox of this iconic song: it is so catchy, so weird, and so deeply spiritual. It's both despondent and uplifting; it is equally lament and praise.

**"Once in a Lifetime" is so catchy,  
so weird, and so deeply spiritual.  
It's both despondent and uplifting;  
it is equally lament and praise.**

Brian Eno was the producer for Talking Heads' 1980 album *Remain in Light*, and he incorporated Afro-beat rhythms inspired by Nigerian musician Fela Kuti into the song's groove. The other musical elements emerged out of recorded jam sessions with bassist Tina Weymouth, drummer Chris Frantz, and keyboardist Jerry Harrison. The group experimented with various beats and melodies in repetition, allowing the final song to emerge from their communal improvisation. With the



inclusion of a massive Hammond organ part during the finale, the final product is both simple and complex on every level—lyrically, musically, and theologically.

Byrne employs a half-spoken, half-sung call-and-response pattern throughout the song, a hyperventilating improvisatory style he based on radio and televangelist sermons. This technique positions Byrne as a preacher and the listener as a member of a congregation receiving Byrne's repetitive and rhythmic sermon. The repetition makes the song instantly unforgettable; upon a single listen, you simply can't get it out of your head.

Echoing Ecclesiastes, the song's lyrics could be described as ostensibly meaningless; "there is water at the bottom of the ocean" isn't exactly a groundbreaking observation. Yet there is something profound about the imagery underlying Byrne's words, particularly that of flowing water. The song presents water in various symbolic ways; it both drowns and restores, weighs us down and gives us buoyancy. As Ecclesiastes [puts it](#), "all streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full." In the song, "water flowing underground" seems to signify a dynamic reality just below the surface of our everyday existence, that if we could only break free of "letting the days go by" and dig a little deeper, we might find some meaningful answers to our existential questions.

The [music video](#) for "Once in a Lifetime" is an iconic, pre-MTV work of religious audio-visual art. Opening on glossy artificial-looking water, a stunned Byrne bursts onto the screen from the bottom of the frame as the bass line kicks in. He looks as if waking from a dream before diving back downwards. This up-and-down rhythm continues, suggesting Byrne is repeatedly being dunked under the water. The allusion to baptism is conspicuous; it is an image of resurrection and transformation, signifying new life. As Byrne says in [an interview with NPR](#) about the song's meaning, "We're largely unconscious. You know, we operate half awake or on autopilot and end up, whatever, with a house and family and job and everything else, and we haven't really stopped to ask ourselves, 'How did I get here?'" Both Byrne and Ecclesiastes' teacher have awakened

to the question of the meaning of existence and are seeking the truth through poetic reflection and action.

When he begins to sing/sermonize in the video, Byrne appears against an all-white background in the posture of an evangelist while wearing a dark suit, a bowtie, and glasses. His movements are spasmodic and erratic, as if he's in a trance or "slain in the Spirit" during a Pentecostal worship service. As he sings, video footage of various religious rituals appears in the white background, with Byrne imitating the bodily movements of the worshipers. When he sings, "Same as it ever was / and look where my hand was / Time isn't holding up / time isn't after us," his left hand marks the beats along his extended right arm in a staccato chopping motion. It's as if his entire body has become a living clock to mark the times and seasons. For Byrne and Ecclesiastes, there is a [time for everything](#) and a season for every activity under heaven, an underlying sense of purpose behind the daily rhythms of reality.

As the song fades out, Byrne can faintly be heard muttering a new enigmatic lyric: "Here a twister comes, here comes the twister." I can't help but think of another biblical book of wisdom: God speaking to Job from "[out of the storm](#)." Like Ecclesiastes, the book of Job confronts the apparent meaninglessness of existence and human suffering with poetic verve. God loves our honest questions, those which erupt out of us and cannot nor should not be ignored. In God's infinite wisdom, the answers are not given in clear propositions or philosophical systems, but in poetic and divine grace. For, as Ecclesiastes [puts it](#), each of us may eat and drink and find satisfaction in all our toil—this is the gift of God.

Though this comforting conclusion may feel abrupt or even unearned, it parallels the music video for "Once in a Lifetime." At the video's coda, we see an image of Byrne in a black (not white) room, dressed in a white, open-collared shirt without glasses. He appears calm, even peaceful; it's a stark contrast to the frazzled and erratic Byrne from moments earlier. The vision is ever-so-brief, but it's perhaps a glimpse of Sabbath rest on the far side of these existential longings. For time isn't after us—God has made everything beautiful in its time.

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## Kendrick Lamar

# Alright

by CLAUDE ATCHO

"If God got us then we gon' be alright."

In 2015, Kendrick Lamar's hit "[Alright](#)" became the unofficial anthem of the nascent Black Lives Matter movement. Since then "Alright" has maintained, if not outright increased, its cultural importance and emotional impact as a prophetic song of protest. While the song has remained in our cultural consciousness—and personal playlists—on the merits of Lamar's aggressive, nimble flow and its relevance to the seemingly unending cases of police brutality against Black people, an overlooked aspect of the song's enduring power comes from its similarity with the psalms—the prayers and songs of Israel, which shaped and vocalized the resilient faith of the people of God.

The Book of Psalms is nothing if not drenched in honesty. In fact, the psalms often showcase how bracing honesty can live quite comfortably with God-centered hope, with the former often producing a deeper sense of the latter. In [Psalm 43](#), the psalmist mourns a sense of abandonment by God ("Why have you rejected me?") because of the schemes of oppressive and ungodly enemies. Throughout the psalms, we find writers who pull no punches about their bleak circumstances, while simultaneously holding on to hope in God. Lamar does the same. After opening with the declaration, "If God got us then we gon' be alright," Lamar is painfully, and at times profanely, honest about the condition of Black folks in America:

*Wouldn't you know  
We been hurt, been down before, n\*\*\*a  
When our pride was low  
Lookin' at the world like, "Where do we go, n\*\*\*a?"*

It's precisely this rare blend of honesty about injustice and the refusal to relinquish hope that gives "Alright" its triumphant edge. The notes of victory that Lamar raps with conviction—"If God got us then we gon' be alright"—are the opposite of trite religiosity; they're well-earned and meaningful because of the stark realities of injustice spoken through the song. In this sense, "Alright" has a psalm-like quality, vocalizing the grim realities of hardship and a hope that's distinctly rooted in God. "Alright," like the psalms, teaches us that honesty and faith are designed to co-exist.

**"Alright," like the psalms,  
teaches us that honesty and  
faith are designed to co-exist.**

The psalmic resonances of "Alright" emerge most during the song's chorus. As the drums drop out, Lamar's voice takes center stage as he narrates an all-too-real slice of Black experience in America, including a sense of abandonment and existential homelessness ("looking at the world like, 'where do we go, n\*\*\*a?'"). Lamar's grim honesty culminates in a shift toward both violent and religious impulse:

*Lookin' at the world like, "Where do we go, n\*\*\*a?"  
And we hate po-po  
Wanna kill us dead in the street for sure, n\*\*\*a  
I'm at the preacher's door  
My knees gettin' weak and my gun might blow  
But we gon' be alright*

Facing injustice and despair, Lamar vocalizes faith and religion as a refuge from an unjust world and a means for overcoming temptation toward retaliation ("my knees getting weak and my gun might blow"). Where the psalmist seeks refuge at "the altar of God," Lamar seeks the modern equivalent, turning to "the preacher's door." Instead of death by police or violence by his own hand, the chorus exults: "But we gon' be alright." It's at this point that the drums return, a new voice emerges, and the chorus explodes in tones of triumph, musical and lyrical, both of which are palpably spiritual:

*N\*\*\*a, we gon' be alright  
N\*\*\*a, we gon' be alright  
We gon' be alright  
Do you hear me, do you feel me? We gon' be alright  
N\*\*\*a, we gon' be alright  
Huh? We gon' be alright  
N\*\*\*a, we gon' be alright  
Do you hear me, do you feel me? We gon' be alright*

This is a God-centered hope achieved through gritty honesty and a Godward gaze. The rhetorical questions are again reminiscent of Psalm 43, where the psalmist asks, "Why, my soul, are you downcast?"

Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God,  
for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God."

The great British preacher D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones once remarked that this pattern of rhetorical question followed by God-centered declarations revealed "[the main art in the matter of spiritual living](#)." Based on examples from Psalms, Lloyd-Jones declared, "You have to take yourself in hand, you have to address yourself, preach to yourself, question yourself . . . you must go on to remind yourself of God, who God is, and what God is and what God has done, and what God has pledged himself to do." Lamar's chorus powerfully employs this same discipline of questioning and declaring. Where the psalmist might ask, "Why, my soul, are you downcast?" Lamar goes colloquial: "Do you hear me, do you feel me?"

The outcome of both the psalmist and Lamar's rhetorical questioning is a self-talk and communal exhortation toward God-centered hope. In response to the rhetorical question, Lamar's chorus, like that of the psalmist, begins to preach and declare. Each chorus declaration is another note of defiance and hope—defiance against the injustice that seeks to kill and hope in the God who walks with us even in the valley of the shadow of death. With psalm-like resonance, Lamar reminds us that because of the steadfast love of God, we can say with honesty and hope, despite the chaos that engulfs us, that "if God got us then we gon' be alright."

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