

Prayers

To God

*Praise God for His miraculous powers and His will to bless you with signs of His love.
Receive His blessings!*

For myself

Weekly theme: social media

Where will You lead us, Lord God, for Your mind is more mysterious than the supreme mathematical puzzle; Your will is more purposeful than a particle thrown around an accelerator; Your character is more intense than the most exhilarating sport imaginable! You will lead us to complete our race, to finish the journey, to win the battle and to grasp the prize, and the strength of Your leadership will never falter! Praise You, Lord God!
AMEN

For others

Pray for all who have been tainted by the problems of alcohol and the consequences of family life lived with alcoholism. Pray for any known to you, and take stock if you are anywhere near the limits of safe drinking ...

Meditation

I confess my sins to You O Lord;
Will You forgive all my faults and misdemeanours?

I confess my rebellion against You O Lord
Yet You are big enough to accept my heartfelt apology

I confess my guilt to You O Lord;
Where can I turn my face from your penetrating gaze?

I confess my feelings to You O Lord;
How will you respond to everything I think, deep inside?

I confess my faith to You O Lord;
Will You help me express it in showing love to my neighbour?

I confess my thanks to You O Lord;

For You shape and mould all that happens, for Your Glory!

Bible Passage

Psalm 25:11-22

- ¹¹ For Your name's sake, O LORD,
forgive my guilt, even though it is great.
- ¹² Who, then, are those who fear the LORD?
He will instruct them in the path they should choose.
- ¹³ They will spend their days in prosperity,
and their descendants will inherit the land.
- ¹⁴ The LORD confides in those who fear Him,
and He makes His Covenant known to them.
- ¹⁵ My eyes are always looking towards the LORD,
for He will release my feet from the snare.
- ¹⁶ Turn to me and be gracious to me,
for I am lonely and weak.
- ¹⁷ Relieve the troubles of my heart;
free me from my distress.
- ¹⁸ Look upon my affliction and my troubles
and take away all my sins.
- ¹⁹ See how many enemies I have
and how fiercely they hate me!
- ²⁰ Guard my life and deliver me;
let me not be shamed, for I take refuge in you.
- ²¹ May integrity and uprightness protect me,
because my hope is in you.
- ²² Redeem Israel, O God,
from all of its troubles!

Review

Psalm 25 is a private poem of prayer in which a variety of personal issues are brought to God and they are dealt with by reflecting on Israel's Covenant. The prayers are characterised by talk of shame (25:1-10), and now guilt, which appears at the beginning of today's passage (25:11). In general, it leads us to seek God's covenant faithfulness, whilst remaining wary of ever present enemies (25:2,19); and we are urged us to follow the Lord's ways if we are to overcome all evil (25:18-21).

The second half of the psalm contains an odd mixture of personal experience and guidance. On the one hand, we read this personal comment, '*my eyes are always looking towards the Lord ...*' (25:15), but then, we read the firm instruction, '*He will instruct them in the path they should choose ...*' (25:12). The great mystery of this psalm is its constant references to a state of mind that seems troubled, verses 11,15,16, and 17, for example, reveal a sense of guilt and a feeling of being trapped, lonely and weak. Yet neither do we ever find ourselves

far from appeals to the Lord to be gracious, to save and to deliver (25:16,17f.). In this, the psalm expresses a profound faith in the Covenant God of Israel (25:14) and His ability to save those who turn to Him, whatever the circumstances (25:17-18).

Interestingly, the psalm does not finish on a note of victory, as do many psalms, but on a call for the redemption of Israel (25:22). In the last verses, we read a call for the Lord' to be gracious, and for His power to protect those who are upright and live in integrity (25:20,21), and it finishes with a beautiful and succinct call for Israel's redemption, which is quite unique in Scripture (25:22).

Psalm 25 has always spoken to people who are struggling, for whatever reason, and it speaks to those who feel lonely in church, but still call on God to lead, correct and bless His people. Many of us have been in such a place before God on a Sunday morning! Perhaps its greatest blessing is the sense of guidance and protection coming through the whole psalm; *'guard my life and deliver me, let me not be ashamed, for I take refuge in you ...'* (25:20). But if we go further in study we will find the psalm holds some other fascinating possibilities.

Going Deeper

Guilt and shame

Guilt (25:11) and shame (25:2,3,20) are both represented in this Psalm, and are essential to our understanding of it. But what is the difference between them? First, guilt is a matter of the law; for guilt is what we should properly feel if we have broken some law, whether it is a national law, a religious law or a social convention. We also say we feel 'guilty' when we have done something that cuts across what other people expect of us.

Shame, however, is a deeper emotion in which we feel the personal pain of our own failing in some matter, and the important thing to remember about shame is that it is rooted in our own self-understanding. It causes great confusion when we use both words almost as if they mean the same thing, but when it comes to dealing with the Bible, it is best to keep them separate and think of them as they are defined. Guilt is a state of having broken the law, whether purposefully or not; and shame is what we feel about what we have done wrong, and it can encompass a wide variety of feelings depending upon our life's experience.

Here, the psalm reflects guilt before the law (25:11), yet for reasons we do not know, the sense of shame is carried through the whole psalm. There is a feeling that people are not 'good enough', and the Lord's ways are a route to becoming a better servant (25:14). Verse 15 says, *'my eyes are always looking towards the Lord ...'* and there is a sense of urgency as we read a call for God to act to remove sins (25:18), to defeat an enemy (25:19), to guard life (25:10) etc.

There is certainly a wonderful conclusion to the psalm, but you may feel, as I do, that we are missing something here. We must now consider what this might be.

What is going on?

The closer we look at the psalm, the more it reads as if the writer is very insecure (2:2,7,11,17,18) and is caught between a variety of emotions, constantly asking for help from God. So although the psalm begins by saying 'Of David' (25:1), this may mean here that this psalm is one in David's 'collection' because he liked it, rather than one he wrote that expresses his own personal feelings.

The main reason we must consider this is because the writer does not seem to be able to feel secure in the help and sustenance of the Lord. In verse 14 he declares the nature of the Lord as a Covenant God of love, and yet repeatedly returns to ask for relief from his troubles

(e.g. 25:16,18). This is an indication that his heart remains troubled; he believes that God will help him, but not that his troubles have been dealt with.

Because of this, I offer below a new explanation of this psalm which I have not found in other commentaries, yet is perfectly understandable from an Old Testament point of view.

The prayer of a resident alien?

I suggest that this psalm is not written by David, but by someone living in Israel who was a 'resident alien'. Scripture frequently refers to such people who are not children of Abraham, but people whose lives have become entwined with the Israelite people and who have come to worship the same God. This would explain so much, and why we can hardly imagine David writing a psalm like this which talks about God, and yet never really expresses total confidence in God. However, it does express the feelings of someone who was a 'resident alien', someone who was very much a part of Israelite life and culture, but on the edge of the worshipping community.

There are plenty of references to such people in the Old Testament, and it should be no surprise to us that their faith is expressed here in the Psalms. These people were the remnants of the other tribes that inhabited the land of Canaan before the Israelite invasion under Joshua. They were not wiped out by the Israelites (Judges 2:1-5), indeed, Moses gave specific laws whereby the 'resident alien' might live within Israel, with the full protection of the law, and a welcome participant in its worship and festivals (Ex 12:48,49, Leviticus 17:10ff, Deut 24:14ff for example).

The best example of a 'resident alien' is Ruth, a foreign Moabite woman who was vital to the plans of God, a direct physical ancestor of David, and part of the spiritual heritage of Jesus. Early Christians came to see how vital it was that she was included in the Old Testament stories, as such people represented God's faithfulness to Gentiles in Old Testament times before the Gospel was preached to 'all the world' by Paul and the disciples, after the death and resurrection of Jesus.

New ways to understand the psalm

In this light, Psalm 25 begins to have some interesting insights. It explains why the writer knows all about the Lord as a Covenant God, but seems not to have felt that his sins were completely dealt with (vv 16-18) because the alien in the midst was not included in the annual ritual of forgiveness, when the 'scapegoat' was let loose into the wilderness taking with it the sins of the people (Leviticus 16:9ff). It was also clear that in Old Testament times, despite the laws of Moses, 'resident aliens' were regarded by some with suspicion, even as enemies of Israel, despite their protection under the law. This could well explain the use of the word 'enemy' in this psalm, for Israelites and 'resident aliens' sometimes felt considerable animosity towards each other, despite the intention of the law that they should live together in peace within Israel.

If this psalm expresses the feelings of a resident alien, then it would explain not just the talk about 'enemies', but the fact that the writer seems insecure. He feels hurt by false accusations that he is not a proper Israelite and yet yearns for the true God of the Covenant, and knows all about the path of faith and the ways of righteousness that are right before God. To his credit, he does not attack the people of Israel directly, even though some of them have hurt him, but finishes with a prayer for them 'Redeem Israel, O Lord, out of all its troubles'; an enigmatic prayer that displays considerable magnanimity.

Discipleship

Application

The seeker at church?

If this psalm does indeed represent the godly feelings of a 'resident alien', then the equivalent today could be someone who comes to church claiming to be a believer, but struggling to accept the claims of Christ personally, and there are many such people in our churches. They are people who try to live good lives, and just like our psalmist, they express a hope in the salvation of God, but are worried that their sins might still find them out (see verses 6,7,16,17). They can be people of regular prayer and who support what the church does, but they feel some in the church are a threat to them (25:2,20), perhaps even 'enemies'.

The fact remains that just as the person who wrote this psalm was not able to express confidence that his sin was dealt with by the Lord and was still dogged by shame and guilt, so many people in church today live an Old Testament faith in which they believe in God and yet have no assurance of sins forgiven. Their faith is more like that of a 'resident alien'!

The mission of the church

There is a great deal of emphasis today on mission, and the need to take the message of Jesus Christ 'out there' to the many who have not yet heard it. However, there is also a need within the church to minister to those who attend our churches, but do not feel able to commit themselves fully to the Lord, and receive the fullness of His promises. With the help of Psalm 25, we may begin to understand that part of the problem of such people may well be shame and guilt. They have personal issues which need to be dealt with, and this tells us something about how we need to go about our mission to such people. Certainly, if they feel inadequate, then they will not be persuaded by being 'battered' by the Bible or by preaching; they need people who will walk the path of faith alongside them and help them to take the steps that will bring them closer to their Lord. They need what is proclaimed at the end of psalm 25, which is 'redemption'!

Psalm 25 and the full Gospel

Psalm 25 contains a number of verses of general value for the path of discipleship, but I suggest that its unresolved focus on shame and guilt means it must be read alongside other Scriptures if we are to find the full message of salvation. The true value of the Psalm may well be that it helps us understand the faith of those who are 'on the edge' and not at the heart of God's promises. This may not be what you expect from a Psalm, but the Old Testament constantly reveals truths in this way, pointing us to Christ from the experience of people who did not know Him personally!

It is part of the purpose of God's Word to tell us about the total condition of humanity, which includes people who feel like this. In this way Psalm 25 can teach us about understanding those who are close to faith, but still searching.

Ideas for what to do

- It may seem strange for me to suggest that a Psalm in the Bible expresses the faith of one who falls short of the Covenant people of God. But without Christ, everyone falls short. Read through the psalm and consider whether it reflects your faith and whether you have come to a full acceptance of God's love in Christ.

- Who do you know who is on the edge of faith? Think of them, and then read this psalm, and see whether any of it expresses their faith. What does the psalm teach us that might help?

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Do you feel that your own faith is expressed in this psalm? If so, identify which verses most accurately express what you feel?
2. Do you think that my understanding of the faith of an 'alien in the midst' is justified for this psalm?
3. What are the treasures of faith that you find in this psalm. If there are none, say so.

Final Prayer

Lord God, You have strengthened us for the journey of life, and given us all the sustenance we need. Please guide us in how we use what You have provided; may we share what must be shared, and use for ourselves the personal resources you have given. Thank You for Your gifts, O Lord our strength and our Redeemer.