

Prayers

To God

Powerful Lord, and great God of awesome splendour, deliver Your people from the enemy and His attacks. Get rid of wrong teaching, evict scurrilous gossip, destroy domination, eliminate hurtful comments, and clear out from our midst the evils of racism, anger, prejudice, envy and suspicion in all its forms. We want to be Your people, pure and holy, so we ask that we might be as unwilling to put up with evil as You are! **AMEN**

For myself

Ask the Lord to help you value yourself, your opinions and your feelings. Ask the Lord to root out of your heart any self-centredness that might cause you to place wrong values on your opinions and feelings.

For others

Weekly theme: embracing change

Many people find it hard to embrace change, perhaps because we all want security and are unlikely to be generous in attitude to changes in things which affect this. Pray that God will bless His people with the desire to be secure in Him, and therefore able to embrace all the change He wishes to bring to His people.

Meditation

(Using the shorter form of the Lord's prayer as in Luke's Gospel)

*Father, hallowed be your name,
May the whole world have the decency
to respect the One who gives it its life.*

*Your kingdom come.
May Your people set a good example
by respecting Your divine authority.*

*Give us each day our daily bread.
May we all be willing to share what we have
so that the poor and need may eat and live.*

Forgive us our sins,

May we be prepared to ask You for help
especially when we really need it.

For we also forgive everyone who sins against us.
May the way we practice of our faith
make a positive difference in the world.

And lead us not into temptation.
May we all recognize the core truth of our faith,
that the Lord is greater than all powers of evil.

Bible Passage

Psalm 26

Of David.

- ¹ Give me justice, O LORD,
for I have walked in my integrity;
I have trusted in the LORD
without wavering.
- ² Test me, O LORD, and try me,
examine my inner feelings and intentions;
- ³ for your faithful love is there in front of me,
and I go about what I do guided by Your truth.
- ⁴ I do not spend time with vain people,
nor do I mingle with hypocrites;
- ⁵ I cannot abide the company of those who do evil
and refuse to sit down with the wicked.
- ⁶ I wash my hands in innocence,
and go about your altar, O LORD,
- ⁷ making my voice heard in thanksgiving
and telling of all your wonderful deeds.
- ⁸ I love the house where you live, O LORD,
the place where your glory dwells.
- ⁹ Do not throw me out with sinners,
nor put me with violent men,
- ¹⁰ who carry out wicked schemes
and whose right hands are full of bribes.
- ¹¹ As for me, I walk in integrity;
redeem me and be merciful to me.
- ¹² I take my stand on upright stability,
and I will praise the LORD in the great assembly.

Review

Psalm 26 is a positive psalm about honesty and integrity of motive and action, and offering the whole of life to God. These are admirable qualities and the psalm is a clear challenge to all people of faith to live by the highest of standards. It has many great themes; trustworthiness (26:1,2); faithfulness and obedience (26:3), avoidance of evil (26:4-7), the love of God's presence (26:8) a distaste of violence (26:9,10) and the intent to do what is right (26:11,12).

This all sounds good, but a bit arrogant! In Old Testament times, the mercy of God was not freely available through Jesus Christ, so to claim innocence and holiness sounds unattainable. For example, how could anyone say they have '*walked with integrity*' before God (26:1,11) when this sounds like boasting!

In ancient times, Temple worshippers believed they were justified before God when they kept God's laws as given to Moses (Exodus 20f.). Today, we react against this because it sounds like the religion of the Pharisees; remember Jesus' comment about the Pharisee He saw who prayed in the Temple '*God, I thank you that I am not like other men*' (Luke 18:10). Jesus instead commended a man who knew he was a sinner, and He criticised the Pharisees who claimed justification through what they had done, as this psalm suggests.

We could therefore dismiss Psalm 26 as unhelpful and a denial of true faith, but this would not be fair to the Psalm. It was not written to be read aloud or to claim uprightness before others. Some psalms were used for public worship (such as Psalms 47 and 48), but most were not, and this has the characteristics of a private prayer. They reflect someone trying hard to be godly!

There must surely be something wrong if we cannot confess to the Lord that we are doing everything in our power to be truthful and trustworthy, and all that this psalm suggests, even though we now know that our full salvation is found in Christ alone. This psalm urges the reader to aspire to the highest standards of holiness before God, to be uncompromising in truth and integrity. It is a sharp reminder of the standard to which we should aspire in Christ, and if we cannot say it then sin is lurking within and must be addressed.

Going Deeper

We shall therefore look more deeply at how these words, as part of the Old Testament, can illustrate the true life of faith we now experience in Christ. Many of the verses are useful expressions of faith; such as '*test me, O Lord, and try me ...*' (26:2), for example.

The importance of personal integrity

The first thing to notice about this psalm is that nowhere does the psalmist claim, directly, to be perfect. The whole psalm is encapsulated by one word, which in the Hebrew occurs in both verse 1 and verse 11. It is the word '*tom*' (pronounced 'toam') which I have translated as '*integrity*', but also means '*wholeness*' or '*completeness*'. The way that this word begins and ends the psalm clearly indicates that it is the key to our understanding of this psalm's purpose, which is to express the prayers and feelings of one who comes before the Lord in private prayer with open honesty and a heartfelt desire to do what is right, without question. So many other psalms deal with what goes wrong in human affairs and relationships (read psalms 12,13,14 for example, and many others), but this one is about personal integrity.

The mistake we can make is this; there is a difference between trying to act with integrity and

claiming to be perfect. So those who say they are aspiring to integrity or holiness should not be penalised for this, but give credit to God for all that is good and right (26:8), and being the object of their desire. It is right that those who know Jesus should approach the Throne of Grace with this kind of honesty. For example, the first letter of John helpfully highlights the meaning of this psalm by encouraging the Christian to walk *'in the light'* (1 John 1:4,5), and what we have read today is a good guide as to what *'walking in the light'* might mean.

Inner feelings and emotions

The first challenge is to be open to the continual testing of God which is also an important theme of 1 John (see 1 John 4:1, for example). In Psalm 26, the psalmist asks God to examine his *'inner feelings and intentions'* (26:2). If you look this up in other versions of the Bible, you will find that most of them say that God tests our *'hearts and minds'*. You could say that both phrases mean roughly the same thing, but the emphasis within the Hebrew is subtle, but distinct, and says literally, *'examine my kidney's and heart'* where the *'kidney's'* were regarded as the seat of our emotions (hence my translations *'inner feelings'*), and the heart was regarded as the seat of *'will power'* (hence my translation *'intentions'*).

The psalm therefore presents a picture of someone whose personal emotions and will are set upon God's purposes; a proper and noble aspiration for any Christian. But the psalmist goes on from there to say that his inspiration is God's *'faithful love'* (26:3). The Hebrew word used here is the great Covenant word of the Old Testament, *'cheseth'* which indicates God's faithful and eternally steadfast love for those who trust in him.

Integrity and the company we keep

The following verses are not difficult to follow. It has often been said that a person's character is greatly determined by the company they choose to keep, and verses 4 and 5 describe the choice we must make to keep away from those who are ungodly so that we can do what is right; *'I do not spend my time with vain sinners ...'* (26:4). The psalm indicates that the Christian should not spend time with those who are ungodly, in particular those who are *'vain'*, which means wasting time on the things of this world, and *'hypocrites'* whose actions and words do not match (as Jesus said of the Pharisees - Matt 23:13f.). This does not mean to say we should permanently avoid all but *'pure'* company, the psalm merely reflects the choices we must make if we are to keep close to the Lord.

Keeping the Lord's company

Following this, verses 6 to 8 describe how a godly person might choose to spend time in the Lord's company; in active worship, and in proclaiming God's works. In Old Testament times, this was done in the Temple at Jerusalem, but not everyone of God's people, even then, could get there. In the 500 years before the life of Christ and after the Exile when the Temple was torn down by the Babylonians, people were encouraged to set up local centres of worship called *'synagogues'*, precisely because people could not always get to Jerusalem. Worship of the Lord, both then and now, was a matter of how you lived your life, as well as what you did with others on formal occasions of worship. In this vane, verse 8 indicates that if we love the Lord, then we must love His *'house'*, where He dwells. We might think this would be the *'church'* today, but we must remember that the New Testament teaches that God dwells with His people, and they are the *'Church'*, not the buildings.

Sinners, or not sinners? That is the question!

The final verses of Psalm 26 appeal to the Lord not to count us as sinners, but is this a Christian approach to faith? Certainly, we all confess our sins to God so that we may be saved, but Psalm 26 expresses the faith of God's people who would be mortified to be told they have done something wrong before God. We strive not to be like that and are mortified if we have not understood properly some sin we may have committed. But want nothing to do with *'violent men who carry out wicked schemes and whose hands are full of*

bribes' (26:10)

God's redemption and mercy

After a final appeal to integrity in verse 11, the psalm confirms that we may stand on firm ground by asking the Lord for redemption and for mercy. This, of course, is available to us through Jesus Christ and depends upon not just our integrity, but our repentance and faith. This psalm does not illustrate the repentance required for salvation, but it does illustrate the desire of the heart that lies behind one who would please Almighty God and seeks to live a life of faith pleasing God.

So this psalm does not present us with a picture of inappropriate or selfish faith. It is more like a practical guide for discipleship, focussing on the emotions and intentions of the believer and the judgement of God. It illustrates the importance of our life choices to do what is right, and the place of true worship at the centre of our lives. It does not illustrate everything about the life of faith, nor the full requirements for salvation as found in the New Testament. But it does speak to us clearly about what goes on in the heart of the believer!

Discipleship

Application

Is this a prophetic psalm about Christ?

But there is one further feature of this psalm worth considering. Many of the psalms speak prophetically of God's purposes in Christ, and we can see this in psalms 22 and 23, for example. Prophecy is a broad subject, for some prophecies speak of Christ directly, but others tell us about God's Word to His people at different times and places, pointing to truths that may not have been evident to those who originally wrote them. This is particularly true of many psalms, and perhaps this one as well.

When we read of the quality of life that this psalm advocates, it does indeed present us with a personal challenge. However, if we think of the psalm as prophetic, could it be that it tells us about the one who did in fact live this life to the full and with complete integrity, Jesus Christ? Jesus opened himself up to the judgements of God within this psalm by the very act of becoming human, but He did not sin, and was not found wanting at His time of judgement. He walked in the truth like no other person has ever done (26:3). He chose not spend time with hypocrites, but with sinners who were willing to let themselves be touched by God (26:4,5). Of all the people who went into the Temple, He was the only one who was without sin (26:6) before the altar, except that in His attempts to purify the Temple, He was thrown out (John 2:13). No one else has declared the Kingdom of God with such power, nor demonstrated so much love for His people despite their sins (26:8,9). And when His purity and love was shown on earth, He was indeed counted alongside bloodthirsty men, and treated like a sinner, suffering the intrigues and bribery (Judas' money) that led to His death for us all (Matt 26,27).

And are we not called to follow in His footsteps? Although He was *'thrown out'* with sinners to be killed and crucified (see 26:9), He rose again and walked in integrity before Almighty God, and ascended into Heaven; praise God! The Christian can say that upon this Gospel, *'I take my stand'* (26:12) and *'I will praise the Lord in the great assembly!'*

Ideas for what to do

- Try reading through this psalm, and assessing your own reactions. How do you feel? Do you feel close to what is written here at all?
- What can you do to work on your relationship with God? You need not be ashamed about this, but we must all be practical about our faith, and the assumption that we have nothing to learn is dangerous. Why not take the opportunity presented by this psalm to measure yourself against a high standard!

Questions (for use in groups)

1. I have made some presumptions about this psalm at the beginning. How did it first come across to you as you read it?
2. Do you feel able to open yourself up to God on a regular basis? When? How?
3. Are there any parts of this psalm that you feel do not apply to Jesus? Why might this be so?

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ; You long for us to be at peace with You. Liberate us from worry and anxiety about our lives, and lead us through every path we have to travel. You know our beginning and our end; so give us the courage to trust You completely for all that's to come. Thanks be to God: AMEN