

Valparaíso University

ValpoScholar

Walter E. Keller's Devotional Studies of Psalms

University Archives & Special Collections

1-31-1999

Psalm 15: A Psalm of David

Walter E. Keller

Valparaíso University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/kellerpsalms>

Recommended Citation

Keller, Walter E., "Psalm 15: A Psalm of David" (1999). *Walter E. Keller's Devotional Studies of Psalms*. 13.
<https://scholar.valpo.edu/kellerpsalms/13>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University Archives & Special Collections at ValpoScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Walter E. Keller's Devotional Studies of Psalms by an authorized administrator of ValpoScholar. For more information, please contact a ValpoScholar staff member at scholar@valpo.edu.

Psalm 15

A Psalm of David

(NRSV) (RCL)

My central concern in these Psalm studies is always to provide an answer to the questions, “How can Christians pray this Psalm? And how can they do so without becoming arbitrary? How can they pray these Psalms while remaining true to a Biblical faith that is governed by the New Testament?”

I think that the answer lies in living consciously in the continuity of the community in which these Psalms are treasured, living in an awareness of the history of that community which we know as the People of God. The People of God are the People of Israel in its long and developing history, and the Body of Christ, the Church as it continues this long line to the present in which we stand. This continuous community has important junctures, decisive points along the line of continuity. When we think of the Psalms, we need to think obviously in this instance of David and his successors, of Jesus, and of the Church as it is informed by the Reformation.

I think that the key to praying Psalm 15 lies in verse 1. The prayer is addressed to the LORD, that is to say, to Yahweh. As I have said frequently, Yahweh is the Name by which the God who called Abraham and rescued Israel from Egypt wills to be known (Exodus 3:13-15). This Yahweh, who wills to be known as the calling, rescuing, redeeming, and forever faithful God, is the one whom Jesus addresses as Father. Thus by this acclamation, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (and of David and us!) is further revealed as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In the shorthand of the early Church, this God is now known as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

When David wrote this Psalm, he refers to the *tent* on Yahweh’s *holy hill*. The tent was the place where the Ark of the Covenant was housed; hence, it was the place where Yahweh dwelt, where he lived, where he was present so that his People might come before him. David had hopes of building a more imposing Temple as a suitable place for God to dwell, but that was a task which God assigned to the Son of David, King Solomon. In the generations after David, pilgrims who were approaching the splendid Solomonic Temple sang this Psalm. The hill was Mount Zion, where the Ark of the Covenant was kept and where later the Temple was constructed. Obviously the hill was not intrinsically holy, but it was regarded as holy for the sake of the tent/Temple there located. So when David asks the question of verse 1, he is asking the question, “Who may abide, dwell, live in the presence of Yahweh, the God-who-is-here-for-us?” And when in the generations after David pilgrims would approach the Temple, they would liturgically or ritually ask the questions of verse 1, and the Temple priests would then respond with the rest of the Psalm.

For Christians, God-for-us is not located in a tent or a Temple; God-for-us dwells in the person of Jesus. It is in the body of Jesus, born of the Virgin Mary, crucified on the holy hill of Calvary, and raised to live now in a new death-proof life, where God-with-us is God-for-us. And so when we ask the question of verse 1, we are asking something like this: “Dear Father in heaven, who may live in Christ on Calvary’s holy mountain? And who may be immersed in the Spirit who so palpably proceeds from the interrelationship between the two of you?” And the answer also for us is to be found in the verses following.

V. 1

**¹ O LORD, who may abide in your tent?
Who may dwell on your holy hill?**

This verse asks the questions to which verses 2-5a are the answer. They are nearly synonymous, but there may be a slight progression in thought. To *abide in a tent* is to remain for only a shorter time, while to *dwell* implies a more permanent residence.

Vv. 2-5a

**² Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right,
and speak the truth from their heart;**

These are general moral principles that picture persons with a certain kind of character rather than commanding specific deeds. They are a picture, not a prescription. To *walk* is Biblical language for pursuing a certain way of life; we are to follow a way of life in which no one can accuse us of harm or evil. To *do what is right* means to be obedient to the Law of God. To *speak the truth* means to speak reliably, to speak in such a way that others can depend upon what you say, and to speak with sincerity.

**³ who do not slander with their tongue,
and do no evil to their friends,
nor take up a reproach against their neighbors;**

Positive virtue always implies negative prohibitions. If we are to walk blamelessly, then we must avoid certain evils. Here the list is not exhaustive, but illustrative. To *slander* is to use the tongue to spread malicious gossip about anyone. To walk blamelessly is, in broadest possible compass, to *do no evil* to your friends or others. To *take up a reproach against your neighbor* is to hold him in contempt or to taunt him.

The warning against negative behavior against one's friends and neighbors was undoubtedly understood as a proscription within the boundaries of the clan or the people; outside the tribe or people you had the freedom to do and think as you please. But Jesus closed the door on that misinterpretation in his Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5:43-45: **You have heard that it was said (of old), "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good.**

This is especially important also because of the following verse.

**⁴ in whose eyes the wicked (too bland) are despised,
(better in RSV: in whose eyes a reprobate is despised)
but who honor those who fear the LORD;**

Two classes of people are here delineated: the wicked and those who fear the LORD. *The wicked* are those whom God rejects for their insufferable evil (look, for example, to Psalm 78:59,67). *Those who fear the LORD* are those who hold Yahweh in the highest regard, and who therefore love, obey, worship, and serve him. They may abide in the tent of the LORD who fear the LORD and also honor others who do; they may dwell on the LORD's holy hill who reject that which – or those whom – God rejects.

This is easier to understand in the abstract than in concrete cases. The line between these two classes came to be drawn by the Israelites as a line between the Jews and the Gentiles. That is an easy way to make the distinction; draw the line between “us and them.” But the easy way is not always the right way. Who may stand before God the Triune? Those who acknowledge and hallow the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; those who learn to rejoice in His Rule and Kingdom; those whose eyes learn to see what He sees; those whose will is molded by His will. That necessarily means also to resist -- and to reject -- all that would oppose itself to the way of God. But the distinction between those two in concrete situations is not always easy to draw. The God-fearers will overwhelmingly be in the Church, but not every one in the Church is a God-fearer. And sometimes even in the Church we have opposition to God. Likewise, we all know someone who seems to be basically a God-fearer, but who for some reason will not identify very closely with the Church.

But honor the God-fearers we must, and therefore we must also resist the wicked. But such resistance, even if it should come to outright blows, may not degenerate into hatred. Jesus honored his Father, he resisted and excoriated his opponents (stereotypically, the Pharisees), but he did not hate them. For us to pray this Psalm means that we must – once more – learn to pray it “in the name of Jesus” or “in Christ.” Maybe you can think of a friend or associate who makes light of the Lord Jesus, who thoughtlessly uses the precious Name by which alone we may be saved, who by his (or her) behavior raises your tolerance for thoughtlessness and irreligion. You must resent this behavior, you must resist its influence, you may perhaps tell that person how you oppose their way, you will seek refuge and strength in the congregation of those who honor the Name of the LORD. But you will not hate the offender; like God, you will defer any final judgement and hatred to God’s final judgment.

**5a who stand by their oath even to their hurt,
who do not lend money at interest,
and do not take a bribe against the innocent.**

To take an *oath* is to seal a solemn promise made before God and attested by Him. If the promise should misfire, or if keeping the promise should get costly, you are to keep the promise you made, whether to God or to a neighbor, and suffer inconvenience, pain or loss rather than default on the obligation. A promise to God and the welfare of your neighbor always weigh more heavily than your own comfort and convenience. God’s child will not renege on any promise, even when keeping it becomes painful.

The Law of Moses forbade *lending at interest* to a fellow-Israelite, though it allowed taking interest from a non-Israelite. It may have been a law more honored in the breach than in the observance. Thus the Psalm is saying that walking blamelessly includes giving to your fellow believer the honor due him. *Taking a bribe* always compromises speaking the truth from the heart.

V. 5b

5b Those who do these things shall never be moved.

The moving and the shaking of the earth describe an earthquake. But they who walk in the way described in verses 2-5a shall never be shaken from the secure foundation, which God has provided.

Prayer from the LBW to accompany Psalm 15:

Lord Jesus, you chose to live among us, and in returning to your Father you made an eternal home for us. Help us walk blamelessly in your ways and bring us at last to your holy mountain, where you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

This is a good prayer. It addresses to Jesus, the place where God has chosen to meet us human beings. Jesus makes an eternal home for us, which turns out to be the holy mountain of heaven. En route to that destination, we ask that we may walk blamelessly in the way of God, which has now focussed in the way of Jesus.

My own preference would be to think of the tent and the holy hill as the place where God-in-Christ meets us while we are still on earth. The final destination, of course, is heaven. But the need for praying is dictated by the fact that we are still on this side of the grave. Thus I think of the tent as the body of Jesus, and therefore as the Body of Christ. The Body of Christ is both the Sacrament of the Altar and the Church, and both of these are available to us here on earth. The Sacrament of the Altar is the place where in his Body and Blood our Lord Jesus comes to us and gives us of himself for the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. That is therefore the place where we may expect to find God-for-us here. The Church is the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Community which the Spirit creates, and which is therefore the place where again God is for us, and the place where we may confidently expect to find him here.

A Final Reflection:

Who is welcome to live in the House of the LORD? Anyone who is in earnest about becoming the kind of persons God has designed us to be. The Psalm lists both positive and negative virtues; whoever lives by these has a firm and secure place in God. Who can qualify to reside in the House of the LORD under those terms? That is a question the Psalm does not ask. But once it is asked, it requires an answer. Do we have to live as God wants us to live as a prior condition *before* we are admitted as members in his Household? Or is a growth in the godly life the desired result of being subject to God's discipline within his Household?

Christians confess that they cannot meet God's standard for human behavior before admission into God's House; only Jesus lived as God designed human beings to live. We qualify for membership among God's People only because in faith we are "in Christ," where we are clothed in his righteousness. But Christians are also confident that, and pray that, in the House of God we may be immersed in his Spirit so that we might become like him.

The biggest danger in praying this Psalm is that we will read verses 2-5 as prior conditions which we must meet in order to gain an audience with God. We might read the Psalm as saying, "You want to

dwell with God? Well, if you do, you must first walk blamelessly, etc., and then you will have earned your right to dwell with God.” That is the danger which we call work-righteousness.

The situation is rather like the insistence of Mom, who says to her boy, “No way are you going to eat at the table with such a dirty face! First you wash your dirty face and hands, and when you have made yourself clean, then you may sit down at the table.” Mom and Dad remain Mom and Dad; the boy with the dirty face is always their child. Washing his face does not qualify him to become a son; that happened a long time ago when he was born. But Mom and Dad are doing what they can to mold him into a good son. They want him to wash his face for hygienic reasons, for aesthetic reasons, for social reasons. Of course if the boy consistently refuses to become that kind of son, then we have a different story. Then we are dealing with rebellion and obstinacy.

In a similar way, God has made us his sons and daughters, adopting us for Jesus’ sake as his own dear children. In this way He showed us His love for us, and for that reason we entrust ourselves to Him. We are His children through such faith. But God is not content with simply calling us to be His children; He also wants us to be a certain kind of children. He wants us to be the kind of children who walk blamelessly before Him, as the Psalm leads us in praying. Who may dwell permanently on the holy hill? Those who know about the rescue of God-in-Christ, in whom we receive the forgiveness of our sins and our adoption as God’s children, and who are prepared to be remolded into the image of Christ, the work of that Master Molder, the Holy Spirit. Make no mistake about it, before He is through with us, we shall find verses 2-5 more and more describing us as we really are becoming. In the meantime, we need to keep praying this Psalm.

Walter E. Keller

January 31, 1999 – **The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany**