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## Psalm 25: A Psalm of David

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## **Psalm 25**

### **A Psalm of David**

(RSV) (Revised Common Lectionary)

#### **Introduction to Psalm 25**

This is an acrostic psalm. That means that that first verse begins with an Aleph, the first letter in the Hebrew alphabet, and thereafter each verse begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. It is a literary device which can scarcely be reproduced in an English translation. I know of none that has tried. The Jerusalem Bible indicates where the verses divide in order to accomplish the acrostic, but it does not attempt to follow suit with A, B, C, etc.

It is a richly devotional psalm for personal prayer, beginning with a commitment of trust in the LORD. In my conflicts with my enemies (here we might think Sin and Death and the Devil), I ask not to be defeated (verses 1-2), a theme to which the Psalmist returns in verses 18-21. Verses 4-7 are a plea to be led in the ways, the paths, and the truth of the LORD. These are the ways of mercy, steadfast love, and goodness, and these are the lenses through which I ask the LORD to look at me and remember me rather than upon the sins of my youth. Verses 8-9 are not a petition to God, but praise of God, who attends to the humble sinner. Verse 11 is the central petition of the Psalm, another plea for pardon for great sin. Framing this central petition are verses 8-10 and verses 12-15, statements of assurance. Verses 16-18 return to the language of pleading to the LORD for his grace.

A notable theme in this Psalm is the petition that the LORD would be our instructor (verses 4, 5, 8, 9, 12, 14). And the LORD will indeed be a teacher to those who are teachable. We are teachable when we wait for the LORD (verses 5, 21), when we acknowledge our sins (verse 8, 11), when we are humble (verse 9), when we keep his covenant (verse 10), when we fear the LORD (verses 12, 14), when our eyes are toward the LORD (verse 15), when we take refuge in the LORD (verse 20).

At the beginning of the Eucharistic liturgy the pastor bids us in God's name to "lift up your hearts," to which we then respond, "We lift them to the Lord." Psalm 25 may be used as an extended reply to the invitation to lift up our hearts to the Lord.

#### **Vv. 1-3**

**<sup>1</sup> To thee, O LORD (O Yahweh), I lift up my soul.**

"To lift up one's soul" is an expression for "to pray." But the expression is more graphic. Remember that in ancient Israel the posture of prayer was that of outstretched arms raised toward heaven. It was the visible sign of what one does when one prays. In prayer I lift up my soul, that is, my very self, my life and all that attends it, to the God from whom it derives. To lift up the soul is, in effect, saying, "I give you all that I am and have and entrust myself completely to you, O God."

**2a O my God, in thee I trust;**

In the phrase, "O my God," there is an element of choice, commitment, and confession of faith. David addresses his prayer to Yahweh, and here confesses Yahweh as his God. Of all the gods

that are out there, all of whom are designated as a "god," and all of whom compete for my affection and allegiance, Yahweh is the one whom I confess and own as *my* God. In this connection you can greatly appreciate the significance of the name "Elijah," the champion of Yahweh in his victorious competition with Baal (1 Kings 18:17-40). The story reaches its climax in verses 39: "Yahweh, He (and not Baal) is God; Yahweh, He is God." That is the very meaning of the name Elijah: Eli (=my God) (is) jah (weh).

**2b let me not be put to shame;**

**2c let not my enemies exult over me.**

The trust of which the Psalmist speaks is a very publicly-articulated trust; he openly confesses that his source of confidence, for life and for death, is Yahweh. And he says so in the face of the doubters and the skeptics and those who hold a differing, even competing allegiance. Therefore, the Psalmist prays that his confidence not be misplaced, that he not be made to suffer public embarrassment or disgrace or humiliation for having gone out on a limb for Yahweh. Do not let my enemies laugh me to scorn and make me look foolish!

We Christians know that the great pray-er of this Psalm was our Lord Jesus Christ, in whose image we have been recreated and in whom we now live. He was taunted while he hung helplessly on the cross, "He trusted in God; let God deliver him now, if He delights in him" (Matthew 27:43). Christ appeared to be defeated, and his enemies were rejoicing in his shameful end. But God did in fact vindicate him and his faith when He raised him from the dead.

**3 Yea, let none that wait for thee be put to shame;**

**let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.**

The Psalmist prays not only for himself, but for all who suffer shame. The posture of the faithful trustor is that of waiting patiently and confidently for Yahweh. Let public disgrace come rather to those who are deceivers and traitors.

#### **Vv. 4-5**

**4 Make me to know thy ways, O LORD;**

**teach me thy paths.**

What is the will of God for me? What is at stake here is not simply that kind of information one can get from the catechism, though it is hardly ever less than that. The Psalmist here shows that there is that kind of inner knowledge (INsight!) that is available only in the context of lifting up one's soul to God. Who God is and what He intends and how He is leading me is a series of mysteries that begin to open up only in the context of prayer. And the prayer under consideration here is not public prayer; it is private prayer in which I lift up my soul.

**5 Lead me in thy truth** (the faithfulness and reliability of God), **and teach me,**

**for thou art the God of my salvation;**

**for thee I wait all the day long.**

Truth is always personal. A person is true when s/he proves faithful and reliable. Yahweh is a true friend. When the Psalmist speaks of "thy truth," it is the same as saying, "You are true and faithful." Precisely because Yahweh is the God of my salvation, I can and want to look to Him for instruction. And the teaching here in view is teaching about the concrete realities and decision of life. The Psalm is here not speaking simply of salvation as a rescuing job, but of salvation as also a long-term rebuilding job. Again, note the expectant and hopeful waiting.

**Vv. 6-7**

**<sup>6</sup> Be mindful of thy mercy, O LORD, and of thy steadfast love,  
for they have been from of old.**

God's mercy and steadfast love are abstract nouns that refer to concrete events of rescue and rebuilding in the past. Events such as the Exodus from Egypt and the entry into the Promised Land - in fulfillment of God's promises to the Abraham - because they reveal the heart of God, are the basis for the continued hope in his mercy.

**<sup>7</sup> Remember not the sins of my youth, or my transgressions;  
according to thy steadfast love remember me,  
for thy goodness' sake, O LORD!**

When the Psalmist looks back and also invites Yahweh to look back, he can see that God has not only His own mercy and love to remember; in the backward look God will also be reminded of the Psalmist's youthful sins. Therefore the petition: when you look back, O LORD, do not remember my sins, but remember only your own mercy. Why should the LORD overlook my sins? Certainly, not because we have "put them behind us," as the current phrase for presumed consignment to irrelevance has it, but for the sake of Yahweh's own goodness. This is an Old Testament way of saying that God is merciful to us, not on the basis of our own merit, but for His own sake. How that works out the New Testament teaches us when it speaks of the atoning death of Christ, the Son of God.

**Vv. 8-10**

**<sup>8a</sup> Good and upright is the LORD;**

It is possible, again from a New Testament perspective, to see in the goodness of the LORD the generosity of God's gracious right hand, and in the uprightness of the LORD the fairness and justice of God's left hand.

**<sup>8b</sup> therefore he instructs sinners in the way.**

The "way" in which Yahweh instructs sinners is no mere formal curriculum; it is a process in life. It is rather that way of knowing God and His way which emerges when one leads his/her life before the LORD and the commandments which direct the God-pleasing life, when one lives in the stories that reveal His faithfulness to His promises, when one lives as one who holds up his/her soul before God in prayer, when one learns the goodness of the just God and the justice of the good God, when God instructs me in my life both by rescuing me and rebuilding me.

**<sup>9</sup> He leads the humble in what is right,  
and teaches the humble his way.**

**<sup>10</sup> All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness,  
for those who keep his covenant and his testimonies.**

Here the one who lifts up his/her soul to God is called the humble one. To be humble before God is to recognize that, when God meets one of His human creatures, it is God who commands and speaks, and we are the ones who must listen, obey, and believe. In the context of God as the Teacher, to be humble means to be teachable. And to be teachable means to live in the covenant God has enacted with His people. There God the Teacher shows Himself to be full of love and faithfulness.

**Vv. 11-15**

**<sup>11</sup> For thy name's sake, O LORD,  
pardon my guilt, for it is great.**

To appeal to the Name of God is to appeal to the name Yahweh. Yahweh is the Name under which God reveals Himself to be the gracious forgiver (Exodus 34:6 ff.)

**<sup>12</sup> Who are they who fear the LORD?  
They are the ones whom He will instruct in the way  
that they should choose.**

What are the characteristics of one who fears the LORD? To fear the LORD is to know that you are rightly judged a sinner before God, that you have no option but to stand before Him as sinner. To fear the LORD is to know that you *can* stand before Him as a *forgiven* sinner, because He is both good and just and has pledged Himself to be full of love and compassion. To fear the LORD is to be eager to receive not only the necessary rescue, but also the needed rebuilding. To fear the LORD is to be willing to be taught the way of the LORD in the context of prayer as lifting up one's soul to the LORD.

**<sup>13</sup> They who fear the LORD shall abide in prosperity,  
and their children also shall possess the land.**

The blessings of the fear of the LORD come also to our children, for our fear of the LORD is like a contagion that can be caught, as well as a lesson that must be taught.

In the Old Testament, one of the great blessings that God had promised His people was the land, the Promised Land. One generation sought to pass on that piece of real estate which we call Palestine to the next generation. The New Testament teaches us that the physical land of Palestine was symbol of the better, heavenly country which God has prepared especially for those who entrust themselves to Him (Hebrews 11:10,16).

**<sup>14</sup> The friendship (KJV: secret) of the LORD is for those who fear him,  
and he makes known to them his covenant.**

The LORD has a secret which He shares only with His intimate friends. His friends are those who fear Him, and the deepest desire of His heart is revealed in the covenant which He made with His people. And the inner workings of the heart of God, the inner meaning of the covenant, He shares with those who lift up their soul to the LORD.

The Christian who wants to make these words his/her own will have to see this Word of God as speaking pre-eminently of Jesus, the God-fearer without equal. The inner working of the heart of God is there more fully revealed to those who with our Lord Jesus Christ lift up their soul to the LORD.

**<sup>15</sup> My eyes are ever toward the LORD,  
for he will pluck my feet out of the net.**

Therefore, when we now look to the LORD for help, Christians must now see the LORD God as He has appeared to us in our Lord Jesus Christ. It is he who will rescue us. This verse speaks of

snare and traps. It is a common Hebrew figure for danger, here unspecified. Hence, we may read into it those dangers which we can specify. And when each of us lifts up his/her soul to the LORD, a part of what we lift up will be those dangers which we can specify, or those dangers which we do not see, but to which we are alerted by others in the community of God's people.

### **Vv. 16-18**

**16 Turn thou to me** (literally, "face me"), **and be gracious to me; for I am lonely and afflicted.**

Dangers are compounded when I am alone in my affliction. "When other helpers fail and comforts flee, Help of the helpless, oh, abide with me." (TLH 552, LBW 272, LSB 878) Among the greatest of gifts a Christian can receive is the timely visit, presence, friendship of another who will be Christ-to-me. And by the same token it is pure religion, says St. James (1:27), to visit orphans and widows (i.e., those most alone and in need) in their affliction.

**17 Relieve the troubles** (a word often used of battles) **of my heart, and bring me out of my distresses** (the physical or emotional stress from danger or deprivation).

The battles here meant are not the superficial annoyances we all experience, but those that rage in the heart, the very center of my being, those that affect my very life, those that cause me the distresses of sleepless nights and anxious days.

**18 Consider my affliction and my trouble, and forgive** (take away) **all my sins.**

Not the least cause of my inner turmoil is that nagging, persistent sense of sin.

### **Vv. 19-20**

**19 Consider how many are my foes, and with what violent hatred they hate me.**

**20 Oh guard my life, and deliver me; let me not be put to shame, for I take refuge in thee.**

One of the hardest problems we have in praying the Psalms is to know how to identify in our situation the foes and the violent hatred which pose so mortal a threat to us. Ancient Israel had its national enemies, who, because they opposed God's Chosen People, were by that fact also God's enemies. But the Christian Church, God's People in the New Testament, does not have an exclusive national embodiment; it is, in the creedal sense, catholic. Furthermore, the Psalms often do not hesitate to lash out at personal enemies in a way that seems contrary to Jesus' command to love even your mortal enemies.

The way I solve the problem, at least theoretically and theologically, is not to identify the foes in advance. The foes will identify themselves as those who oppose, obstruct, or otherwise seek to undermine either my own personal Christian devotion to the LORD, or as those who seek to harm the devotion of others in the Church catholic. Bear in mind also the visible and public character of calling on the LORD, the public stake in being embarrassed (or vindicated), as stated in verses 1-3. So, for example, I might think the Muslims of the northern Nigerian states are my foes, because

they are continually obstructing the worship of fellow-Christians in the adjoining states, doing so by looting and often raping and enslaving them, by destroying their houses of worship, and by seeking to impose Sharia. That is not a very popular position to propose and defend, especially among those theologians who want to make the case for the basic compatibility of the two religions. And in that sense, and to that initially limited extent, such theologians also become my foes. This, of course, presupposes that the individual Christian pray-er knows him/herself to be lifting up his/her soul in the context of the wider Christian Church. My own Christian praying is never completely isolated from that context; though personal and private, it regards also fellow Christians and it is always part of the chorus of prayer reaching the ears of God from around the globe.

Jesus' command to love our enemies does not preclude the notion of enemies. It rather presupposes that there are indeed enemies to be identified and who need to be loved. We can learn from praying this Psalm that a proper loving response to those who are hostile to us (and in that sense, enemies) is to lift up our souls to the LORD, fully distrusting our own inclination in some way to retaliate, and rather commending the disposition of the matter into the hands of God.

### **V. 21**

**<sup>21</sup> May integrity and uprightness preserve me,  
for I wait for thee.**

Without any possessive pronouns in the phrase it is impossible grammatically to determine whether the preserving integrity and uprightness are my mine or God's. Is it my own human integrity that preserves me? Or is it God's divine integrity that must preserve me? It would, of course, be a violation of my human integrity for me to claim absolute moral perfection. However, if the ground rules call for me to abstain from any retaliatory action against raging foes and instead to commit the matter into the hands of the LORD, then in this limited sense I think we can plead integrity. What preserves me, then, is not so much the formal fact of my integrity, but precisely the content of that perfection, namely, the reliance on the steadfast love of the LORD.

There are stronger (and therefore more difficult) such prayers in the Psalms; you might want to take a look at Psalm 7:8, as an example. Such a Psalm prayer is an urgent reminder that in the last analysis any Christian who prays the Psalms can do so only under the terms that apply to all Christian prayer, namely, to pray them in the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ. The divine/human Savior prays these Psalms, and we pray them with him, at his invitation. The integrity is his, and in him it is also ours, imperfectly now, perfectly then.

### **V. 22**

**<sup>22</sup> Redeem Israel, O God,  
out of all his troubles.**

What I pray for myself, I pray also for all of God's people. Since this verse falls outside the acrostic scheme, it has the effect of saying, "Ditto for all Thy People, O God." The verse may have been added to adapt this (individual's) prayer to public worship.

**The Prayer from the LBW to accompany Psalm 25:**

LORD our God, you show us your ways of compassion and love, and you spare sinners. Remember not our sins; relieve our misery; satisfy the longing of your people; and fulfill all our hopes for eternal peace through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

This seems to me to be a good all-purpose, liturgical prayer. But Psalm 25 is so rich that it can easily inspire many of your personal prayers. In the space remaining you might want to make some notes for your own prayer. As you do so, think of some of the following:

- 1) Where can you sense an antagonism to your faith in the LORD, that is, to your well known faith in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit?
- 2) What traps are you aware of on your Christian path? At what point do you want God to show you His way?
- 3) Where are you aware of the need for God's compassionate forgiveness of your sins?
- 4) What are the battles, the afflictions, and the distresses that you need to lift up to the LORD in prayer?

*Walter E. Keller*

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