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## Psalm 27: Of David

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## **Psalm 27**

### **Of David**

(RSV)

### **Introduction to Psalm 27**

If you read this Psalm as a whole you will notice that there are differing moods in verses 1-6 and verses 7-14. This leads many commentators to treat this Psalm as a composite of two originally different Psalms: 27A is a psalm of confidence, in which David confidently expects to triumph over his enemies and looks forward to the day when he will be able to turn his attention to his heart's desire, the building of the Temple; whereas 27B is a lament in which David is not nearly so confident, in which he almost desperately asks for God's help against his enemies, and in which he consoles himself by exhorting his soul to patience. Of course, we can understand that both of these moods will occur in the same person at different times, or maybe even at the same time. All of us have experienced the alternation and tension between optimism and discouragement. I notice that of the translations I have consulted, only the New American Bible divides the Psalm into two halves.

Again as we read this Psalm, we need to read it in its three interpenetrating layers. First, it is an expression of the faith and prayer of David during the days of his military campaigns. As God's Anointed he was God's earthly agent to fight on behalf of the people of Israel. Israel was God's chosen people, and therefore his enemies were in a certain sense also God's enemies. Second, because David is a (proto)type of the Son of David, we need to think of this Psalm also as an expression of the faith and prayer of Jesus, who came to fulfill this Old Testament type. Third, we need to understand this Psalm as the means by which God seeks to shape and form the prayer life of all of us New Testament Christians, who have been joined in faith to Jesus as our Lord.

### **A**

#### **V. 1**

**<sup>1</sup> The LORD is my light and my salvation;  
whom shall I fear?  
The LORD is the stronghold (or: refuge) of my life;  
of whom shall I be afraid?**

"The LORD" is the translation for "YaHWeH," the Name under which God revealed both His compassion and His power in delivering Israel from Egypt. It is the Name by which He who is powerful to save wills to be known throughout all generations (Exodus 3:15). Because this God is now further revealed under the Name of the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, in our Church collects we address him as "Almighty God, Heavenly Father." The God so named is here described under three images, all of them transparent enough. -- (1) The LORD is my Light, the Source of all life and vitality. Recall that in the further revelation of God in the New Testament it is Jesus who declares, "I am the Light of the world" (John 8:12). Thus the Christian should read this verse, "The LORD Jesus is my Light!" -- (2) The LORD is my Salvation (safety). That means that the Father of our Lord Jesus is the One who brings me to safety, as well as the One who is himself the safe haven, the Goal of that saving activity; I am both saved by Him and for Him. At

Jesus' birth the Angels praised him the Savior Christ the Lord (Luke 2:11). -- (3) The LORD is the Stronghold, the fortress, of my life. Since castles are obsolete as protective walls in our day, should we perhaps think of the LORD as our nuclear shield?

The point is clear. Because the LORD displays the characteristics of these images, we may confidently entrust ourselves to Him. We need not fear. The LORD of the Exodus and of the Resurrection is the comprehensive remedy for the persistent fears we all experience, whether it be David, or Jesus in his humanity, or you and me.

#### **Vv. 2-3**

**<sup>2</sup> When evildoers assail me,  
uttering slanders against me (NRSV: to devour my flesh),  
my adversaries and foes,  
they shall stumble and fall.**

**<sup>3</sup> Though a host encamp against me,  
my heart shall not fear;  
though war arise against me,  
yet I will be confident.**

These verses are an extension of verse 1. They make clear that the questions of verse 1 were not empty rhetorical devices. There are actually enemies out there who seek to inspire fear. But the Psalmist has no reason to fear, regardless of the number of the adversaries, for his confidence rests in Yahweh. David can be confident of victory, because he acts as the anointed agent of Yahweh against the enemies of Yahweh; moreover, he can therefore also characterize his foes as evil doers, who raise their hands against Yahweh himself. When Jesus in his full humanity prays this prayer, he can do so in the confidence of the baptismally accredited Son with whom the Father is well-pleased; any hostility against him is in fact hostility also against God. For that reason we may pray this prayer as our own only "in Christ." Otherwise it would be pure self-vindicating arrogance to assume that we are the innocent ones, whom God should rescue, while it is our foes who are the evildoers. Only as we bear, or are willing to learn to bear, the reproaches of Christ may we speak this prayer.

It is perhaps necessary to add here that, even if we have the courage and insight of faith to think of our enemies as the evildoers, this constitutes no basis for hating them. In Christ we are called upon to love our enemies.

#### **V. 4**

**<sup>4a</sup> One thing have I asked of the LORD,  
that will I seek after --  
<sup>4b</sup> that I may dwell in the house of the LORD  
all the days of my life,  
<sup>4c</sup> to behold the beauty of the LORD, and  
to inquire in his temple.**

In this verse we hear David confess what he really desires; he wants soon to be done with his military campaigns of pacification and wants instead to build a Temple and devote himself to more spiritual pursuits. Notice the character of the prayer: David knows what he wants, David asks the

LORD for what he wants, and David seeks after (i.e., single-mindedly devotes himself to) the project. He does not wait for the LORD's approval. If the LORD does not approve, He will have to veto David's project. What he asks of the LORD he also plans vigorously to pursue. *Ora et labora* was the wisdom of the medieval monks; *pray and work*. For David there is yet no Temple; the house of the LORD is still merely a tent, but David proposes to rectify that. As things turned out, God did veto his project. His desire to build for God a beautiful Temple was never realized; his son, the Son of David, Solomon, built it. Jesus already as a 12-year old boy showed how he too took delight in dwelling in the house of the LORD, the Jerusalem Temple. It was for him his Father's House, where he earnestly conversed with the Bible teachers (Luke 2:46-47). Later His disciples also admired the beauty of the earthly Temple (Mark 13:1). His disciples' admiration gave Jesus the opportunity to lament the impending end of that beauty. It was a divine sign that the eternal Temple, the place where God would permanently dwell among us human beings, is a Temple not made with hands, but is the resurrected body of Jesus (John 2:19-22; Mark 14:57-58).

For Christians therefore, this verse acquires a Christ-centered, or a Christ-modified, meaning. For us the House of the LORD, the place where God makes Himself available and the place where we therefore go to meet Him, is now irrevocably tied to the crucified, but now-risen Body of Christ. That Body, together with his Blood, is given to us in the Sacrament of the Altar. There Christ is truly and substantially present; there the Good News that God is graciously with us is given with the Bread and Wine. Because that is the defining activity in our earthly houses of worship, we Christians may also desire to live in that earthly house of the LORD all the days of our life. We need not sacrifice our aesthetic sensibilities; we decorate our churches as beautifully as we can, so that as in a mirror we may behold the beauty of the LORD (Psalms 50:2; 96:6). Nor need we sacrifice our intellect, because our faith must always seek understanding. But it is essential to do our prayerful work of inquiry within the context of the Church, because, if we do not, we run the danger of losing our mooring in the faith.

You will notice that I have pushed my comments on verse 4c in the direction of academic inquiry. Actually in the context of David's life, the life of Jesus, and our own Christian life, the inquiry is not in the first instance an academic inquiry; it is rather the much more personal and existential inquiry, "LORD, what will you have me do?" It is the inquiry for divine guidance; it is the inquiry of prayer. One style of inquiry was modeled by the petitionary prayer of David who said, "I am going to do what my best judgment calls for, and I place the burden on the LORD for showing me that that is not the best way." Another way says, "I don't trust my judgment; I shall place the burden on the LORD for showing me what is the best way for me." In practical prayer life, of course, both styles are at work.

#### **Vv. 5-6**

- <sup>5</sup> For he will hide me in his shelter  
in the day of trouble;  
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent,  
he will set me high upon a rock.**
- <sup>6</sup> And now my head shall be lifted up  
above my enemies round about me;  
and I will offer in his tent  
sacrifices with shouts of joy;  
I will sing and make melody to the LORD.**

David expresses his confidence that the LORD will protect him from his adversaries (verse 5), and vindicate him publicly before his enemies (verse 6). It is a powerful notion to think that David, around 1000 B.C., composed psalms out of his own experiences which provided the language that Jesus in his humanity used in his confrontation with the powers that sought his life. (It is also, incidentally, a dimension of the inspiration of the Bible.) The theme of Jesus being lifted up above all enemies is a prominent one in the New Testament; see, for example 1 Corinthians 15:24-28; Ephesians 1:20-23. These provide our entry into this Psalm; for when we pray this Psalm "in Christ," we also may confidently anticipate that we shall be raised up above the reach of all our adversaries, that is, Christ's adversaries and therefore now also ours.

That is the reason that David offered praise and sacrifices in the tent-soon-to-be-Temple of the LORD. Sacrifices of praise are the appropriate thankoffering to God for His demonstrated mercy and goodness. David offered them in the tent of the LORD, because he had received promise that one day his son would build a suitable house of the LORD. David thereby showed that he was anticipating that the present tent would one day become the Temple. Jesus in turn honored the Temple of his day as the foreshadowing of his body, THE TEMPLE, where God would now graciously meet us. It is therefore "in Christ" where we commit ourselves to making our sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving, for in Christ is where God has promised to meet us and hear us and receive our prayers.

## **B**

### **Vv. 7-9**

- <sup>7</sup> Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud,  
be gracious to me and answer me!**
- <sup>8</sup> Thou hast said, "Seek ye my face."  
My heart says to thee,  
"Thy face, LORD, do I seek."**
- <sup>9</sup> Hide not thy face from me.  
Turn not thy servant away in anger,  
thou who hast been my help.  
Cast me not off, forsake me not,  
O God of my salvation!**

David's insistent plea is based on the LORD's own command. He is saying, "LORD, you said we should seek your face! Well, I am seeking it! Please do not now in my moment of great need hide your face from me!"

Here we might think of the Aaronic Benediction (Numbers 6:22-27), which is often used at the conclusion of services of worship:

The LORD bless you and keep you.  
The LORD *make his face to shine upon you*, and be gracious to you  
The LORD *look upon you with favor*, and give you peace.

Since there is some difficulty with the underlying Hebrew of verse 7, you will find variations in other translations.

## **V. 10**

**<sup>10</sup> For my father and my mother have forsaken me,  
but the LORD will take me up.**

(NRSV: If my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will take me up.)

The LORD is more reliable even than that most trustworthy of human relationships, that which children have with their parents. For that reason we need to love the LORD even more than we love our parents. Of course, this is not Christian license either for parents to abandon their children or for children to hate their parents.

## **Vv. 11-12**

**<sup>11</sup> Teach me thy way, O LORD;  
and lead me on a level path  
because of my enemies.**

**<sup>12</sup> Give me not up to the will of my adversaries;  
for false witnesses have risen against me,  
and they breathe out violence.**

Again, enemies and adversaries appear who bear false witness against David and threaten violence. Jesus, the Anointed of the LORD, also had enemies who in fact did bear false witness against him, not only in his final trial before the Sanhedrin, but also earlier in his public ministry when they accused him of falsely representing God, His kingdom, and His teaching. These are the backdrop for our understanding of the Psalmist's request. It is always a temptation for us to descend into the untruthful and violent ways of the enemies; the Psalmist therefore asks to be led in the way of the LORD, the way of truthfulness and peace. The way of the LORD is described as a level path, that is, the path that contains no obstacles or pitfalls or potholes. The "way of the LORD" means both that way which the LORD has commanded for us to walk, and that way which leads to the LORD. So here we are praying that we may not slip into the way of God's enemies, the way of "the world," but that the LORD may instead always lead us to the LORD.

## **Vv. 13-14**

**<sup>13</sup> I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD  
in the land of the living!**

**<sup>14</sup> Wait for the LORD;  
be strong, and let your heart take courage;  
yea, wait for the LORD!**

The goodness of the LORD for which the Psalmist confidently waits is both the eventual triumph over his and God's adversaries and being directed into the way of the LORD. That goodness will be shown while we are still in this life; we need not wait until death for it.

These verses are a classic exhortation to confident waiting for the LORD. The LORD, his gifts and his goodness are well worth the wait. In the language of the New Testament (Romans 5:5), "Hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us." The goodness of God in this present time is continuous with the full goodness yet to come.

**The Prayer from the LBW to accompany Psalm 27:**

Gracious Father, protector of those who hope in you: You heard the cry of your Son and kept him safe in your shelter in the day of evil. Grant that your servants who seek your face in times of trouble may see your goodness in the land of the living, through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

**This excerpt from Luther's explanation of the Third Petition of the Lord's Prayer in the Large Catechism addresses itself to the always-troublesome question of the enemies in the Psalms.**

"Thus far we have prayed that God's name may be hallowed by us and that his kingdom may prevail among us. These two points embrace all that pertains to God's glory and to our salvation, in which we appropriate God with all his treasures. ... We must also pray that God's will may be done. If we try to hold fast these treasures, we must suffer an astonishing amount of attacks and assaults from all who venture to hinder and thwart the fulfillment of the first two petitions.

"It is unbelievable how the devil opposes and obstructs their fulfillment. ... Like a furious foe, he raves and rages with all his power and might, marshalling all his subjects and even enlisting the world and our own flesh as his allies. For our flesh (=our baser nature) is in itself vile and inclined to evil, even when we have accepted and believe God's Word. The world (=society) too is perverse and wicked. ...

"Therefore we who would be Christians must surely count on having the devil with all his angels and the world as our enemies and must count on their inflicting every possible misfortune and grief upon us. For where God's Word is preached, accepted or believed, and bears fruit, there the blessed holy cross will not be far away. Let nobody think that he will have peace; he must sacrifice all he has on earth -- possessions, honor, house and home, wife and children, body and life.

"Now this grieves our flesh and the old Adam, for it means that we must remain steadfast, suffer patiently whatever befalls us, and let go whatever is taken from us.

"Therefore there is just as much need in this case as in every other case to pray without ceasing: Thy will be done, dear Father, and not the will of the devil or of our enemies, not of those who would persecute and suppress thy holy Word or prevent the kingdom from coming; and grant that whatever we must suffer on its account, we may patiently bear and overcome, so that our poor flesh may not yield or fall away through weakness or indolence."

*Walter E. Keller*

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