

Show Me the Way

March 9, 2003

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passage – Psalm 25:1-10 (from the NRSV) – a psalm of David

- ¹To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul.
²O my God, in you I trust;
do not let me be put to shame;
do not let my enemies exult over me.
³Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;
let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.
⁴Make me to know your ways, O LORD;
teach me your paths.
⁵Lead me in your truth, and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all day long.
⁶Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love,
for they have been from of old.
⁷Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;
according to your steadfast love remember me,
for your goodness' sake, O LORD!
⁸Good and upright is the LORD;
therefore he instructs sinners in the way.
⁹He leads the humble in what is right,
and teaches the humble his way.
¹⁰All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness,
for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.

Acrostics

This psalm is an acrostic poem written by David. In the original Hebrew, each succeeding verse begins with the next letter of the alphabet. We can't see this in our English translation and we are left with a poem that sacrifices clear structure for the sake of the acrostic. I guess it is a little like trying to write a 26 verse acrostic poem in English and having some trouble making "q" or "x" fit smoothly into the flow! Still, in the opening ten verses we find prayers for deliverance and guidance. We'll tackle these ten verses in three sections.

A prayer for deliverance and guidance (v. 1-3)

We always seem to have adversaries of one sort or another in life. Here, in the opening verses, the psalmist comes to God, praying for deliverance from these ever-present adversaries. We don't know whether David had some flesh-and-blood people in mind or simply the adversaries within himself. Regardless, the psalmist confidently comes before God, YHWH,¹ knowing that God has not and will not disappoint those who put their trust in him. Verse 1 could also be translated as "To you, O Lord, I offer my life." Because God is loving and faithful, the psalmist will entrust

God's "Steadfast Love"

In v. 6, 7, and 10 you can find the words, "steadfast love." These two words translate the single Hebrew word, *hesed*, which is one of the most important words in the Old Testament. It is virtually a one-word summary of Israel's understanding of God! Used more than 240 times, and especially in the Psalms, *hesed* conveys love, strength, trust, kindness, mercy, faithfulness, steadfastness, loyalty, truthfulness – all embodied in a covenantal relationship. Our word "devotion" perhaps best captures the nuances of *hesed*. The older English translations most often rendered *hesed* as "lovingkindness," an archaic word but a good one.

Hesed is a covenantal word and could be used to talk about marital love. A marriage is a legal contract but much more. A marriage is a covenant between two people who are expected to demonstrate devotion and trust and lovingkindness in their relationship. Their devotion to each other is not just a sentiment; it is to be expressed in concrete actions of loving, protecting, and truthfulness. Under their covenant, each spouse is obligated to the other and finds great joy in those obligations.

In much the same way, God's *hesed* for his people is expressed in God's acts of mercy and salvation. In v. 6 the psalmist proclaims that God's steadfast love has been "from of old." As the psalm unfolds it is clear that the psalmist has in mind the Exodus, God's deliverance of his people from Egypt. God's love for his people, for us, is seen in his actions – we too proclaim a God-who-acts. The psalmist prays that he would know God's ways so he can, through his actions, be faithful to the covenant just as God has been faithful. After all, this is what covenant partners do!

¹ See the text box on page two.

his life to God.² In v. 3, the phrase, “those who wait for you” is a little obscure. The NIV translates the phrase a little more clearly: those “whose hope is in you.” Here, the psalmist expresses his certainty that evil cannot be victorious because it is an insult to those who trust in their Lord.³ God will not disappoint our confidence in him.

A prayer for guidance and deliverance (v. 4-7)

Having entrusted his life to God, confident in God’s justice, the psalmist prays for guidance in understanding God’s “ways” and the strength to actually walk the talk: “make me to know . . . teach me . . . lead me . . . teach me.” The word “ways” appears four times in this psalm and also is the root of the words translated “guide” and “lead.” The word means “way of life” or “lifestyle” and in v. 9 is explicitly tied to humility (leads . . . humble . . . humble . . . way”). These can be hard words for us to hear, much less actually walk. Successful Americans tend not to build lives built on humility! Nonetheless, as McCann puts it, the “lifestyle of those who trust God will be characterized by humility – openness to God’s teaching and reliance not on the self but on God.”

Of course, like us, the psalmist realizes that he fails to always walk in God’s way. He offers his life to God while seeking forgiveness. When the psalmist appeals to God’s “mercy” in v. 6, he is appealing to God’s motherly compassion.⁴ In v. 7, he begs God “do not remember the sins of my youth and my transgressions,” while emphatically praying that God does “remember” him in God’s steadfast love. Because this psalm centers our attention on humble repentance and the need to walk in God’s paths, we shouldn’t be surprised that it is traditionally used during Lent.

God’s Name

In your Old Testament, every time you see “LORD,” the underlying Hebrew is God’s name, YHWH. In ancient cultures, personal names were much more important than they are in ours. For a person to reveal their name to another was a significant relationship-building event. God first revealed his name to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3). For the Israelites, God’s name, YHWH, was so holy that it was spoken aloud only by the high priest of Israel, only in the temple, and only on the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur! Hence, when the Jews read their sacred scriptures they would say *adonai* when they came upon “YHWH,” rather than pronounce God’s name. *Adonai* is Hebrew for Lord. Following the practices of the early Greek and Latin translators, our English translations continue to render God’s name as LORD.

Because God’s name, YHWH, could only be spoken in the temple, its pronunciation was lost after the temple was destroyed in 70AD. God’s name was no longer spoken at all. Something like “Yahweh” is probably the correct pronunciation, but we can’t be certain.

Assurance of guidance (v. 8-10)

Here, the psalmist expresses his confidence that, though he is a sinner, God will “instruct . . . guide . . . teach” him God’s way and show him what is right. The psalmist is confident in this because he proclaims that God is “good” and “upright” and “loving” and “faithful” and because he lives in covenant with God (v. 10). Indeed, this covenantal relationship underlies the entire psalm. In the covenantal community of God’s people, the substance of discipleship is instruction in God’s ways.

We too live in the covenantal community of God’s people. We too seek God’s way. Today is the first Sunday in Lent, a time of reflection on our life with God as we humbly seek to live as God wants us to live. This is all about being true disciples of Jesus Christ. We echo the psalmist in our desire for instruction and guidance. The psalmist knows that God’s ways are not instinctual in us, that learning to walk in the ways of the righteous is not easy. Sometimes, we can mistakenly think that if we only “choose God,” then all is done. However, as Craigie says, “the road of the righteous is too difficult to walk without the companionship and friendship of God . . . [the psalmist] knows that he cannot turn back, but scarcely knows how to continue . . . so he prays that God would show him the road and make him walk in it . . . as one forgiven of sin. He is confident that God will show him the road again.”⁵

² from J. McCann Jr.’s commentary on Psalms in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Abingdon Press, 1996.

³ from VanGemeren’s commentary on Psalms in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Zondervan, 1991.

⁴ The Hebrew word translated “mercy” is *rahamim* and is related to the Hebrew word for “womb.”

⁵ from P.C. Craigie’s commentary on Psalms in the *Word Biblical Commentary*, Word Publishing, 2002.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Psalm 25 Offering our life to God as we seek to walk the paths of righteousness</p>	<p>Day 2 Psalm 1 The way of the righteous is contrasted with the way of the wicked.</p>
<p>Day 3 Proverbs 8:1-21 Wisdom speaks; wisdom is the way of God; the moral order is rooted in God's purposes</p>	<p>Day 4 Proverbs 8:22-36 Wisdom is a principle, a force working in all creation</p>
<p>Day 5 Psalm 37 This is almost a sermon on the apparent prosperity of the wicked. It proclaims the faith and instructs the faithful.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Spring Bible Academy Session begins soon -- the week of March 24!

We'll be offering a variety of daytime and evening classes. Four different courses will be offered. On Monday evenings, Scott Engle will teach *Introducing the New Testament*. On Monday mornings and Tuesday evenings, Scott will teach *Our Life in the Spirit*. Both of these classes are lecture-oriented and are suitable for those who know little about the Bible. Rev. Doug Meyer, Rev. Kathryn MaGee, and Monty Moore are going to teach a class on Thursday mornings based on Brennan Manning's book, *Ruthless Trust*. Also on Thursday mornings, Frankey Commer is going to lead a class on the Gospel of Mark. We hope you'll join us for one of our spring classes! For more info and to register on-line go to www.standrewccl.org. **Please register early!**

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Today is the first Sunday in Lent, forty days that Christians have set aside as a time of repentance and reflection. We are mistaken if we think that repentance is nothing more than being sorry for something we did. Instead, it is a complete change of direction. As UMC Bishop William Oden put it recently, "More and more of us see [Lent] as a period of inner searching, and of throwing off habits that are not helpful for the spiritual journey." The psalmist prays that his journey will be along God's paths. What do you make of Lent? Has it been a big part of your Christian life in the past? What will you do this Lenten season to build habits that will help you to walk in God's way? How will you be different after Lent?
2. In his commentary, J. McCann, Jr. notes that Psalm 25 offers us a model of prayer and of living that don't really square with a secular culture that glorifies the self, self-sufficiency, and instant gratification. Instead of depending on self, the psalmist depends on God. The psalmist is willing to confidently wait for God. This is a psalm about seeking not what we want, but about seeking God's will. Do you agree that the culture we live in glorifies self? If so, why do you think this is so? What do you personally find most difficult about focusing on God's will rather than your own? The psalmist prays for instruction and guidance; how open are you to God's instruction? How do we even go about finding God's guidance? God's paths can lead us to places we aren't sure we want to go. How do we deal with that? Do we sometimes "water down" God's guidance so it is more palatable and socially acceptable?