

Summer of Psalms: God Guides the Guilty

Psalm 25

August 19, 2015

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This morning we are continuing our Summer of Psalms series and will be looking at Psalm 25 which was read for us earlier. Upfront I want to say that the outline of this sermon comes from John Piper; he is one of my favorite preachers. And I've incorporated several of his thoughts into this sermon because he nails what I believe God wants us to hear today.¹

Now this is an especially important Psalm because it teaches us how to discern God's will. Or it teaches us how we can know what God wants for us and our future. And this is a topic we have come back to several times, because this is one of the most frequently asked questions I get as a pastor – what does God want from me? What does He want me to do?

And this is a really important question. In fact I believe this is the most important question a Christian ever asks. Or to say this another way: you can judge the quality of your faith, the strength of your relationship with Christ, by whether or not you are asking this question often “What do You want from me Jesus? How can I live my life in a way that pleases you?”

But before we get into this Psalm imagine a scenario. Imagine Jesus walked into your living room this afternoon and said “Hi, I'm Jesus. I AM the creator of the entire universe. I'm the crafter of mankind – I personally knit you together in your mother's womb. But not only am I your maker, I'm your redeemer. And I've come today to forgive your sins afresh and cover you again with My righteousness. I've got new mercies for you. I've come to breath new life into you that will continue increasing and expanding and becoming more and more vibrant for all of eternity. So will you trust your life to Me?”

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And supposed you answered: “Well, I believe in You, and I want to be happy. And I like the idea of having my sins forgiven because I want to go to heaven and I certainly want to avoid hell. And I like the idea that because You are infinite, You can fulfill Your promise to give me new mercies that are fresh every morning for all of eternity... But I'm not sure I can completely trust You. You see I think there are aspects of my life that if I handed them over to You and lived Your way all the time I would be poorer than if I did it my own way. I don't want to give up some of the things in my life because I know better than You what will make me happy.”

Can you imagine having that kind of conversation with Jesus?

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¹ John Piper “The Goodness of God and the Guidance of Sinners” (Preached January 10, 1988) <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-goodness-of-god-and-the-guidance-of-sinners>

Now how does Jesus respond when we restrict Him from having His way with all of our life? Is He content to be mostly our Saviour? How does Jesus respond?

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We actually have a pretty good idea of how Jesus would respond because when a certain rich young man told Jesus basically the same thing – “I like Your message Jesus, but I just want to make sure I hold on to the one thing that I believe will make me happy,” – in this case money. Jesus responded in essence “It is harder for someone who thinks they know what makes them happy to enter the kingdom of heaven than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle.”²

So Jesus wants to save us 100% of the way. He isn’t interested in being our partial saviour. And that’s the warning for today, and it is a warning addressed to those who, like David in Psalm 25, believe in God but don’t have an easy life and are often unsure of what God’s will is in the situations we find ourselves in. So if you believe in God but life isn’t simple this is for you today.

Now if you are here today and this doesn’t describe you, perhaps you haven’t chosen to turn your life over to Jesus yet, I encourage you to listen in because it may suddenly happen that the Holy Spirit will convince you that His wisdom is worth trusting more than your own. God does this because He believes that when we live our lives His way we find ourselves living the most satisfying and joyful lives possible, and this is what He wants for us.

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Alright, there are three things that I want to do with Psalm 25 today. First I want to start with the context that David finds himself in as he writes. And what we will see is that we can identify with a lot of what he was experiencing. David encountered the same stresses and pressures we face today. So we will look at David’s context.

Second, we will look at what David does when he finds himself under these stresses. And what we are going to find is that he goes to God and asks for something. And what he asks for is what we should ask for too because God wants to give it.

And finally we will look at what kinds of people can be confident that they will receive what God wants to give.

Now this Psalm is long so we won’t re-read it, but rather will jump around from verse to verse.

So first let’s start with the context that David finds himself in. See if you can relate to this. Throughout this Psalm David struggles with: fear, loneliness, guilt and confusion – talk about the human condition!

² Matthew 19:16-24

Look at verse 2 and then verse 19

[Read Psalm 25:2; 19]

In these verses David describes his fear. He is facing threats. Real people wish him harm and hope things don't go well for him. Have you got anyone in your life who wishes you harm? They seek his demise. They hope he loses his job as king, which is the same as saying they wish he was dead. And David was afraid.

Now I don't know what kind of enemies you have. Certainly if you hold or have held a position of leadership there are always people to clash with. And if you haven't had a position like this then you've probably been under someone you've had the opportunity to clash with. All of us face this from time to time.

And David is honest as he faces this pressure. He doesn't claim to waltz through life with ease; he's got a tight chest and sweaty palms, and he admits it. Friends following God does not mean escaping from fear inducing stress, so if there is stress in your life it is not a sign that God isn't present. David felt fear.

Second David struggles with loneliness. Look at verse 16.

[Read Psalm 25:16]

Mother Theresa said "Loneliness is the leprosy of our time." It's a sickness no one likes to admit they have. If you admit this people look at you with disdain and perceive you as incredibly needy – they run the other way which only makes your loneliness worse. And statistics show that more than ever loneliness has become an epidemic in our time.

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A study in the UK found that loneliness has increased dramatically over the last 20 years. Now almost 50% of people recognize themselves as being lonely all of the time or some of the time. This is due in part to a substantial increase in single parenting and single occupancy households, and less face to face interaction on a daily basis.³

Now whether or not you identify yourself as lonely, if these statistics are accurate for Canada, which I suspect they are, then in this room today there could be up to 50 chronically lonely people. And we hide it well don't we? David struggled with loneliness.

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Third David struggles with guilt. If you are at all familiar with David's story you know that he was a man who passionately sought God, but he wasn't a perfect man because there aren't any. (Ladies don't say amen, there aren't any perfect women either).

³ <http://www.friendsforyou.co.uk/research-study-loneliness-uk/>

But the Bible revealingly presents David was a conspiring, murdering adultery committing man. And his sin weighed heavy on his heart. So four times he talks about his feelings of guilt in this Psalm.

In verse 7 he says: “Do not remember the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways.” In verse 8 we read “Good and upright is the LORD; therefore He instructs sinners in His ways.” In verse 11: “For the sake of your name, LORD, forgive my iniquity, though it is great.” And in verse 18 “Look on my affliction and my distress and take away all my sins.”

Now while David certainly sinned big, he also repented big – we get that in Psalm 51. But here we find something profound: guilt didn’t release its grip willingly. And this has been my experience as well. When I am afraid and lonely and stressed I often start remembering my short fallings as well. Guilt gangs up on us. And David finds himself here as he writes this Psalm.

And finally David struggles with confusion. He feels he is losing his bearings and wonders what God’s will is in the midst of what appears a hopeless situation. Look at verses 4 and 5.

[Read Psalm 25:4-5]

With everything raging in his mind it is no surprise that David finds himself confused and feeling separated from God’s will.

So let me ask you, have you been here? Have you wondered why God seems so hard to find in the midst of the stresses you are experiencing? Have you felt alone and helpless to stand against not only the onslaught from without but also the guilt within? Have you been here?

If you have then you are in good company. You see the Bible calls David a man after God’s own heart and yet he knew these feelings. But it is what he did with them that proved his character – he went to God for help.

And here we come to the second aspect of this Psalm we are going to touch on today. First we dealt with what David was feeling – his context, and now we are going to look at what he does in light of his context – he prays.

So notice right off the bat who this Psalm is addressed to – to whom does David sing? Notice he isn’t singing to himself urging himself to stand steadfast; and he isn’t singing to his friends asking for their assistance or companionship – though sometimes he does that, but he’s not doing that here. And David isn’t singing about God or what He can do. David is singing to God.

Verse 1 says “In You, LORD my God I put my trust. I trust in You.”

And I can't emphasize enough how important this is all by itself. Prayer and worship happen when we address God Himself, and it is only when we go directly to God that we get His help.

Worship lyricists who understand this write songs like "Our God" that we sang earlier. It sings: "Into the darkness – or into my darkness – You shine... there's no one like You, none like You!... God You are higher than any other." Songs like this don't just sing **about** God or what He does, they sing to God because they know that it is when we commune with God that we get His help.

Or songs like "Guild me, O Thou Great Jehovah" are powerful for the same reason, though sometimes the thee's and thou's mask this. But taken out it sings "Guide me, O my Great Redeemer, Pilgrim through this barren land – which means I'm living in a stressful and broken situation – I am weak, but You are mighty; hold me with Your powerful hand. This song doesn't sing **about** God, it sings to God. And we have to go here when we sing because the grace and guidance we need comes from God. We will sing this song later.

And David understands this so he goes to God with his concerns in petition and worship.

And there are 18 petitions David makes in this psalm. In every circumstance he goes to God whether that's in fear or loneliness or guilt or confusion, David goes to God to find guidance and deliverance.

So verse 2 sings "Do not let me be put to shame." Verse 4 "show me Your ways, teach me Your paths." Verse 5 "Guide me in Your truth." Verse 11 "forgive my iniquity." Verse 16 "Turn to me and be gracious to me." Verse 18 "take away all my sins." Verse 20 "Guard my life and rescue me; do not let me be put to shame."

David is broken and desperate, and he knows there is no other deliverer than God. So to YHWH he goes.

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Now this really isn't that surprising. After all when adversity strikes don't we go to God too? Is it not when we are afraid and lonely and guilty and confused that we press in to God longing for His presence and guidance? And this is what David does too.

But this raises the question "How does God guide us?" Ask yourself, when I want God's guidance how do I expect it to come? How does God communicate His will to you? How do you know God's will for your life?

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Well, the most obvious answer to that question should be "I look in the Bible." But the problem with this is that the Scriptures only tell us God's will in matters of morality.

So if you want to know “should I cheat on my taxes, or should I look at pornography, or should I be dishonest in my speech, or should I continually hunger for more stuff.” We can look in the Bible and clearly find God’s will – though it might be hard to act out, His will is completely clear. When the choice is sin or not the answer is “not.” God’s will for us is always to pursue holiness.

But what happens when we face situations where there is no biblical command? How do we get God’s will about where to work or who to marry or what to study or any number of countless other decisions that we face every day? How do we know God’s will?

Do we wait for dreams or pray for peace or ask God to open or close doors, or to make a fleece wet or dry? How does God lead in matters where the Bible is silent? This is important because most of the time this is where we live – right?

Now certainly God can lead through miraculous intervention, and there are stories in the Bible where He does. But these stories are the exception not the norm for us. Instead the Bible, and particularly the New Testament, speak of a very different way that God guides His children. Now that His Spirit resides within us most of the time He guides us as we deepen our knowledge of Him.

Here’s what this means. God reveals His will to us as our hearts and minds come into harmony with His own. As we press in to Him, His desires become our desires and we are able to discern what paths He would have us take because we want what He wants. We know God’s will when we know God.

And we get this picture in Psalm 25. David doesn’t ask for God to write on the wall. He doesn’t ask for dreams or inner peace. And that’s because he doesn’t just want God’s leading, he wants God. And so he prays in verse 4, “Show me Your ways, LORD, teach me Your paths. Guide me in Your truth and teach me, for You are God my Savior, and my hope is in You all day long.” David knows he will get God’s leading when he gets God.

And this is the same for us today. If you want to know what God’s will for your life is, then don’t put out a fleece; don’t try to gain some secret information from God about your future. If God is going to speak to you that way He will and you won’t miss it. But don’t seek it, instead seek God. Get to know God. Because when you know Him you will know His will for your life. You will ask “God, what do you want from me and for me?”, and you will know the answer because your heart will be in line with His.

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Now does this sounds messy? It does to me. I mean it sure would be nice if God would just write His will on the wall. But He doesn’t, and here is why: God doesn’t just want us to do right things; He wants us to be in a right relationship with Him. He wants us to know Him. And that’s why He leads like this.

And this brings us to the third and final place we are going to go today where David shows us what it looks like to be in a right relationship with God where we can know His will. The Psalm wants us to learn to ask not “how do I find God’s will, but how do I become the kind of person who knows God’s will?” Can you see the difference?

Look at verse 8.

[Read Psalm 25:8]

The first characteristic of people who can know God’s will is that they are sinners.

Now this isn’t to say that you need to sin to know what God wants from you – that’s not what the Psalm says. But rather that sin itself is not necessarily an obstacle to guidance; after all David was a sinner and he knew God’s guidance.

Rather God leads those who know they are sinners and bring their sin to Him in repentance.

The fact is God loves to save sinners. Are there any people who struggle with sin out there today?... So if you are a sinner come to God because He will save you and instruct you in His ways.

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The second characteristic of people who can know God’s will for their lives is that they are humble. Look at verse 9.

[Read Psalm 25:9]

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In the Gospels Jesus interacted with two kinds of people. There were religious people who looked like they had their lives in order and in fact believed they had their lives in order. And there were broken, destitute, weak, poor, sin-sick sinners. And when these pathetic people came to Jesus He saved them 100% of the time. So humility is connected to knowing you are a sinner – do you see a theme here?

The fact is God loves to save sinners. So hear this: if your life is broken that’s an excellent place to be. On the other hand if you’ve arrived at a level of spiritual maturity that puts you above the people around you that’s the position of danger because “God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble.”⁴

The third characteristic of people who can know God’s will for their lives is that they fear God and keep His covenant. Look at verse 10.

[Read Psalm 25:10-12]

⁴ James 4:6; Proverbs 3:34

Now the call to keep God's covenant doesn't contradict what we have just established. Keeping God's covenant does not require sinlessness, in fact verse 11 makes it clear that it requires forgiveness.

So people who keep God's covenant are those who humbly admit their sin and ask God to forgive them. And it is those who fear God that do this.

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Now fearing God is admittedly a confusing concept. And we like to explain things away that confuse us so some people say "Fearing God doesn't mean being afraid of Him, it means respecting Him." Have you heard that?

The problem is if that was true then the Bible would say "respect God", but instead it says "fear God", and it says this over 300 times so we can't downplay this. But the good news is the confusion goes away simply by understanding that the Bible uses the word "fear" in two ways.

Usually fear is a negative thing, and in the Bible fear of everything other than God is treated this way.⁵ But when the Bible talks of fearing God it is always a positive thing. So for example Moses chose his leaders saying:

Select capable men from all the people—**men who fear God**, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain—and appoint them as officials. (Exodus 18:21)

So the fear of God made these men trustworthy which is a good thing. They feared God so they could not be corrupted to distort justice. Their fear of God was greater than their fear of the worst criminal who might want to sway them because they valued God's pleasure more than the biggest bribe and wanted to avoid His displeasure more than anything else.

In a sentence then to fear God means to understand who He actually is, and what He can actually do to us, and live our lives accordingly.

Now the good news is that this God loves us and wants good things for us. But it is still true as Hebrews says that:

It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. (Hebrews 10:31 ESV)

And when we live fueled by this fear we are living in the covenant relationship God designed us for; we are in a right relationship with God. And God promises to point those who know Him towards what is good for them. "The fear of the LORD leads to life."⁶

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So the Psalmist asks you, "have you been seeking God's direction, or have you been seeking God?"

⁵ 1 John 4:18 "Perfect love casts out all fear"

⁶ Proverbs 19:23

God does lead, and He wants to lead you to green pastures in spite of the fact that you are a wandering sheep – you sin. Actually He will only lead you if you recognize that you aren't perfect because God only saves sinners.

But to people who come to Him as sinners in need of a Saviour, and who recognize that His will for us is not primarily about what to do but where to go when we don't know what to do, God loves to meet us and guide us.

You see the most important thing God has for you is Himself. And when we get Him we get everything.

So brothers and sisters God guides the guilty. He loves to give Himself to sinners. So when you are afraid and lonely and guilty and confused go to Him with your sin and seek a Saviour. And you will know you have found Him when you fear what you find like you have feared nothing else. And your fear of Him will deliver you from your fear of everything else. And as you put your trust in Jesus His promise is that He will guide you down the paths of joy He has for you.