

Unreserved Trust

Jeremiah 33:14-16 | Psalm 25:1-9 | 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13 | Luke 21:25-36

PSALM 25:1-9

¹ To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul; O my God, in you I trust; let me not be put to shame; let not my enemies triumph over me. ² Let none who look to you be put to shame, but let the treacherous be shamed and frustrated. ³ Make me to know your ways, O Lord, and teach me your paths. ⁴ Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you have I hoped all the day long. ⁵ Remember, Lord, your compassion and love, for they are from everlasting. ⁶ Remember not the sins of my youth or my transgressions, but think on me in your goodness, O Lord, according to your steadfast love. ⁷ Gracious and upright is the Lord; therefore shall he teach sinners in the way. ⁸ He will guide the humble in doing right and teach his way to the lowly. ⁹ All the paths of the Lord are mercy and truth to those who keep his covenant and his testimonies. ¹⁰ For your name's sake, O Lord, be merciful to my sin, for it is great.

INTRODUCTION

I'll start with a brief story. When I was in high school, I lived with 23 other students in a dormitory that was overseen by a Resident Head. This man was a generally good man, but whose job was to enforce the rules of the dormitory. So naturally, we students were at odds with him often. On one occasion, he created and enforced new, possibly punitive rules, perhaps unfairly, and much to our frustration. But he was the Resident Head, he was in charge, and there was nothing we could do about it but abide by his new policies. But of course, we did do something about it. We purchased a couple pounds of freshly ground beef and a couple quarts of milk, promptly removing the packaging, and placing them in the ceiling crawlspace above his apartment. A week went by and nothing. But by day nine or ten, his apartment began to smell rather putrid, like... I tried to come up with a metaphor to describe the smell of 10-day-old rancid meat, but honestly, this is the metaphor that we use to describe other bad smells. So, simple description will have to do. It took another two weeks for him to find it. And frankly, that little bit of revenge was incredibly satisfying. Learn this: Don't mess with me.

Revenge. Retaliation. It's an interesting concept. In January of 2002, Ernst Fehr and Simon Gächter, two Swiss researchers, published an article suggesting that the punishment of those who act badly, even when it is costly to the person enacting the punishment, leads to societal cooperation. In other words, there may be an evolutionary reason why revenge, or retaliation, is so satisfying.¹ But is it? We are constantly faced with conflict in this life. We have enemies. We may not think of them that way, but we have adversaries at work. We have sparring-partners at home. We have opponents on the street or in line at Billa. And in this chaotic world, people are going to offend us, to take advantage of us, fairly or not. And revenge against such enemies is going to look so good. But is it satisfying? Is that what we're supposed to do?

The Psalmist—very possibly David—suggests an alternative. In fact, David was no stranger to persecution at the hand of other people. Yet, while this Psalmist faced difficult circumstances at the hands of his enemies, his response is one of unmitigated trust in the Lord. And this is what we see in our reading, the first half Psalm 25, the first three stanzas. And hopefully, we can see

¹ Ernst Fehr and Simon Gächter, "Altruistic Punishment in Humans," *Nature*, vol. 415, January 10, 2002, 133-140. See also Natalie Angier, "The Urge to Punish Cheats: It Isn't Merely Vengeance," *The New York Times*, January 22, 2002.

that for us as well, in the face of difficult circumstances at the hands of other people, we may also place our unreserved trust in the Lord. Let's take a look at these first three stanzas, noting that they focus on three words: confidence, guidance, and repentance.

1. CONFIDENCE

The Psalm begins, in the first verse, with set of repetitions. The Psalmist declares his trust in God. It doesn't begin with a request, but with a confident statement. 'I lift my soul up to you, God, and I trust in you,' he says. Note that this is on the basis of a very personal trust. God is "my God." Having asserted his trust, he then makes his request. Notice the repetition of shame three times in these opening verses. "*Let me not be put to shame,*" in fact, "*Let none who look to you be put to shame,*" but "*let the treacherous be shamed.*"² In an honour/shame culture, this is far more significant than a minor tarnish on a reputation. This is everything. The kind of shame he references has economic consequences, familial consequences, broad-reaching societal consequences. But his trust remains in the Lord. He doesn't seek revenge. He doesn't pursue retaliation. But rather, he trusts the Lord to preserve him and to set right the enemies, subjecting them to the very shame they are trying to put upon him.

There is a lesson here for us. To where do we turn when enemies come after us? Do we rely on our own fortitude to survive? Do we turn to thoughts of retribution? Do we rely on the system or the state to set things right? Or do we actively trust in the Lord to mediate? The Psalmist suggests that we can place our confidence rightly in God. But this raises a different question? How? If we are going to trust in the Lord for our salvation, for our way through this maltreatment at the hands of enemies, what does that look like?

2. GUIDANCE

In the second stanza, verses 3-6 in this version of the Psalm, the author suggests that we look to the Lord, not just with confidence, but we look to him for guidance.³ "*Make me to know your ways, O Lord, and teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you have I hoped all the day long.*"⁴ How can a person trust in God if they are not aware, if they are not knowledgeable, about the ways of God? As God saves, so the Psalmist wants to know him, his Saviour. And how? Through his truth and his teaching. This is how the Psalter begins, back in Psalm 1, where blessed are those whose "*delight is in the law of the LORD*" and who '*meditate on his Law day and night.*'⁵ There is extraordinary joy, comfort, and confidence in seeking the guidance of the Lord.

A few of us started a journey yesterday over Zoom, a journey of looking at how we read the Bible. It's an important task, learning from and about God through his divine self-revelation articulated in the holy Scriptures, what next week's BCP collect calls 'reading, marking,

² Psa 25:1-2.

³ The Coverdale version of the Psalm that is listed in Common Worship is used as the basis for this sermon. Please note that the verse numbering in most major English translation is different, splitting the first verse in the Coverdale into two, resulting in a total of 22 verses (cf. 21 in the Coverdale) and a renumbering of all verses.

⁴ Psa 25:3-4.

⁵ Psa 2:2.

learning, and inwardly digesting' the very Word of God.⁶ It is something from which we would all benefit, coming to know our Lord more and more.

Then we could rightly appeal to him, on the basis of his character and not our own ability, appeal to him to protect us against our enemies. *"Remember, Lord, your compassion and love, for they are from everlasting."*⁷

3. REPENTANCE

The final stanza we will see this morning, though not the final stanza of the poem, honestly, surprised me a little. In making the choice to forego vengeance and instead place his confidence in the Lord, to seek his guidance through this challenging time of persecution, one might be tempted to think the Psalmist could be self-satisfied. He's taking the high road, the pious path, the admirably humble approach. It would be very easy to stop there.

But in the centre of this Psalm, the Psalmist stops to meditate on both his own sinfulness and the corresponding grace and goodness of God. *"Remember not the sins of my youth or my transgressions, but think on me in your goodness, O Lord, according to your steadfast love."*⁸ The Psalmist's pious approach does not lure him into self-righteousness. He remains fully aware of his own sin, his own tendency toward rebellion and evil and all that violates the very truth of God on which he meditates. Yet, and this important here, he once again turns to what he knows of God. God is gracious and upright. He is good and loving. He guides the humble. His way is merciful. And the Psalmist, in his confidence in God and his dedication to seeking God's guidance in the covenants and testimonies, the Psalmist is able to appeal to God for mercy, to approach God in repentance. The final line of this stanza makes this clear: *"For your name's sake, O Lord, be merciful to my sin, for it is great."*⁹

We also can be confident in God's mercy, even in light of our own sin. For God provides the way of salvation. In his Son, Jesus Christ, who came in human form and gave his life as a ransom, as a sacrifice for our sins, God shows the most profound mercy. And if he is able to save us from sin and death, through this gospel, how much more can we be confident that he will protect us against the comparatively insignificant enemies of our day.

CONCLUSION

As I begin to close, I want to return us, for a moment, to the day. This is the first day of Advent, a penitential and reflective season here to begin our liturgical year. And what a place this is to start, a penitential and reflective Psalm—which, by the way, it is worth reading the rest of his Psalm—a penitential and reflective Psalm to set us on our path. So, before the excitement of Christmas sets in, and it should be exciting if we have emerged from lockdown, perhaps this is the time to meditate on these things. For we can be confident in the Lord's protection of us

⁶ See the 1668 Book of Common Prayer Collect for Advent 2. "Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; grant us that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them; that by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ." *Book of Common Prayer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 89.

⁷ Psa 25:5.

⁸ Psa 26:6.

⁹ Psa 25:10.

against all enemies, even sin and death itself. And we do well to seek his guidance, to seek his truth in his Word, that place where it might be found, always remembering that we also are sinners in need of his mercy. But we need not despair nor resort to revenge in the face of our enemies. For in the face of difficult circumstances, we may place our unreserved trust in the Lord. We may, in the words of the famous Advent hymn, join the Psalmist in trusting God:

O come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free
Thine own from Satan's tyranny;
From depths of hell Thy people save,
And give them victory o'er the grave.¹⁰

Let me pray: *Heavenly Father, we are thankful this day that you are gracious and merciful and have saved us through your Son. May we evermore put our trust in you. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

¹⁰ Anonymous, *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel* (based on the O Antiphons, trans. John Mason Neale).