

A PSALM FOR THE LOW MOMENTS

Psalm 25

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Psalm 25:1-22 (NIV)

“To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul; in you I trust, O my God. Do not let me be put to shame, nor let my enemies triumph over me. No one whose hope is in you will ever be put to shame, but they will be put to shame who are treacherous without excuse. Show me your ways, O 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. Remember, O LORD, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old. Remember not the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways; according to your love remember me, for you are good, O LORD. Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in his ways. He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way. All the ways of the LORD are loving and faithful for those who keep the demands of his covenant. For the sake of your name, O LORD, forgive my iniquity, though it is great. Who, then, is the man that fears the LORD? He will instruct him in the way chosen for him. He will spend his days in prosperity, and his descendants will inherit the land. The LORD confides in those who fear him; he makes his covenant known to them. My eyes are ever on the LORD, for only he will release my feet from the snare. Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted. The troubles of my heart have multiplied; free me from my anguish. Look upon my affliction and my distress and take away all my sins. See how my enemies have increased and how fiercely they hate me! Guard my life and rescue me; let me not be put to shame, for I take refuge in you. May integrity and uprightness protect me, because my hope is in you. Redeem Israel, O God, from all their troubles!”

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I have titled this psalm, “A Psalm for the Low Moments.” It is in a category of psalms which deal with individual laments. Times of life when we are in a state of lamentations. When we feel very crushed down. Probably now that we’ve looked at the first twenty-four psalms prior to tonight the kind of psalms that you find the most of are these kind of individual lament psalms. I want to pick through to refresh our memory so as you go through the psalms you see what kinds of places we turn to when we are going through difficulties in the heart.

Psalm 3 was the first of these type of lament psalms. I call that psalm the dark hour. “O LORD, how many are my foes! How many rise up against me! Many are saying of me, ‘God will not deliver him’” (verse 1, NIV). A person who is very sorely pressed with a lot of problems and people saying your faith has been misplaced.

Then Psalm 4, psalm for desert seasons. “Answer me when I call to you, O my righteous God. Give me relief from my distress” (verse 1, NIV). Here is a person who on his bed at night is filled with grief and trouble.

Psalm 5 is the third of the lament psalms. “Give ear, O Lord, to my words. Consider my sighing. Listen to my cry for help. Morning by morning O LORD You hear my voice” (verses 1–3).

Psalm 6, the fourth of the soul’s trouble psalms. “O LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath” (verse 1, NIV). This is one of the psalms where the psalmist’s trouble is traced directly to his own disobedience, rather than the fact that he’s picked up adversity or enemies.

Psalm 7, a psalm for a person falsely accused. “Save and deliver me from all who pursue me...if I have done this and there is guilt on my hands...then let my enemy pursue and overtake me” (verses 1,3,5, NIV).

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Psalm 10, linked with Psalm 9. These two psalms went together and we called them psalms of the pendulum because Psalm 9 is an up psalm and Psalm 10 is a down psalm. “Why, O LORD, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?” (verse 1, NIV).

Psalm 11, a psalm also of lament. When we’re tempted to run away. “In the LORD I take refuge. How then can you say to me: ‘Flee like a bird to your mountain’” (verse 1, NIV).

Psalm 13, the last of the lament psalms before the present one. “How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?” (verses 1-2, NIV).

Isn’t there a common theme uniting all of those? Out of the first twenty-four psalms, eight of them have dealt with individual laments. One third of the Psalter so far is given over to the down moments of life. This psalm, the psalm for low moments, has a lot in common with the other psalms we just noted. But it also is a moment particularly, it seems to me, to appeal to moments in life when somebody else has really ripped us off or done us harm and we, as we contemplate the future, are afraid of even worse disaster happening. On top of it, we blame ourselves for some of what has happened to us and we’re having problems with our own guilt load as we struggle with someone who has really done us in. That’s to me the setting for the psalm.

Look at the particular low moments that David is in as he writes this. Verse 2: “Do not let me be put to shame, nor let my enemies triumph over me.” Verse 16: “I am lonely and afflicted.” Verse 17: “The troubles of my heart have multiplied; free me from my anguish.” Verse 18: “Look upon my affliction and my distress.” Verse 19: “See how my enemies have increased and how fiercely they hate me!” And verse 20: “Guard my life and rescue me; let me not be put to shame.”

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What moments in life do I find myself or other people feeling this way? When we look at the psalm itself for clues into David's life we are left without a clue as to what particular moment he may have been facing in his life. You come into these themes that are addressed in these psalms—the theme of security in life, the thing that has been my rock solid element in life has been ripped from me and the prospects of the future appear worse than what my past has indicated. On top of that I bear some responsibility for what has happened. Maybe too I've found that a person going through that kind of crisis often takes on more responsibility than is actually theirs and focused tremendously on their guilt to the point where maybe their guilt seems to be the biggest.

I'm not sure that's a valid argument, but it's certainly an element of this psalm. The phrases in Psalm 25 describe the person who is feeling low. And not only feeling low but facing the prospect of things getting much worse. The end result being personal humiliation. To be put to shame, to be put to disgrace.

When you try to outline this psalm you're going to find that it's a very difficult psalm to outline. The reason why is when it was written in the Hebrew it was written in the form of an acrostic alphabet. That is, each verse starts with a succeeding letter of the Hebrew alphabet. With some exception but basically it follows an alphabetic rule. When you're composing poetry and following an artificial outline, your thoughts are not necessarily united. They are more like a string of pearls gathered around a chain or a rope. They do not have the force of like building a bridge and you've got the base and the span and things flowing out of it. It's just beads of thought. There are a number of passages in the psalms—Psalm 9 and 10 was the first instance we saw of this. Now again, Psalm 25 where the biblical author inspired of the Spirit uses the

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alphabet of the souls. The alphabet of trouble in life. Since we don't use the Hebrew alphabet it doesn't lend itself to coming across in the English that way.

From our standpoint of needing to organize things, and I always find it's helpful to organize things, I would organize it in the following way. The first seven verses are a prayer. An opening prayer for the low moments. Verses 8–15 constitute a hymn of praise. It is not really in the form of a prayer. It is a statement made about God that we make when we are down, and then verses 16–22 come back and form a concluding prayer. It's like a sandwich. The hymn is in the middle. It's the meat of the sandwich and the slices of bread are the two prayers. The opening prayer and the last prayer.

I. The opening prayer is where I'm going to spend most of the time.

The opening prayer consists of three elements.

A. The first element is the presence of enemies, Verses 1–3. The action recommended and commended in the psalmist's soul is trust in the Lord when faced by enemies. "To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul; in you I trust, O my God. Do not let me be put to shame, nor let my enemies triumph over me" (verses 1–2, NIV). David is evidently facing some situation in life where someone maybe who has been his friend has now become his enemy. Maybe it was a long-standing enemy. He doesn't tell us directly. But if you've ever been betrayed by anybody you look and you say to yourself, "Who is predictable? Whom can you depend upon? Whose word can you trust?" David is sensing this: "Are people into me only for what they can get out of me?" He's got to be saying this as king. "Are they into me because if you're in my inner core you've got automatic access to wealth and power and recognition and social prestige. Why are people into me? Why are people my friends? Whom can I trust? Who is predictable? Who is loyal?"

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David is probably wrestling with this. He's come down to the basic conclusion that there's certainly one whom he can trust. That is the Lord. "To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul; in you I trust."

I do not trust someone who is manipulative, who is using me as a means to an end, who has a proven record of non-dependability. But with the Lord, when I look at him I realize the Lord is not being manipulative with me; He's not using me as a means to an end. He loves me for myself and not for what I do for Him. He has a proven record of dependability. When David begins to cry out to the Lord, he expresses a truth that we need in our own prayers to have fixed deep within. That is, God can be counted upon to be the same person today and tomorrow that He was yesterday. He's not changing. He's immutable. David sees that the very character of God is tied to his dilemma. If his enemies act falsely, God will not act falsely. If it's his enemies that are acting falsely, then they are becoming God's enemies, and if they score a triumph over him, then God's cause itself will suffer and be brought into disrespect. So he prays, "No one whose hope is in you will ever be put to shame" (verse 3, NIV). That is, "If I have acted truthfully and the person who has betrayed me or let me down has acted untruthfully, Lord, ultimately You will vindicate me because you must vindicate Yourself. For You always stand on the side of what is right and I can trust in You that when it comes down to a final resolution of this situation You will not only vindicate me but You will deal with that person who has betrayed a lack of covenantal trust."

David is down but he's saying, "When I trust in You, I won't be disgraced." There is a difference from being down and being disgraced. A moment of reckoning is coming for the treacherous. They will be put to shame. The treacherous will be without excuse.

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I think sometimes in our culture—we've quit talking about hell and quit talking about judgment and God holding people accountable. Much to the loss for the church and much to the loss of righteous living. It seems to me that God uses two things to help us lead a righteous life—one is the drawing of His love and the other is the burning nature of His fire. We're kept both by the sense of His love and also by the sheer sense of His judgment. That He judges sin while He loves the sinner. He is going to have day in which all of our evil deeds and thoughts are going to be exposed and dealt with. David faces that moment. He says, "Lord, if I've lived before You in integrity, if I've really trusted in You, then in that day I'll have nothing to be ashamed of. I will not be disgraced when I stand in Your presence. But my enemies, those who have acted insincerely, will in that day face You and will have to answer to You." That's his first theme in his prayers. "Lord, I trust You when I'm faced by my enemies."

B. The next thing that he faces in verses 4–5 in his opening prayer is he asks God for guidance. Evidently he doesn't quite know how to get through this difficult moment in his life. That's often the case. I've had moments in my own life when I've literally felt so much pain I didn't know what to do next. I hardly knew how to get two words together and keep on going. Trouble and difficulty are so paralyzing. You're overwhelmed by it. What should we do next?

It's interesting how David prays about direction in his life. "Show me your ways, O 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" (verses 4–5, NIV). What he doesn't do is ask God for guidance of a directional kind. He asks instead for a moral and spiritual sense of really following God's heart in his time of crisis. He's asking for a kind of personal response in life that will in an intimate sense know how God himself would walk through this situation. What kind of attitudes God would have. What kind of perspectives God would have. So, "Lord, show me that kind of way.

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Show me how I can cope with my bitter feelings. Show how I can cope with my letdown, my despondency and depression. Lord, You're my Savior; remember me. Guide me in Your truth and teach me."

David is seeking moral and spiritual guidance and I think through this indicating that sometimes sin hurts; when we're hurt and in low moments we have powerful temptations in our life.

Temptations of escapism. Of self-indulgence. Of despair. Of suicide. Of anger with God. And David is really by praying the apostolic prayer, "Teach me Your ways," saying, "Lord, I choose in this low moment in my life not to get involved in escapism, not to get involved in self-indulgence, not to drown myself in anger against You or other people, not to seek retaliation or revenge, not to despair. But to trust You. Guide me, Lord. Help me to keep a hold on reality in this difficult moment."

C. Then the third thing he deals with—he's dealt with his enemies, he's dealt with his need for guidance. Then the third thing is his own guilt. In fact in this psalm three times David deals with guilt and sin. He mentions his sin in verse 7, verse 11, and in verse 18. It's very much upon him. Any time we are under severe pressure or trauma and if we have a sensitive spirit we become conscious of our shortcomings. We reach inside and blame ourselves—if I had only done things differently.

So as David faces this low moment those thoughts are on him as well. I think before the phrases this prayer, "Lord, remember not the sins of my youth" (verse 7). That's kind of strange that that should arise here. He's wrestling with his enemies. Why all of sudden has he switched gears and gone back to the sins of his youth? I wonder if there isn't this pressure David is feeling of looking at himself inwardly and psychologically and saying, "I wonder if the reason I am the way I am is because I slipped into patterns as a young man that have wound up producing this

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kind of harvest in my life today. Maybe at some point early in my life I failed God and didn't adequately deal with the problem. It has now come back to haunt me."

So he's saying, "Lord, if this is the case remember not the sins of my youth when I was impetuous." And let's face it: When we're young we do make mistakes that we live with for a long, long time. You can't unscramble an egg. There are some decisions in life that are just that way. Once you scramble the egg you can't unscramble it. The problem with youth is that we're filled with impetuosity and don't have the wisdom to go with it. So we can really rush into a lot of decisions that cost us dearly over the years.

So David is saying, "Lord, if part of the problem is because of inclinations that started out in my youth then, Lord, release me from that. Create a whole new clean slate in my life. Forgive the sins of my youth."

David, by the way, grounds the rationale for God to forgive him not in his own good conduct but he's saying, "Lord, forgive me because of who You are. According to Your love remember me, for You are good, O Lord."

II. That is followed by a hymn of confidence in God.

One of the kind of interesting things that is occurring in Psalm 25 is there never seems to be a wild moment of joy in it. There's no hitting of the cymbals and wild crashing sounds of thunderous hallelujahs. More on the quiet and contemplative level like he's working through a process. When he's done praying this prayer for the Lord to deal with his enemies, give him guidance and release him from the sins of his youth he comes to a clear statement. It's not wildly jubilant but it's very factual as to the nature of God and what God will do for him. He reminds himself that God has made a covenant with people who trust in Him and He will be true to His covenant. "He will guide the humble in what is right" (verse 9). He's prayed for guidance. Now

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he says God is going to guide me. “All the ways of the LORD are loving and faithful for those who keep the demands of his covenant. For the sake of your name, O LORD, forgive my iniquity, though it is great. Who, then, is the man that fears the LORD? He will instruct him in the way chosen for him. He will spend his days in prosperity, and his descendants will inherit the land. The LORD confides in those who fear him; he makes his covenant known to them. My eyes are ever on the LORD” (verses 10-15, NIV).

Where do we find encouragement when we are in trouble? I look to other people. That’s a help to me. Where do we go for the encouragement that nobody’s saying to us? I think ultimately we have to get into the Word and hear what God is saying to us. David is doing that.

I don’t think there are shortcuts to resolving matters of the heart. Some problems do not readily solve themselves. I resent those who in preying on the flock of God try to hold out magic instead of Scripture. There are a lot of nuts out there. The body of Christ today is filled with more nuts than I’ve ever seen in it. The problems you and I wrestle with, how are they going to be overcome when it comes right down to it. They’re going to be overcome as we get right with God. As we seek His face, as we give God time to work things through. Some things in our life are kind of like a glacier. A glacier just inches a long. There are some things in my life I’d like to see happening a lot faster. But deep in the gut of me I know God’s in control of my life. I’m going to trust Him and He’s going to work out for the good. If He brings a total release of everything I’m wrestling with today, wonderful. If it takes a little bit longer than a day, I know my spiritual muscle’s getting toned up and I’m getting inwardly stronger. And God’s helping me. God hasn’t abandoned me.

Lord, I really trust You. A lot of people we’ve learned maybe not to trust. But my confidence is in You. Lord, You don’t use me. I don’t need a shaman. I don’t need a human guru. A magical

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solution. I need moral solution. I don't need to try to find a way to charm You. You already love me. I don't have to charm You or find the right word to somehow get Your attention. In You, O Lord, I trust.

I want to focus on one other word in that phrase. "He will spend his days in prosperity." When we're done trusting God we'll spend our days in prosperity. One of the vital principles of scriptural interpretation is that we always interpret the Old Testament in light of the New Testament. It's obvious that prosperity, for David within the Old Testament setting, was a long life span, a rich life and a life that involved all the things that prosperity materially represents. We read in the New Testament, however, giving us deeper insights into prosperity. For example, from New Testament perspective look at Philippians 4:11–13. "I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength" (NIV). That's the New Testament understanding of prosperity. I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation. Prosperity is that inner contentment.

Paul also in 1 Corinthians 3:21–23 reminds us of our prosperity in Christ. "So then, no more boasting about men! All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God" (NIV). When it comes down to it that's all I need. The wonderful people God has placed in my life who have spiritually helped and strengthened me. In relationships are where the real riches are at. This life and the life to come, Paul says, to these physically poor non-prosperous Corinthian believers, everything is yours.

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So when I flip back to Psalm 25 and find David remarking on the character of God, “He will spend his days in prosperity,” I’m thinking as I read that not necessarily of material prosperity although I thank the Lord if that happens. If you’re materially prosperous you’ll be able to get more behind the work of the Lord. That is really when it comes right down to it, the only function of money that I personally see. I want to do with my life and my assets what counts the most for the kingdom of God. So prosperity for me is not just having “a lot” per se. It’s being able to do as much as I can for the work of the Lord.

“LORD, my eyes are ever on You” (verse 15). I’m watching for you. My feet may be in a snare, in a trap. That’s not comfortable. But my eyes are on You, Lord.

III. Then this psalm closes with a concluding prayer.

An eloquent and a personal plea for help. It’s interesting that the opening prayer is not nearly as intense as the closing prayer. When he comes to the closing prayer after he’s stated his trust in God, he realizes he’s still very much in a life-and-death situation in terms of his emotional well-being. He asks God to do a number of things. To turn to him. To free him. To look upon him. To take away his sins. To guard his life and rescue him. And ultimately he comes to simply say that in the last analysis, integrity and uprightness will protect him because his hope is in God.

I want to take a moment to look at this psalm in light of Psalm 1. “Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous” (verses 1–2,4–5, NIV). Those things are picked up in this Psalm 25. The contrast of the way of the life of the righteous and the way of life of the wicked.

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The first psalm establishes these two ways. But taken by itself Psalm 1 can be misleading for it seems to imply that there is just one moment in life where you face that choice. And you're at the crossroads. One road says Life and the other road says Death. One road says your leaf will not wither and your fruit will prosper. The other says you're going to come to destruction. So you stand there at the beginning of life and you say, "Which one of these two ways do I want to take?" And you start going the right way.

Psalm 25 comes along as a follow-up and says there's more than just making the choice at the beginning. When you get on that right road you're going to have to keep making choices. You're going to have to keep choosing to remain on that road. The road is lined with enemies who would like nothing better than to put you to shame. The road is plagued with travelers who are dropping out. The way is going to be plagued with internal doubts as you yourself wander off from the path or are plagued with previous sins. The road is too difficult to walk without the companionship and friendship of God.

So David on Psalm 25 has actually come for a moment to a stop in his walk along that road. The two ways that Psalm 1 talks about. He knows as he stops that he cannot turn back. But he scarcely knows how to continue. So he prays that God will keep him on the road and make him to walk in it.

Someone has said, therefore, that Psalm 1 is a signpost to use at the beginning of the walk. But Psalm 25 is meant to be your companion.