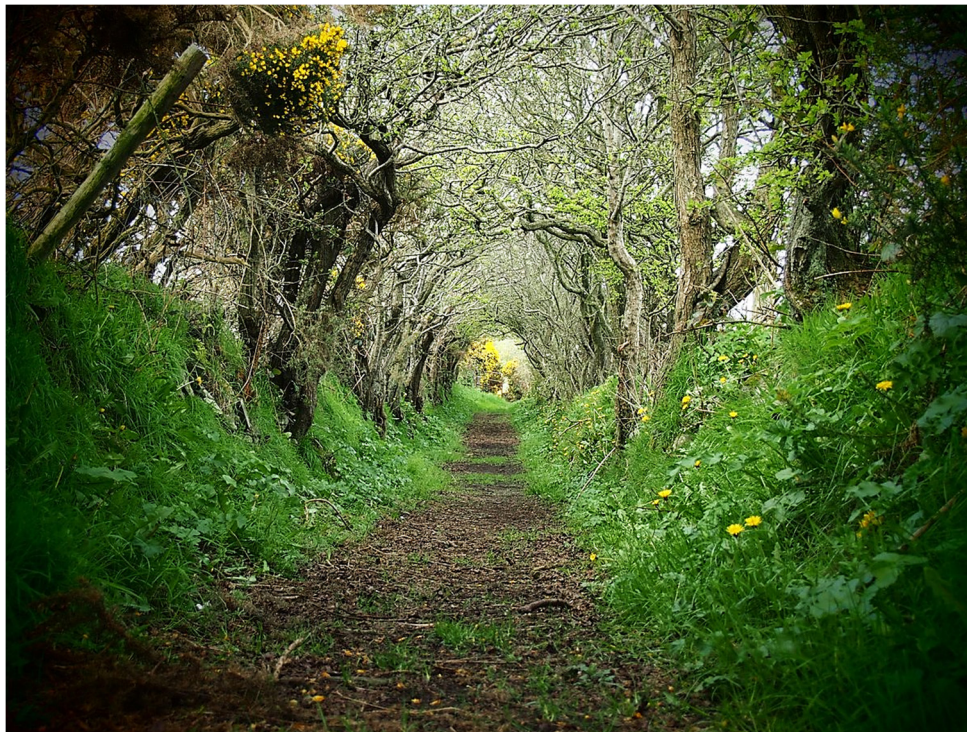


Wisdom Psalms

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



Prayer of Illumination

Testify to us, O God, by the voice of your Spirit. Put your law in our hearts, write your word in our minds, show your will in our lives;
Jesus Savior, lead us in your way, your truth, and your life.
Amen.

Background

Last week we looked at an example of a thanksgiving Psalm. This week we're spending time with the wisdom Psalms. Reading wisdom Psalms often feels like reading the book of Proverbs.

Wisdom Psalms also often come in acrostic form, which is a memory device. Each segment of the poem begins with a new letter in the Hebrew alphabet starting with A, then B, all the way to Z. From A to Z, from first to last, beginning to end, we see what a lifestyle of wisdom looks like, from the womb to the tomb, the cradle to the grave.

Wisdom helps us see life comprehensively and closely, from the whole and the part, as an individual and part of a community—the Me and the We.

This particular Psalm oscillates, even jerks back and forth between expressions of trust and petitions for help. Kind of like real life—a roller coaster crammed with highs and lows, ups and downs, valleys and mountain tops, victories and defeats.

Psalm 25 is a prayer that God—the Alpha and the Omega, the Way, the Truth, and the Life—might be a patient, present, and forgiving teacher, guide, and confidant—from start to finish.

So let's hear from ...

Scripture: Psalm 25:1-22 (NRSV)

- To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.
² O my God, in you I trust;
do not let me be put to shame;
do not let my enemies exult over me.
³ Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;
let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.
⁴ Make me to know your ways, O Lord;
teach me your paths.
⁵ Lead me in your truth, and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all day long.
⁶ Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love,
for they have been from of old.
⁷ Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;
according to your steadfast love remember me,
for your goodness' sake, O Lord!
- ⁸ Good and upright is the Lord;
therefore he instructs sinners in the way.
⁹ He leads the humble in what is right,
and teaches the humble his way.
¹⁰ All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness,
for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.
¹¹ For your name's sake, O Lord,
pardon my guilt, for it is great.
¹² Who are they that fear the Lord?
He will teach them the way that they should choose.
¹³ They will abide in prosperity,
and their children shall possess the land.
¹⁴ The friendship of the Lord is for those who fear him,
and he makes his covenant known to them.
¹⁵ My eyes are ever toward the Lord,
for he will pluck my feet out of the net.
¹⁶ Turn to me and be gracious to me,
for I am lonely and afflicted.

- ¹⁷ Relieve the troubles of my heart,
and bring me out of my distress.
- ¹⁸ Consider my affliction and my trouble,
and forgive all my sins.
- ¹⁹ Consider how many are my foes,
and with what violent hatred they hate me.
- ²⁰ O guard my life, and deliver me;
do not let me be put to shame, for I take refuge in you.
- ²¹ May integrity and uprightness preserve me,
for I wait for you.
- ²² Redeem Israel, O God, out of all its troubles.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – Wisdom Psalms



"Warships in a Heavy Storm"

In the 1600s, Dutch painters developed a traditional scene they would often paint: *ships at sea being tossed by violent waves*.

These sea paintings would be displayed for everyone to see, in private homes and public buildings around the Netherlands. They were everywhere and there was a reason for it. Lessons about character were being conveyed through art. We live in a land dependent upon maritime trade, and so we need to be confident about seafaring and overall living, not only in still waters but in tumultuous storms.

Take for example this painting here entitled "*Warships in a Heavy Storm*" by Ludolf Backhuysen in 1695. It's a chaotic scene. You wonder how these ships can even survive.

But the ships were designed for this very chaos. They were created and built for weathering storms. They were in their element; it is to be expected. The hulls were perfected over time to withstand the tempests of the northern oceans. Crews had practiced sailing maneuvers countless times. They knew when to hoist and to take down the sails so that the winds wouldn't shred the mast. They were trained to keep their wits about them in the storm.

These paintings reminded the Dutch people about generations of planning and experience. Older generations passing down their experiences to younger generations. Younger generations learning the received knowledge, and then reshaping it, just as their mentors did. They would someday pass this knowledge down to their children. Bakhuisen sought to instill confidence and pride in his people, reminding them they had the resources and the resilience to face any challenge—whether at sea or on dry land.

A similar message is being conveyed in Psalm 25. You are that ship in the painting. Your emotions and your circumstances are that storm. Your heart, your gut, and your mind are being tossed to and fro. Maybe you're finding the waves of shame crashing against you. Biting winds of criticism from detractors howling in your ear. Youthful indiscretions or old traumas shaking your soul like a leaf. Rocks and sand bars of trouble, affliction, and distress abound that will run you aground, if you're not careful.

But then the voice of God calms you in the still raging storm. Peace be still, my child. I've made you strong. I'm with you. God widens the straits of your heart, leading you safe to shore once again.

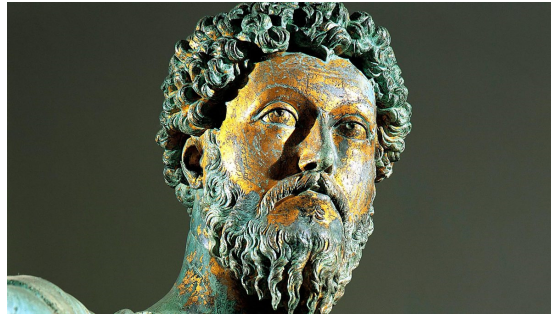
*Jesus, Savior, pilot me
Over life's tempestuous sea,
Unknown waves before me roll,
Hiding rock and treacherous shoal,
Chart and compass come from thee,
Savior, pilot me.*



God's path parts an unseen way through the Red Sea and leads us out of captivity and shame into freedom and acceptance. Shame's tyranny has come to an end. But we must accept God's acceptance.

There's a difference between guilt and shame. Guilt is a feeling that I've done something bad. But shame ups the ante. With shame you feel you are bad—that you're never enough. Shame keeps you stuck in the past and wallowing in the mire of regret, fixated on what you don't have. Stuck in your pain. Your hurt is you. Your identity is found in it. And so shame makes you feel immobilized and belittled, helpless, powerless, worthless. Not just rejected, but a reject.

Edith Eger calls shame the "rigor mortis" of the mind. When you see yourself as a victim, you give yourself license to do nothing. To stay stuck.



Two thousand years ago, in the middle of a pandemic, Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius wrote:

*an infected mind is a far more dangerous pestilence
than any plague—because one threatens your life,
the other destroys your character.*

The good news is that God has plans to prosper, not penalize us. God drains the swamp of shame and fills up the empty spaces with loving-kindness.



We're swimming in and surrounded by living waters from the river of life. God's forgiveness and goodness wash over us. We extend it to others. And, importantly, we extend kindness to ourselves. Shame recedes. We're unstuck, forgiven, and free. We can follow God's leading to the land of promise.

We can show up for life. Say yes to life. The good news is that God remembers us, but not our past. We're freed to no longer say, "Why me?" and instead say, "What now?" God's paths open up the renewal of our minds. Exchange your monkey mind for the mind of Christ. That's the way of wisdom. We're open. Teachable. Children again. Students of the Savior.

"Teach me your paths." "Make them known to me God." (25:4)

Help me to be well-travelled in your passages of steadfast love and pathways of faithfulness.



God's paths also move us from fear to trust.

"Unto thee O Lord, do I lift up my soul." (25:1)

Another word for trust is hope. My hope is in you, God. I'm not only waiting on you, I'm looking to you God. My eyes are fixed on you. Constantly, I trust you. Trust is offering the whole self up to God, like a living sacrifice, a pleasing aroma to God. *"I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God,"* says Paul in Romans, *"to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."* (12:1)

Trust renews your mind and your thinking. It lets go of fears and worst case scenarios, throwing overboard that cargo that's sinking your boat. There are no regrets. You just watch your fears and negativity float away downstream. Trust is possible because God is good and God is our guide. God is trustworthy. To trust God involves us, too. We want to do his will. To really trust that God's paths are true. That God knows best. Better than us. We know our spotty track record, and in that place of relinquishment and stillness, God shares his secrets with us, confides in us, and takes counsel with us. We open up, confide in God, and God confides in us. Confidence builds. Not arrogance, but confidence. We can turn our lives over to God. We have intimacy, mutuality.

God steadies us, rights our ship. Like rolling a kayak, we go with the flow, upside down and then back up again. The journey continues. In fact, it's kind of fun and refreshing, keeps the blood pumping. Because God is a wise and kind-hearted guide, we don't have to put on airs, pretending we're perfect, that we have it all together or know what we are doing. We can loosen up. But you can't kid God. We're invited to take off the heavy halo and just lay it on the table. There's nothing to fear. No shaming or shunning if we come clean. God has a forgiving nature, nurturing nature. There's no need to keep up appearances. In fact, when our passage speaks of God's tender care, the literal Hebrew word is "womb." The womb of God, divine compassion is a motherly love.



The Hebrew word for "afflicted" (25:16) literally means "bowed down." We can be afflicted, but we're not cowering in fear or anxiety. We can reframe our afflictions into opportunities to kneel in prayer. We're bowed down, humble and humbled, reverent before our tender-hearted God. We're free to be who we are, to be genuine, to cry out.

We can be honest about our mistakes, our past, unafraid of recriminations about youthful indiscretions or years and decades of old, lingering shame. God doesn't hold it against us or over us. He remembers us, not our shame.

As the psalmist says:

"Good and upright is the Lord; therefore he teaches sinners in the way. He leads the humble in what is right." (25:8,9)

God is a gracious guide, not a scorekeeper or a task master. We're in good standing with God. God also walks with us—right where we are. He'll wade knee-deep with us in the swamp of shame. He'll drag us out of the muck and the mire, out of shame and into acceptance. Out of guilt and into forgiveness. Out of victimhood and into being a survivor. Out of perfectionism and into authentic freedom. We can arrive at and abide in the land of promise.

Let me tell you Immanuel, I'm not ashamed to be a believer because our God is the God of possibilities and the God of fresh starts and new beginnings. God loves entering into hopeless situations, opening up and widening unseen pathways to safe passage.

"I will teach them the way that they should choose." (25:12)

God loves pointing the misdirected in the right direction.



Martin Luther put it this way,

"As affliction is the narrow place that oppresses us and makes us sad, so God's help is the wide open space that makes us free and joyful."

With trust, we not only ask Jesus to take the wheel of our lives, but to steer us as well, trusting us as we trust in him. So relax in God's presence. Trust in his tender care and unfailing love. Enjoy what the psalmist calls "the friendship of the Lord." (25:14)

Don't look to tea leaves, tarot cards, or omens. Rather scan the horizon for God's way of wisdom, which will soon be revealed. You see, God wants us to know his ways. When we're trusting, we're not tense. We respond responsibly. We don't react. Our detractors don't dictate the terms of the battle

or how we live our lives. God does. Forgiven by God, guided by God, and trusting in God, Christ's character is being pressed, percolated, and poured into us.

"His word is a lamp to our feet and light to our path." (Ps 119:105)

Psalm 25 ends open-ended. It's a cliff-hanger. The psalmist is still waiting for an answer, and he's okay that it hasn't come yet. He's scared, but there's no dread or resignation. His life, his nation, are in good hands, trusting hands. And so are we.

Amen.

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