

“Our Friend at the Centre”

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Psalm 25

July 22, 2018

Read the psalm by clicking [here](#). In our worship service, we read the psalm responsively.

That was a bit of a mess! Not your reading. You did fine. I did okay too. It's the psalm. Psalm 25 is a bit of a mess.

Tradition tells us that King David wrote it. At least he inspired it. He wrote great psalms. “The Lord’s my Shepherd. . . .” “The Lord is my light and my salvation. . . .” “How long, O Lord, will you forget me?” even. Beautiful!¹

Psalm 25? It’s all over the place. David feels guilty. Then he’s being persecuted. He’s worried and confident. He jumps from one thought to the next, without any obvious connection. That’s kind of like my praying. I’m all over the place. Maybe this psalm is for me. Maybe you too.

Someone called this “an ugly duckling among the Psalms.”² What happened to the Ugly Duckling? It turned out to be a beautiful swan.³

II

Psalms are poetry. We did a style of poetry-prayer a few minutes ago, when we prayed through the alphabet. The psalms were composed in Hebrew. The Hebrew alphabet has 22 letters. In Psalm 25, the first Hebrew word in each line begins with a consecutive letter of the alphabet. This psalm takes us from beginning to end, A to Z or, really, *Aleph* to *Tav*.⁴ Beautiful!

The psalm has another pattern too. Think of it as like a target. You’ve got rings, one inside the other, and at the middle, a solid bullseye. The bullseye centres it all.⁵

In Psalm 25, the beginning and ending parts are like an outer ring. They are different but their theme is very similar. Inside are two parts which make another ring, with a similar

¹ The first lines of Psalms 23, 27, and 13.

² Stan Mast, “Psalm 25:1-10,” Sermon Starter for Lent 1B (February 12, 2018), Calvin Centre for Excellence in Preaching. cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/lent-1b-2/?type=the_lectionary_psalms

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Ugly_Duckling

⁴ This pattern is called an “alphabetic acrostic.” Psalm 25, however, is not a perfect acrostic. It appears to skip the letters Beth, Vav and Qof. I was unable to find a convincing theory about why this is.

⁵ This is called a chiasmic structure, or ring pattern. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chiasmic_structure

theme. At the centre is the heart of the psalm, the core that holds it all together.⁶

This centre holds us too.

III

Let's start with that outer ring, the beginning and ending sections. Their theme is this: *Lord I need You to rescue me from THEM.*

What does it say about "them?" They are adversaries: people with whom I'm in conflict, people who are causing me trouble. They act with treachery, without care nor caution. They are hateful and harmful. They want to tear me down in public and stand over what's left. They bring all sorts of trouble, to me and the whole community. The psalm calls them "enemies."

Maybe I need to watch my back more . . . but I don't think I have enemies. Not like these. I quarrel with people. I've wronged and disappointed folks. Some don't like me, and some I don't like. But enemies?

Thinking about it more, I realize there are forces — people, organizations, movements — that are hostile. The biblical vision of life, creation, people, mercy, wholeness, justice, flourishing and love is not universally held. Too often it is bitterly opposed. And I remember scripture's caution that behind these "flesh and blood" forces are spiritual realities that are hostile to God.

We need God's protection and shelter. We need God's strength to steady us, and God's honour to hold us up. *God, I need You to rescue me from THEM.* That's the outer ring of this psalm.

But we need to get closer to the centre.

IV

In the inner ring, the cry is: *Lord, I need You to rescue me from MYSELF.*

It can be quite easy and satisfying, to blame the problems and tragedies on others. *It's who they are. It's what they've done. It's THEM.*

⁶ Often the chiasm is in the eye of the beholder. Two of the commentaries I used (Bruggemann's and Charry's) make no mention of this pattern in Psalm 25. I came across it while reading the reflection of Stan Mast on the Calvin Centre for Excellence in Preaching webpage. To me, this pattern makes a lot of sense.

Jesus won't let us get away with that. I am not different from THEM, at least not in ways that matter most. Where does the line dividing good from evil run? Through me.⁷ What's wrong in the world? I am.⁸

I don't know where I am going. So I need God to lead me. I don't have a clue, so I need God to teach me. I have acted with un-love toward God, and with un-love toward my neighbour, so I need God (and them) to forgive me. I'm as good as dead. I need God to raise me. I need God to save me.

I need God to forget "the wrongdoings of my younger years." And while God's at it, to forget the more recent ones too!⁹ I need God to *choose* not to remember the ugly truth of who I am and what I've done. Instead, I need God to keep on remembering the beautiful truth of who God is and what God has done in Jesus, for me.

God, I need You to rescue me from MYSELF. That inner ring takes me closer to the centre.

V

"*Good and upright is the Lord,*" the centre says. *Good and upright is the Lord!* That centres everything else.¹⁰

Good! What God does is always perfectly beautiful and excellent.¹¹ *Upright!* What God does is always perfectly "on the level," correct, and fitting.¹²

God is good and upright. So I can trust God to rescue me from THEM. Me and all of us. ven "them!" God can rescue "them" from "themselves." For God is *good and upright* even to those who are not . . . even to me. God is *good and upright*, so I can trust God to rescue me from MYSELF.

God is good and upright. So God leads us — even us — in the ways to go. With humility,

⁷ In [The Gulag Archipeligo](#), Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrote: "If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?"

⁸ Apparently, in response to a newspaper editorial inviting people to submit their answers to the question, "What is wrong with the world today?" G. K. Chesterton replied in a letter, "I am."
<https://www.chesterton.org/wrong-with-world/>

⁹ Reading verses 7a and 18b together.

¹⁰ Stan Mast calls this "the core theological vision of Yahweh in the Old Testament."

¹¹ <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/hebrew/nas/towb-2.html>

¹² <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/hebrew/nas/yashar-2.html>

we approach God, only knowing that we do not know, and trusting God will teach us.

God is good and upright. So God's love is steadfast — strong-holding. God's love is faithful — always true to what God has promised, true to God's word. God's love is true to us.

God is good and upright. Because of this centre, I can confidently count on God to rescue ME from THEM, and rescue ME from MYSELF.

VI

The centre is like the eye of a hurricane. All around is storm and trouble. It's ME. It's THEM. All of us.

At the centre is peace: God who is *good and upright*. God, our friend.

In his last hours, before he would give himself over to the world's authorities for judgement, condemnation, and execution . . . in Jesus' last hours with his closest circle of disciples, that first bunch who would soon be denying him, abandoning him, giving up on him . . . Jesus turned to them and called them "friends." Then, with such love, he lay down his life for them and for us.¹³ For THEM and for ME. Jesus, the friendship of God.

I remembered this because of a line in the centre part of the psalm.

*The confiding friendship of the LORD
is for those who fear him,
and he makes known to them
his covenant.¹⁴*

That word "fear" can grate on our ears. Don't think "terror" or "worry." Think "trembling love" before God. Think "knees-turned-to-jelly awe" in the presence of God. Think "I will-do-everything-for-You" joy in serving God.

Think friendship with God. The picture is of God, leaning close and whispering to you in the storm. God is telling you a 'just-between-us-friends' secret.

What is it? What does *good and upright* God say to you, to give you peace?

Listen. And keep listening.

¹³ John 15:13.

¹⁴ My rendering of Psalm 25:14.