

The Recipe for Growth

Psalms 25

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A few years ago, I decided I needed to expand my cooking repertoire. I started by trying to find some recipes I thought sounded good. I figured that following a recipe was mostly just making precise measurements, combining ingredients in the right way, and then (often) adding the prescribed amount of heat for the prescribed amount of time. I reasoned that all cooking was basically chemistry, and since that had been my educational background, I could follow the recipe and generally do pretty well. For the most part, that worked, and I got good at making several different things. I still often use some of those recipes today.

Of course, as I became more comfortable in the kitchen, I discovered that there were a lot of other elements that also went into making food taste and look good, and into getting all the parts of a meal done at the same time. But the skills involved in cooking still come down to the ability to follow a recipe, whether that's one in your head or from a cookbook. If we stray from the directions, we run the risk of getting an outcome we don't like.

This morning we are going to turn our attention to Psalm 25. In it, David repeatedly asks for forgiveness, which leads some to conclude that it followed some great sin. But I'm inclined to look at it differently. I think David wrote it late in life, and the truths it contains give us a glimpse into the heart of someone who genuinely seeks after the Lord. It's the prayer of a mature believer. To that end, I believe Psalm 25 gives us a recipe for growth in faith. If we can learn the lessons David teaches in this prayer, it will lead us to a place of growth and maturity, just as it did for him.

Psalm 25 is one of several psalms written in an acrostic style—each line begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. That detail gets lost in translation, but it's an important detail because acrostics were (and are) often used as a memory aid. So this psalm may have been intended to be memorized, because I think David intended it to teach us how we can grow into who God wants us to be, just as he did.

The Lord's Preservation

David begins by asking for the Lord's help in preserving him.

¹ O Lord, I give my life to you. ² I trust in you, my God! Do not let me be disgraced, or let my enemies rejoice in my defeat. ³ No one who trusts in you will ever be disgraced, but disgrace comes to those who try to deceive others.
(Psalm 25:1-3, NLT)

If you're like me, as you read David's request to never be disgraced, you think of being embarrassed. At first glance, it appears that David is asking the Lord to make sure he never looks bad in front of his enemies or anyone else. But I don't think that's what David means by disgrace here. I believe it is about something much deeper. He is

asking that the Lord would not abandon him or let him fall away. He is praying that the Lord would preserve him in his faith.

Why would David pray such a prayer? I think it's because he had come to discover how unreliable he was on his own. David knew that, left to his own devices, he could easily begin to ignore the Lord and start going his own way. So he was asking the Lord to keep him close. He said that no one who trusts in God will ever be disgraced.

I believe the Lord works in every genuine believer to preserve them in faith. A person who has genuine faith in Christ and who has the Holy Spirit dwelling within them will not stray so far as to ultimately abandon their faith, not because they are better than others, but because the Holy spirit works to preserve them. I believe those who appear to abandon their faith never had genuine faith in the first place.

One of the marks of Christian maturity is recognizing just how dependent we are upon the Lord. When we begin to try to do things in our own strength, we set ourselves up for failure. David shows us the corrective to this tendency; it is to ask for the Lord to keep us close. The recipe for growth starts with a recognition that we need the God's help to keep us where we need to be. So it is always appropriate to ask for Him to help us stay close to Him.

The Lord's Leading

The second thing David prays for in this psalm is the Lord's leading.

⁴ Show me the right path, O Lord; point out the road for me to follow. ⁵ Lead me by your truth and teach me, for you are the God who saves me. All day long I put my hope in you. ⁶ Remember, O Lord, your compassion and unfailing love, which you have shown from long ages past. ⁷ Do not remember the rebellious sins of my youth. Remember me in the light of your unfailing love, for you are merciful, O Lord. ⁸ The Lord is good and does what is right; he shows the proper path to those who go astray. ⁹ He leads the humble in doing right, teaching them his way. ¹⁰ The Lord leads with unfailing love and faithfulness all who keep his covenant and obey his demands. (Psalm 25:4-9, NLT)

David asks God to point him to the right road to follow. There is great wisdom in this prayer, but it comes with an important caveat, which we see in v. 9. The Lord "leads the humble in doing right, teaching them his way." Notice who the Lord leads...the humble. David's prayer for the Lord to lead him comes from a recognition that he doesn't see things as clearly as he might imagine. He knows that he has blind spots, biases, and tendencies that he may not even be aware of, so he asks the Lord to lead him, recognizing his need to submit to the Lord's direction.

This is a practice we all need to cultivate. We need to recognize that we often do not see our own sin and areas of compromise as clearly as we might imagine. And we often underestimate the significance of our failures. We must learn to ask the Lord to direct us and be willing to follow His leading.

Let me give you some ideas of things we should pray for:

- We should ask God to show us the areas our devotion is not complete. Show us the places where we're trying to hold back.
- We should ask Him what things we are allowing to become more important to us than Him.
- We should ask God to show us the places where we are acting selfishly.
- We should ask Him to show us the people He has put before us to minister to and then ask Him to give us the courage and strength to do so.
- We should ask Him to show us the people and hurts we need to forgive.
- We should ask Him to reveal the thoughts, actions, and attitudes that are sinful and leading us away from Him.

Let's be honest, most of us aren't particularly interested in praying such prayers. David reminds us that we cannot be led by God if we're not willing to be led! If we are serious about growing in our faith, it requires us to ask hard questions and do the hard work of putting His principles into practice.

In v. 7. David asks the Lord not to remember the rebellious sins of his youth. This would be one of the reasons we think David was writing later in life—he was obviously no longer in his youth. We know about some of the sins of David's youth, so we can understand why he would ask God not to deal with him on the basis of those past sins.

If you live in the same community in which you grew up, you probably know how the mistakes of your youth can haunt you for the rest of your life. One of the concerns that I had in coming back to the church I grew up in was the fact that many of you knew me as a young child and as an awkward teenager. All of you now know me as an awkward adult. My hope, however, is that rather than judging me based on my weakest points and my times of failure, you choose to look on me with love, recognizing that while I'm not who I ought to be, I'm also not who I used to be.

This is the essence of David's prayer. He is asking for the Lord not to hold the sins of the past against him because his hope is that he is no longer that man. He recognizes his need for forgiveness, and he also recognizes the assurance of God's grace.

I don't know about you, but sometimes I find myself replaying some of my great mistakes in life—times when I really messed up and felt embarrassed. When I do, the feelings of guilt and shame well up inside me again. I feel my blood pressure rise and my heart race, as though I was right back where I was then.

That's what Satan tries to do with us. His name means "accuser". He will continually throw up the sins of our past to make us believe that God cannot love us, that all He sees is our failures, and that we are a lost cause. He tells us that it's not worth trying to go in a different direction, because we've failed too greatly. But that's a lie—and David is the proof. David did not minimize or try to explain away his sin. He acknowledged that he had sinned, often greatly, but he also remembered that the Lord did not deal with him based on who he was, but on who he is. This is what we must remember if we are

to grow too—God will lead us and teach us based on where we are now. But must be willing to seek His leading and follow His instructions.

The Lord's Mercy

The next thing we see David ask is for the Lord's mercy.

¹¹ For the honor of your name, O Lord, forgive my many, many sins. ¹² Who are those who fear the Lord? He will show them the path they should choose. ¹³ They will live in prosperity, and their children will inherit the land. ¹⁴ The Lord is a friend to those who fear him. He teaches them his covenant. ¹⁵ My eyes are always on the Lord, for he rescues me from the traps of my enemies. ¹⁶ Turn to me and have mercy, for I am alone and in deep distress. ¹⁷ My problems go from bad to worse. Oh, save me from them all! ¹⁸ Feel my pain and see my trouble. Forgive all my sins. ¹⁹ See how many enemies I have and how viciously they hate me! ²⁰ Protect me! Rescue my life from them! Do not let me be disgraced, for in you I take refuge. ²¹ May integrity and honesty protect me, for I put my hope in you. (Psalm 25:11-21, NLT)

David asks the Lord for forgiveness in these verses. I don't think it was because David had committed some great sin and felt like he needed to beg God for mercy (like had been the case after his sin with Bathsheba), but because David was aware of the depth of his sinfulness and his need for God's mercy and forgiveness.

I believe this is one of the marks of Christian maturity—an increasing awareness of our own sinfulness. Many people, when they first become a Christian, are aware of certain vices they need to weed out. They work at changing their language and eliminating profanity from their speech. They strive to be honest with others. They may start trying to break habits like drinking, smoking, or sexual sin. Hopefully they begin to make worship a priority and start a regular habit of Bible study and prayer. They may begin giving a tithe to the church as well.

All of these are good things! They are things God desires from His people, and working to make changes in these habits is exactly what a new believer should be doing. But the danger is that as we begin to make positive changes, we begin thinking we are better than we are. We think that because we are in church most weeks, God must be pleased with us. We figure that because we don't swear or drink or go with people who do, that we have somehow arrived at a place of spiritual completeness. But that is an incredibly dangerous mistake!

David understood that though he had done battle with some of the sins of his youth, he could now see sin in his life he didn't even realize was there before! David had begun to see how his attitudes, his thoughts, and his decision-making process ran contrary to God. He began to see that his sin was not just about the things he did, but *why* he did the things he did. He realized just how far from the Lord he actually was, and how much he really was dependent upon God's mercy and forgiveness.

I suspect many of us are not that good at asking for forgiveness of our sin. We might ask for forgiveness if we do something we think of as especially bad, but most people do not take time to reflect on the ways they have rebelled against God and ask Him to cleanse and purify us from those things. Take some quiet time before the Lord and ask Him to show you the ways in which you have fallen short of His standards. Listen, see what areas of your life He brings to your mind. When you see those things, remember that He loves you and desires to make you whole. Throw yourself upon His mercy and ask for His forgiveness.

The mature believer in Christ is not the person who no longer is dependent upon God's grace and mercy, but the one who understands just how much they depend on it! As we grow in our faith, we should not become prideful, self-assured, or arrogant; we should become humble, soft, contrite, and ever more grateful for the grace God extends to us.

To All

There is one final point we need to see in this prayer.

²² O God, ransom Israel from all its troubles. (Psalm 25:22, NLT)

This last line is different from all the others. Everything else up to this point was about David as an individual. It is odd that in the final verse, he turns his attention to the nation of Israel and asks God to ransom it as well. But David is doing something important here. By referencing Israel, he is pointing to the fact that all God's people need the same thing he does. He is pointing readers to the fact that this was not merely a prayer David needed to pray, but one we all need to pray!

Israel certainly referred to the nation David led, but I think it is symbolic of something far greater—all God's people are utterly dependent on Him, Jews and Gentiles alike. The sooner we recognize that, the better off we'll be. David's prayer was that all of God's people (including you and me) would come to see their need for Him, just as he had.

Conclusion

As we conclude our study of Psalm 25, I see two major lessons we need to learn. **First, we must learn the goal of mature faith.** We sometimes imagine that maturity in our faith means that we don't sin anymore. Obviously that's what we want to strive for, but the reality is that we aren't going to get there. The problem with the notion that mature Christians don't sin anymore is that it means that if we are to be seen as mature in the eyes of others, we have to pretend. We have to pretend we don't struggle, we don't ever fall, or that we've got holiness mastered.

This is a significant hurdle for pastors and other church leaders. Many people believe that church leaders shouldn't fail, and so many leaders try to hide their failures because they will be crucified by their churches if they admit them. I believe this is why we've seen so many Christian leaders fall into terrible sins. They've felt the need to pretend and hide for far too long. But this flies in the face of what the scriptures tell us to do.

¹⁶ Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. (James 5:16a, NLT)

We can't be healed of sin if we don't admit it! Many feel they must keep up appearances because that's what mature Christians do. David was honest about his failures. He had made progress in holiness, but he still saw many places where he was far from where he should be. Rather than sweeping those things under the rug and pretending they didn't exist, he sought the Lord's help.

The goal of mature faith isn't a lack of struggle; it is reliance on God! My hope is that you will be honest about your sinful tendencies (starting with yourself, and then maybe a few trusted friends who can help you) so you can discover the grace and mercy God offers. May we be people who do not expect perfection, but call each other to dig deep, to deal with sin, and to rely wholly upon the mercy of our God.

Second, we must learn that growth starts with humility. Again, we often assume that being mature in faith means having all the answers. But a mature believer is always learning and growing. And we can't learn anything if we think (or pretend) we know it all!

I remember when I was in high school, I went on a trip with another youth group. I'm not sure why, but the youth leader decided he needed to help me see I wasn't as smart as I thought I was (it's possible I had an air of arrogance as a preacher's kid...) He told me I needed to see what was in Hezekiah 4:19 and told me to look it up. As I struggled for a minute, he told me maybe I should try the table of contents. Of course, no self-respecting preacher's kid should use the table of contents, right? So I continued to search frantically for the book of Hezekiah, confident it was one of those books in the middle you just kind of skip over.

Of course, there is no book of Hezekiah in the bible. But that illustrates an important point. Until we're willing to admit that we don't have it all figured out, we aren't open to learning anything. We must be honest with the Lord and those around us about what we don't know. We must be honest about the things we haven't mastered. We must be gracious with those who haven't learned some of the things we have. And we must always be open to ways for the Lord to help us grow in understanding. The mature Christian isn't the one who has it all figured out, they're those who are constantly looking to the Lord to grow them, deepen them, and challenge them, that they may become all He would have them to be.

I think David's intent was to give us a proper picture of mature faith and show us the recipe to get there. Many imagine that becoming mature means that we follow the rules better and look better than everyone else. But that's not the road to maturity, it's how we become hollow shells of who God wants us to be. If we want to become mature men and women after God's own heart (as David was) we must be soft and humble. We must be honest about our sin. And as we do those things, we will come to appreciate the wonder of His grace and mercy toward us that much more. As we do that, it will change not just our actions, but our attitudes, not only to the Lord and to each other, but also to a watching world.

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