

Restoring Your Soul Through Psalms
His Paths are Love
Psalm 25: 8-22

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**October 11, AD 2020
Gerrit Scott Dawson**

We're more than half way through our journey in the Psalms. I love hearing from you about how praying the same psalm daily for a week is anything but boring. A jewel grows more beautiful as your turn it to look at the light through different facets, so reading and praying a psalm in different ways brings out its richness. You tell me such beautiful things about our God! Of course, I know this is also the stage in a long study when it's easier to get slack, or even drop out. So I want to encourage us as we participate in our psalms groups, as we watch the videos and engage in daily prayer. God is opening his heart to us as we press more closely into him. This morning, we're going very basic as we walk through the second half of Psalm 25. I'd like to turn our attention to three intriguing facets in this gorgeous jewel of a psalm.

1) All the Paths of the LORD. David turns from direct prayer to offering praise for the character of his God. He offers us wisdom about the ways of the LORD with his people. *All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his testimonies* (vs. 10).

The paths of the LORD. This is the language of journey. God is not static. He is not remote. He is in motion towards us. The paths of the LORD are all the ways by which God comes to us. And this involves the journey through life that we are each on. We're going down paths created by our choices and circumstance. When we commit our way to the LORD, these life paths belong to him. We open ourselves to his guidance. And the paths of the LORD are the roads down which God brings us. These are the ways that God deals with us. The things that he shows us. The grace that he gives us.

David declares that all God's roads are paved with steadfast love and faithfulness. Ultimately, the road God has us on does not lead to emptiness. We don't tumble into final disappointment. The future is not final chaos. God is on a long term plan with his world. And he's on a long term plan with each of us. Romans tells us that God works all things together for good to those who love him and are called according to his purpose (8:28).

That certainly does not mean that every road is an easy one. Far from it, we all go down sharp paths, filled with broken glass underfoot and boulders in the way. We all hit stretches where we wind endlessly uphill, breathless with the exertion. We tread paths frequented by snakes and lions. We enter thickets where we are sure that we are lost. Some days we get nowhere, just sitting down in despair that the journey is even worth it. We can't see the sun for days on end. We look around and find no travelling companions. We wonder if there is any point.

David knew what it is to be hunted by a jealous, crazy superior. He knew what it was to be cut off from your heart's best friend. David knew roads he chose that led to having adultery and murder on his hands. He knew the paths of family dysfunction. He ignored one of his sons until that son set fire to a house, and then set out to kill his father. David lost that same son when his gorgeous locks got caught in a tree. He had already lost an infant son. David knew the frustration of dreams, the infirmity of age and the stings of regret. David knew violence, illness, betrayal, schemes, sorrows, and failures. He was no pristine Bible character making pious prayers. He had walked some paths. Been down many miles of the suffering road.

And still he said, "All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness." It's a perspective on life's roads that you can't legislate for someone else. You can't look at a person's sufferings and say "That's a road of love and faithfulness." But you can bear witness. You can speak of the deep mystery. I've heard so many members of our church declare, "I wouldn't wish what happened to me on an enemy, but I wouldn't trade what happened to me for all the world. Because God met me there. I have him now, the pearl of great price, the one thing that matters." It's a deep mystery of faith that we can say "Blessed be your name, on the road marked with suffering. Though there's pain in the offering, blessed be your name."

2) The friendship of the LORD. *The friendship of the LORD is for those who fear him, and he makes known to them his covenant* (vs. 14). This is a stunning sentence! The Creator of the universe offers intimate friendship to mere mortals. He wants to bring us into the circle of trust. He shares his heart with us. Other translations say "The secret counsel of the LORD," or the "The fellowship of the LORD," or just "The secret of the LORD." It's the sense of being let inside. To know the mind of another. To speak to one another of what matters most to each. I'm reminded of when the LORD God walked in the Garden with the man and the woman in the cool of the day (Gen. 3:8). Or when Genesis says that Enoch "walked with God" (Gen. 5:24). There is a lovely feeling of companionship.

On the last night before his crucifixion, Jesus sought to comfort his disciples. He assured them though he was leaving them, he would see them again. He promised that when he was away from them, he would be preparing a place for them. Jesus left them with final instructions and encouragement for the future. “Love one another, as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends, if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father, I have made known to you” (Jn. 15: 12-14). The Father and the Son have existed in intimate communion from before time began. In the bonds of the Spirit, they hold secret counsel together. Father, Son and Spirit are the center of all things, weaving in and out of each other in love. Jesus opened this Triune circle to us. He shared the love of his Father with them. He told them the truth about God. He took them into his secret counsel, into his life with the Father. And then asked us to live from that love by loving one another. He directed his friends, his church, to ever increase the circle of Triune love as we worship and as we love. This is the essence of what Psalm 25 means. The friendship of the LORD, the deep communion of the Triune God, has opened up to us. He makes known to us his covenant love, his everlasting promises.

But there’s a qualification in this verse that disturbs me a bit. The friendship of the LORD is for those *who fear him*. These two things don’t seem to fit together: friendship and fear. Of all the people in the world, it seems your friends are the ones you don’t have to fear. Because they know you and love you anyway. Fearing God conjures images of a wrathful, quick-tempered god who has to be appeased lest he smite us where we stand. But of course upon further review, that’s not what fear of the LORD means at all.

There are lots of things we love that we fear. Indeed, we never lose the fear even though we spend years getting to know and deeply love this awesome thing. Scuba divers never lose their fear of the water, for to get careless 100 feet below the surface could be deadly. They know humans can’t breathe under water, can’t stand the pressure without proper precautions. So they always, always, check their gear, and check it again. They follow protocols. They exhibit a healthy, serious fear of water’s depths and the creatures below. And yet they fall in love with the sea depths more and more. They get to know the wonders of the deep. They feel a friendship with the ocean and its natural occupants. Same with pilots. Mountain climbers. Surgeons. Actors. Dentists. Firefighters. There is a fear that is right and

good because some activities have to be taken with earnest seriousness. But that is no barrier to love.

Indeed, our God is worthy of such respect. He's not fooling around. Getting out of alignment with his plan for human flourishing will lead to our destruction. The proud, the self-asserting, the arrogant will experience God as divine resistance to their self-assertion. They will view God as the one who wants to thwart them, for indeed our God does want to thwart our choices for death. But giving ourselves to his will and his way will lead to intimacy with the great Creator that lights us up with everlasting life.

3) He plucks me out of the net. *My eyes are ever toward the LORD, for he will pluck my feet out of the net* (vs. 15). David simply remembers that from time to time, maybe many times, he needs rescue. And those times are always on the way. I need you to pull my fat out of the fire. I'm all tangled up. Father, get me out! People recall literally rescues. A man remembers his brother pulling him out when he had fallen through the ice into a deadly cold water. Many remember getting rescued from the floods when the Cajun navy came up the streets that had become waterways in 2016. I careened off the interstate in a snowstorm. Airborne, I was sure I was going to die. And then I didn't. I love the phrase I hear often in African American preaching, "God made a way where there was no way." A door opens in a brick wall. Time warps and a deadline is met. The right person waves away an impossible problem. The invisible, swift sure hand of God moves in our lives, and we know it was him.

One guy reminded me this week of when we had Scottish theologian Andrew Purves preach here. He spoke on Philippians 3: 12, "I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me" (NIV). Andrew showed us that the Greek word there means "to seize tight hold of" or "to grasp forcefully with decisive initiative." It means to arrest or to clamp. Andrew said you just as easily translate it as "to grab by the scruff of the neck." The image is of the mother cat picking up her kitten and putting it back in the right place. There's no getting out of that grip. It won't hurt the kitten, but it will create a decisive change of location. And it will stop any foolish activity. Some of us can remember picked up by the collar by someone with loving but irresistible force. Nope, you're not going to run into the road now. Yes, you are going to get into this bed right this minute.

That's what Christ Jesus does to us. He picks us up by the scruff of the neck and says, "You're mine. I'm taking you out of this cess pool and putting you into my care. No, you're going to live like that anymore. I've got you now. We're

going home. And you might as well not fight it, because there is nothing you can do about it. I am plucking you out of the net.”

David had been plucked out of the net enough times to make a habit of looking towards the LORD for rescue. That’s what Paul by meant: I grab hold of Christ who already grabbed hold of me. It’s a way of life. I grip the one who gripped me. I look to my rescuer, my Mighty One who saves me. Once for salvation and eternal life. Again and again for growth in Christ.

We’re all on the journey. The joy is making the discovery that the paths of life are not random. They’re not leading nowhere. For the believer, all the paths of the LORD are paved with steadfast love and faithfulness. He goes with us every step of the way. He leads us. He creates love and goodness and hope even out of the hardest, most broken roads. As he walks with us, he opens his heart in companionship to us. The Triune God of grace wants to make himself known. He wants to hold sweet communion with us, heart to heart. We get in on that when, paradoxically, we express a healthy fear of our mighty, holy God. I realize I am not the final measure. There is a God and I am accountable to him. My life matters only in relationship to him. So when I take him seriously, I begin to know him more intimately. And that means I learn how he has laid hold of me. He laid hold of our humanity in coming to us as the man Jesus Christ. No he lays hold of me as his Spirit locates me in Jesus. He has picked me up by the scruff of the neck and put me into Christ. He saved me and he keeps on saving me. When I look to him, steadily fixing my gaze, I see him at work all the time. Blessed be the LORD I AM, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit for all his ways are steadfast love and faithfulness to those who cling to him.