

Restoring Your Soul Through Psalms
Lead Me in Your Truth
Psalm 25: 1-7

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Psalm 25 is one of the most intimate psalms. King David is under attack from enemies. He takes his stress to the LORD. But he does not pray for a merely external deliverance. He never says, “Just get me out of this!” Rather, the pressure of the enemies drives him to pursue a deeper relationship with the LORD. He seeks clearer guidance. He makes more honest confession. The stakes are high, as they are in every life. David wants to live, or even die, connected to the God he loves, the God of truth. So let’s take a walk through this psalm, starting with the first two verses:

To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul.
O my God, in you I trust;
Let me not be put to shame.

To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul. The word for “soul” doesn’t mean just the spiritual part of us. Soul means the whole person, the body and the spirit, the bones and the emotions. Soul means the core of you, the heart of you, what is most you about being you. David is talking about directing the attention of his very life. To you, my LORD, I direct the focus of my very being. I am aware of you. I turn to you. In Scripture, the direction we follow towards God is always pictured as “up”. I look up from all that’s swirling around me toward God, the Source. I turn my attention from self-focus to God-focus.

This isn’t easy to do. After all, gravity is always pulling us downward. Exhaustion is ever directing me back to the bed. Stress insists on scrambling my thoughts. Screens entice me with their shiny glow. It takes special effort to lift my soul to God. To look up. To see more. And it can’t just be done in a special moment once a week. Lifting our souls to God is about a habit of focus. And habits require repetition. They require repeated actions in order to form. To move from a self-focused life to a God-focused life requires the habit of lifting our souls to God.

Tish Warren is an Episcopal minister who has written a lovely book called *The Liturgy of the Ordinary: Sacred Practices in Everyday Life*. In one chapter,

she writes about changing her morning screen habit to a Scripture habit. Her ritual had been immediately upon waking to check her phone. A text. An email. News. Facebook posts. Before she even turned on a light, the blue light of the screen titillated her brain with the little pings of interest. Tish realized she was wasting the fresh start of a night's sleep. Sleep washes clean our busy brains. But she was making no use of that rest. She writes that by reaching first for her phone, "I had developed a ritual that trained me toward a certain end: entertainment and stimulation via technology."¹ She knew if she wanted intimacy with God, she would have to develop counter-habits. To banish her phone from her bedroom. To give thanks upon rising. To meet with God before she meets with Facebook. To be informed by Scripture before the news. That's the habit of lifting our souls to God that filters through our whole day.

So David begins his prayer by lifting up his soul to God. He places his trust in the LORD I Am. Where he goes next is a surprise to me. David's trust is a counter to a particular kind of fear: the fear of being shamed. Look how concerned he is with the humiliation and disappointment of shame:

O my God, in you I trust,
Let me not be put to *shame*;
Let not my enemies exalt over me.
Indeed, none who wait for you shall be put to *shame*.
They shall be *ashamed* who are wantonly treacherous.

Shame is the humiliation of being found wanting. Proven inadequate. Ridiculed for belief in someone that turned out to be a fraud. Humiliated for what you said or did.

A girl in kindergarten wanted to play with my little action figure. I let her. She immediately dangled it over the huge box of blocks. If it fell in there, I might never get it back. Suddenly, my guy was falling into that abyss and I was screaming "Nooooooo!" A hush fell over the class. The teacher rushed over. This girl had deliberately lost my army man. Surely she would be punished. But no. The problem wasn't her but me. We don't shout out in class. Ever. Your army man doesn't matter. *Never* make a scene. You've embarrassed us all. Loud demonstrations of unfiltered emotion are never right. Got it. Morality is not about losing somebody's toy; it's about *not* screaming. Clamp on. Shame is powerful.

Of course David was praying about something even deeper. This was the hope that the one in whom he most deeply believed would turn out to be true.

David risked the scorn of skeptics. For then as now, people ridicule those who put their trust in a personal yet omnipotent God. And we worry. What if we turn out to be wrong? What if we believed in nothing? What if the God we believe in is actually the enemy of human flourishing?

Our Lord Jesus himself was no stranger to these questions. In Hebrews 12, we read “Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” (12: 1-2). Seldom do I consider the shaming effect of what Jesus had to go through. When you learn and study Scripture deeply in order to grasp and express its truth, you want to share that with others. You want to reach and stretch the limits of speech to say all you can about the glory of our God. How humiliating for Jesus to be told by the professional scholars of the Scriptures: “No. That is not it. That is not it at all. You’re just wrong.” It takes a strong, mature person to hold fast when the whole academy shames you for your interpretation. When you strive to keep the commands of God with all your might, it’s horrible to hear from the leaders of God’s people that actually you are a lawbreaker. Jesus came to bring the fullness of his Father’s goodness to us, and he was scorned as a menace and threat to society. His fate would be crucifixion, the worst physical torture yet devised. But I forget about the humiliation of being nailed up naked before a jeering mob. The shame that would come on your friends and family. The utter disappointment a crucified Messiah would be to his followers. We backed the wrong guy. We followed him for nothing.

Scripture says Jesus *despised* that shame. On the cross, he detested that feeling of shame that everything had been for naught. It was hard. But there’s also another sense in which Jesus *despised* the shame. He shamed the shame by not turning from it. By not saving himself but embracing our rejection. Jesus did not hide. He got lifted up on the cross and from there he lifted up his soul to his Father. He trusted, when all hope seemed gone, that shame would turn to vindication. Rejection would turn to exaltation.

The nature of shame is that it makes us want to hide. Just like our first parents hid in the Garden after they ate the fruit, and covered their nakedness with fig leaves. We don’t want to be found out. Shame tells us we will be rejected and we will die. Now because of the powerful fear shame puts on us, we learn ways to defend ourselves. We drive ourselves to work for our worth. We have an internal resume of credentials we recite when we start to hear the voice say, “You’re not enough.” We learn defensive skills to keep anyone from getting to that core of us.

We deflect focus on our faults by pointing out the faults of others. “I know you are but what am I?” That’s not just a quote from our presidential candidates in their embarrassing debate. We all do it.

But that’s not what David prayed in this psalm. And this is why the psalm is so intimate. David, under pressure from enemies, entrusted himself more deeply to God. He wanted his life to reflect the truth and the ways of the LORD. David was all in with God. If he was going to be shamed, deposed, even killed, he wanted it to be as one who truly served and loved the LORD God. So he prays,

Make me to know your ways, O LORD,
Teach me your paths.
Lead me in your truth and teach me,
For you are the God of my salvation.
For you I wait all the day long.

This is a prayer that can only be answered over time. David wants to learn the character of God through studying his Word. He wants to follow the paths God has laid out for human flourishing. But it takes time to learn who God is and his will for us. It takes a continuing relationship. The daily habit of lifting our souls to God.

God could have made us already knowing all we can know about him. He could have just hard-wired us with that knowledge. But that’s not how love works. It is the time we spend in knowing each other that cultivates love. In the back and forth exchange of lives, we deepen our connection. Love unfolds in time. That’s what makes it costly and what makes it valuable. When we love each other, we wait for each other:

- You wait while the toddler struggles to put on her own shoes. You could do it faster, but love wants the child to grow.
- When the child has grown a few years, you get to wait in car pool lines.
- You wait while your spouse gets dressed.
- You wait in line to get a sick person’s prescription.
- You wait while his brain, once so sharp, now struggles to get the words out.

Love waits, and as it waits, it learns, and as it waits and learns it deepens.

Teach me your paths. It’s the habit of daily life that gives us the history with our God that we rely on in crisis. We take the long road of learning the Word and learning to pray. Because that’s how it works.

In David's prayer, though, there is also a more intensely personal request. Right now, O my God, I need you to lead me in your truth and teach me. I have studied your Word. I have prayed to you for years. But right now, it's just not clear what I need to do. How this prayer strikes right to our heart! Have you ever asked questions like these:

- Do I sign a Do Not Resuscitate document for my father? Is that a merciful act or is it like killing him?
Lead me in your truth and teach me.
- Do I end this relationship? Or is that just giving up? Will I ever love again?
Lead me in your truth and teach me.
- My children have divergent memories of our family. Who is right? Are we the family we thought we were? Or is the nightmare the reality?
Lead me in your truth and teach me.
- Do I step into this new opportunity? It means a significant increase in responsibility and reward. It also means uprooting my family. Is this about me, or them?
Lead me in your truth and teach me. For you alone are the God of my salvation. For you I wait all day long.

Lord, I can't find the way on my own, you have to guide me! You have to save me from the wrong choice.

And finally, if any of this stress and shame and pressure has to do with me and my failings, please forgive me. I won't try to defend myself. I won't hide for fear of shame. You already know. There's no pretending.

Remember not the sins of my youth or my transgressions.
Remember me according to your steadfast love.

Oh the memories of words said and deeds done. The cruelty. The stupidity. The waste. The memories of words left unsaid and deeds left undone. The neglect. The ignoring. The indifference. Oh my God I need you now, but don't answer based on my deserving. As a guy who's lived seven decades said in study this week, "The sins of my youth go all the way up to what I did yesterday. Every day before today is my younger years." Indeed, we are hard pressed by our sins.

That's why we cultivate the habit of confession in worship. We lift up our souls to God and lift our admission of what shames us. Shame wants us to hide.

To admit nothing. To say nothing. To deny. To defend. And so stay in fear and isolation. But the character of God calls us out of hiding. Your steadfast love and mercy, O God, call me into the light that dissolves shame. I'm going to bet everything on who you are. Your character of mercy trumps my character of the sin that leads to shame. The refusal to admit fault leads to all manner of evil. But confession leads to mercy which makes us people who are merciful. It's a crucial rhythm to engage every week, for what we do in worship creates the path for what we do the rest of the week.

David was threatened by enemies. He was under stress. The pressure drove him to seek deeper intimacy with God. He lifted up his soul, his whole life: sins, needs, hopes and all. He cried out the prayer we can pray every hour of every day, "Lead me in your truth and teach me. For you are the God of my salvation. For you I wait all the day long." David staked his whole life on trusting that God's character is what he says it is: full of mercy and steadfast love that never ceases. So Jesus could take up this prayer as his own, and through its words find some hope for the cross. So though he despised the shame he had to endure, he believed the greater joy to come. Let's do the same. Let's breathe this prayer every moment: Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you, and you alone, are the God of my salvation."

¹ Tish Harrison Warren, *Liturgy of the Ordinary* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2016), p. 30.