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SEEKING GOD IN THE HARD TIMES

Psalm 25

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Seeking God in the Hard Times Psalm 25

Have you ever been in a difficult trial and you knew that you were in the trial because of your own sin? You knew that you should cry out to God for help, but you were afraid to do so because of your sin. Or, maybe your problems were not due to deliberate sin, but rather because of immaturity or stupid decisions. Sometimes even though I have prayed for guidance and wisdom, I still have done something that resulted in a heap of trouble. What should you do at such times?

Psalm 25 teaches us to seek God in the hard times, no matter for what reason we are in those hard times. It seems to me that James 1:5-6 is a succinct summary of Psalm 25: "But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind." The context of James' counsel is the need for wisdom in the midst of various trials (James 1:2-3). James tells us by faith to seek God and His wisdom in our trials. That's what David tells us in Psalm 25:

No matter how difficult your trials or what their cause,
seek the Lord for His wisdom and trust Him to work
for His glory and your good.

This psalm is an acrostic, where each verse begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. (There are a few variations that are too technical to explain here.) The psalmists may have used this form to help people memorize the psalms. James Boice (*Psalms, Volume 1, Psalms 1-41* [Baker], p. 223) also suggests that in the case of this psalm, there is the dominant theme of learning or instruction, which fits with the alphabetical arrangement. David prays for the Lord to teach him His ways (25:4-5, 8-9). Boice concludes (*ibid.*), "So we could rightly say that the psalm is a school-book lesson on how to live so as to please God and be blessed by him." I would only add, "in the context of difficult trials."

Acrostic psalms are often difficult to outline, because the content is guided more by the alphabetic arrangement than by a logical outline. Spurgeon (*A Treasury of David* [Baker], 1:441) divides this psalm into prayer (1-7); meditation (8-10); prayer (11); meditation (12-15); and, prayer (16-22). But rather than following such an outline, I want to treat it by dealing with some of the major themes: Trials; sin and guilt; seeking the Lord for wisdom in such situations; and, the Lord's capability of delivering us from these trials for His glory and our ultimate good.

1. God's saints often find themselves in difficult, frightening circumstances.

We can't be certain about David's circumstances in this psalm. In light of his repeated references to his sins, including the sins of his youth, he must have been older. Since his sin with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband led to the events of Absalom's revolt, it probably was written during that episode.

Note David's situation: He has treacherous enemies that are seeking to exult in his demise (vv. 2-3). These foes are many in number and they hate David with violence (v. 19). They have gained the advantage over David, because he describes his feet as already caught in their net (25:15). David feels lonely and afflicted, and his troubles are growing worse, not better (vv. 16-17). And, David's repeated requests for God to teach him (vv. 4-5, 8-9, 12, 14) imply that he is confused in the midst of this mess.

If David, who walked with God from his youth, was facing these kinds of trials as he was about my age (early 60's), then none of us are exempt. Sometimes I hear Christians bemoan, "I've been following the Lord and seeking to be obedient. Why am I experiencing all of these trials?" They think that if you obey God, He gives you a free pass from trials. But read your Bible! Many of the most godly men and women in the Bible went through difficult trials. Don't be surprised (1 Pet. 4:12)!

But maybe you're thinking, "Yes, but you said that the trials behind this psalm seem to stem from David's sin. That leads to the second point:

2. Sometimes the difficult circumstances that we face are due to our own sins or shortcomings.

David's painful guilt runs through this psalm. In verse 7 he prays, "Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions." Apparently his troubles later in life dredged up the sins that he had committed in earlier years. In verse 8, he refers to himself as a sinner. In verse 11, he again cries out, "For Your name's sake, O Lord, pardon my iniquity, for it is great." In verse 18, he again asks the Lord, "forgive all my sins."

The older I get, the more I relate to the prayer that God would not remember the sins of my youth. The closer you draw near to the Lord, the more hideous the sins that you committed when you were younger appear to be. Some of the sins from my youth keep coming back to haunt me. I think, "How could I have done those things? What was I thinking?" Answer: "I wasn't thinking! I was pretty much running on hormones! Only God's grace kept me from doing some things that could have had far more serious consequences!

I try not to dwell on those sins, because they are now under the blood of Christ. But when they come to mind, they remind me of how corrupt my heart not only *was*, but *still is* (because I am still susceptible to the same sins). And, I thank God for His great love that sent His Son to bear my penalty for those sins. And I realize both my own enormous need for grace and my need patiently to extend God's grace to others, as He has done to me.

There is one other application here: Whenever I am in a difficult situation, whether a health need, a financial need, an interpersonal conflict, or whatever, I use the trial to examine my own heart. Am I in this mess, whether in part or in whole, because of my own sin? No matter why I'm in this difficulty, what is the Lord trying to teach me? Even when I get a cold, I use it to humble myself by realizing my own weakness and mortality. I'm like the grass of the field, here today and gone tomorrow. I'm dependent on God for every breath I take and every bite of food that I eat. So, use your trials to examine your heart and life before God.

If you conclude that your trial is directly related to your sin or to your stupidity, what should you do? The tendency is to try to cover it up and bluff your way through. But that's a wrong approach. There is a better way:

3. In whatever trials we find ourselves, seek the Lord and His wisdom for what to do.

One of God's main reasons for bringing such trials into our lives is to get us to seek Him more fervently as we recognize in a new way how dependent on Him we really are. And, if our trial is due to some sin that was previously a blind spot, He wants us to confess it and turn from it. John Calvin comments (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], on Ps. 25, p. 428), "But we must know, that as often as God withdraws his blessing from his own people, it is for the purpose of awakening them to a sense of their condition, and discovering to them how far removed they still are from the perfect fear of God."

Calvin also points out that David directed all his desires and prayers to God alone. Verse 1, 2a: "To You, O Lord, I lift up my soul. O my God, in You I trust." Calvin says (pp. 413-414), "Nothing is more inconsistent with true and sincere prayer to God, than to waver and gaze about as the heathen do, for some help from the world; and at the same time to forsake God, or not to betake ourselves directly to his guardianship and protection." He adds (p. 417) that if David, who was such a wise man in the ways of God, cries out for God's wisdom in his trials, how much more do we need to do the same!

So, how do we seek the Lord in our hard times? There is enough in this psalm to preach separate sermons on just about every verse. But briefly note three things:

- A. To seek the Lord properly, confess your sins and ask for His pardon.

As already noted, David is painfully aware of his sins, not only in the current situation, but going back to his youth. He doesn't just shrug off his sins by thinking, "What do you expect? I was just a teenager!" He doesn't compare himself to his enemies and say, "I may have my faults, but these guys are *evil!*" He doesn't belittle his sins by saying, "Okay, I was wrong to sleep with Bathsheba, but hey, I'm just a red-blooded guy who likes women!" He doesn't say, "Being the king is a tough job. So if I made some mistakes, back off! I'm only human!" Rather, David's guilt over his sins drives him to confess his sin to God and plead for pardon.

Note again verse 11: "For Your name's sake, O Lord, pardon my iniquity, for it is great." God's name refers to His attributes, to all that He is as He has revealed Himself to us in His Word. In one of the primary, early instances of God's revealing Himself, Moses "called on the name of the Lord" (Exod. 34:5). Then we read (Exod. 34:6-7), "Then the Lord passed by in front of him and proclaimed, 'The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression, and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations.'"

David was referring to this when he asks God to remember His compassion and lovingkindnesses (v. 6). Then he prays (v. 7), "according to Your lovingkindness remember me, for Your goodness' sake, O Lord." God is free to deal with us according to grace ("lovingkindness") because Jesus satisfied His holy justice when He bore our sins on the cross. Thus God now can be both "just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Rom. 3:26). Thus the first step in seeking the Lord during your hard times is to examine your heart and confess your sins, relying on His grace through the shed blood of Jesus Christ.

B. To seek the Lord properly, review and affirm God's attributes.

After David's initial prayer (25:1-7), he pauses to review who the Lord is. Calvin (pp. 421-422) observes that it is difficult to be steadfast in prayer unless we pause and refresh ourselves by meditating on God's goodness, as David does here. The psalm is full of God's attributes: God is trustworthy and faithful (vv. 1, 3), because none that wait for Him will be ashamed. He is marked by truth (vv. 5, 10). He is the Savior (v. 5). He is compassionate and loving (v. 6). He is good and upright (v. 8). He is just (v. 9) and forgiving (v. 11). He reveals His truth to those who fear Him (v. 14). He is gracious and comforts the lonely (v. 16). He is powerful to rescue His people from their afflictions (vv. 15, 17, 18, 20). He will redeem His chosen people from all their troubles (v. 22).

As you review and affirm these and God's other awesome attributes, it will encourage you to seek Him more fervently in prayer in the midst of your trials.

C. To seek the Lord properly, you must be teachable and willing to walk in His ways.

Throughout the psalm, David asks God to teach him His ways or paths (vv. 4, 5, 8-10, 12, 14). The Hebrew word for "paths" refers to ruts made by wagon wheels passing over the same ground often. God is consistent in His paths or ways, which stem from His holy nature. It would be ludicrous to ask God to teach us His ways or paths if we were not seeking to walk in them. But, thankfully, God instructs *sinner*s in His way (v. 8)! We qualify!

To walk in God's ways includes several things as revealed in this psalm. It includes *prayer* (the entire psalm is a prayer). It means *to wait* on the Lord (vv. 3, 5, 21), because His timing is not always our timing. It means *being teachable* to grow in understanding God's truth (as noted above). It includes *humility* (v. 9), because God gives grace to the humble, not to the proud (James 4:6). To walk in God's ways means *to obey* Him (v. 10). It means *to fear* Him (vv. 12, 14). It means to *look to the Lord continually* (v. 15). It requires walking with *integrity and uprightness* (v. 21).

Running through all of these qualities is what David repeatedly affirms, namely, his *trust* in the Lord (v. 2): "O my God, in You I trust." (Trust is implicit throughout the psalm.) Trust is behind David's repeated plea that he not be ashamed (vv. 2, 3, 20). I have struggled to understand this, because it seems to me that shame-based cultures, such as currently exist all over the Middle East, are pride-based cultures. To kill someone to maintain your honor is simply to act in sinful pride. So why is David so concerned about not being ashamed? Is he just being prideful?

I think that the main idea is that David has gone public in affirming his trust in the Lord. If the Lord lets him down and David's enemies triumph over him, not only David's honor, but also the Lord's honor, is at stake. Here is a man who trusted in the Lord. Was he a fool to do so or is God worth trusting in? So David's argument in prayer is, "Lord, I'm trusting totally in You.

Don't let me be ashamed, because if I'm ashamed, Your name is going to be dishonored." That leads to the final lesson:

4. No matter how difficult our trials, the Lord is able to deliver us from them, for His glory and our good.

We need to be careful to define "deliverance" biblically, not superficially. The Bible is clear that it is *not always* God's will miraculously to heal us or to get us out of all our problems. God "delivered" John the Baptist, James, and Paul (2 Tim. 4:18) by having their heads cut off! Many of God's faithful witnesses have died young through sickness or accidents. We often do not understand God's ways. His way of getting the gospel to the Waodani tribe in Ecuador was to have them murder five choice young missionaries.

Our duty is to affirm by faith, as David does here, that the Lord is *always* good, loving, and compassionate. He is fully able to deliver us from our trials, even when we were the cause of them because of our sin or stupidity, if we humble ourselves and seek Him. He will instruct us as sinners so that we know His wisdom to guide us out of our trials. Our difficult circumstances should drive us to examine our hearts, confess and forsake all known sin, and cry out to the Lord for His gracious deliverance, all for His glory and our ultimate good.

One final thought before I give a specific application: Verse 22 grabs attention (in Hebrew) because it doesn't follow the alphabetic scheme. Up to this point, the psalm has been David's individual prayer, but at the end, he unexpectedly broadens it: "Redeem Israel, O God, out of all his troubles." Perhaps David did this because he realized that as king, his problems were Israel's problems. David's grief over his own problems reminded him of the nation's problems, so he prays for them. But it teaches us that our prayers must always include others. So if you're going through a hard time, don't forget to pray for others.

Conclusion

The last verse compels me to share with you the "troubles" that we're facing as a church. For some of you, this will not be news. But I often have newer people in the church ask me, "What is this Equestrian Estates property that you often pray for a buyer?" Briefly, here is the situation. Several years ago, we were

overcrowded. We were praying for property so that we could grow. After much prayer and many hours of discussion and counsel, we purchased this 14-acre parcel in west Flagstaff. It has a large indoor riding arena and stable, and a duplex, along with some other features. We planned to convert it into our worship and educational facility. The church raised about \$750,000 in cash and we borrowed \$1.8 million to make up the \$2.5 million purchase price.

Due to many factors that I cannot go into here for lack of time, just before we were ready to move ahead, we decided that the Lord did not want us to pursue developing the property. There was also another piece of property that seemed more suitable for us. So we put the equestrian property on the market. But shortly after this, the real estate market fell apart and we have not been able to sell the property. Our three-year loan ran out and we recently had to refinance. The bank was only willing to give us a two-year note. So we need to pay off the note by December, 2010, or pray that we can refinance the loan again.

As the numbers in the bulletin indicate, we are currently in arrears in our property fund by over \$52,000. That money came out of some general funds that we held in reserve. Also, we are currently falling behind in our property expenses (compared to giving) by about \$6,000 per month (it was over \$7,000, but it has slightly improved). At current rates of giving and expenditures, we could be out of funds by early next year. Also, a roofer has told us that we need a new roof on our main Beaver Street buildings within the next couple of years, which will cost in excess of \$60,000. We can stay solvent for a few months longer by trimming some discretionary costs, such as staff salaries and giving to missions.

I am not trying to be an alarmist, but only to let you know as the body the difficult situation that could be ahead if there are no changes from our current course. We need either the sale of the property for a reasonable amount, a lessee who could make our payments, or increased monthly giving to meet our obligation. If we received some large gifts, we could pay off the mortgage and then consider whether the Lord would have us keep the property and use it for some ministry purposes. For example, it was recently suggested that we use it for a Bible college. But to do that, we must pay off our note, plus raise additional funds. The Lord can do that!

So I'm asking you to do two things. First, would you pray often that the Lord would guide us, either by providing an adequate buyer or by providing \$1.7 million in donations to get us out from under our note before December, 2010? Second, as the Lord leads and provides, would you consider giving faithfully and regularly to the need? Perhaps you can only afford \$50 per month extra. Some could give much more. But we need to sustain our mortgage until the Lord provides a solution. I realize that it is not exciting to give to a property that we are trying to sell, but we must meet our obligation to the bank. If we come away with any extra funds, we can then decide how best to use them for the ministry here. But we need to make up the \$6,000 monthly shortfall before we exhaust our reserve funds.

Psalm 25 encourages me to continue to entreat the Lord for this need. We did not act in self-will when we bought the property. To the best of our ability at the time, we were seeking the Lord. But even if we made mistakes, this psalm tells us that the Lord can still deliver us. I felt the need to inform you so that you will pray fervently and give faithfully. Let's ask that the Lord will be glorified as He leads us in His paths of lovingkindness and truth!

Application Questions

1. Why do many Christians seem to think that following Christ grants them a free pass from trials? Why is this not biblical?
2. Consider the life of David (esp., 2 Sam. 12) and discuss the following: Does God remove some or all of the consequences of our sin when we repent? Why/why not?
3. Where is the balance between proper self-examination and spiritually unhealthy introspection?
4. Do inner feelings have any place in seeking God's guidance? Support your answer from Scripture. Consider 2 Cor. 1:12-13.

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