

How to Pray in Times of Trouble

Psalm 25

In the day of trouble “the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer.”

LTS: 1 Pet 3:8-17

The book of Psalms has provided the church some of its best loved passages of Scripture. Its name comes from the GK word *Psalmos* which means song. The Hebrew name for the Psalms is *Tehillim* means “praises,” perhaps because their normal usage over the past two millennia has been primarily to help believers offer praises to God whenever the church gathered.

Of course, there is more to the psalms than songs of praise. It is actually a collection of 150 Spirit-inspired poems that express a variety of emotions connected with deep rich theology that has instructed God’s people for generations. There are psalms that help us express our love for God, or sorrow over sin. Some wax eloquent on man’s dependence on God, his battle with fear, or faith that transcend circumstances. On a number of occasions, the Psalms offer prayers for help and assurance in the midst of overwhelming difficulty. Such is the case of Psalm 25.

Psalm 25 can be identified as a Psalm of lament. Though its author, David, is well known for his extravagant expressions of joy, delight, and praise toward God, it is also true that he frequently found himself in difficulties that overwhelmed him. And sometimes, when he came face to face with his own inadequacy, inability and fear, he would sit down and craft a poem to express his battle for faith in God’s promises of grace.

David was an enormously capable person. He was one of those men that just seemed to be gifted in everything he undertook. He could care for livestock (especially sheep), he could kill ferocious beast when necessary. He was a champion warrior who was almost as deadly with a sword as with a sling. Moreover, he proved to be a gifted leader and acclaimed musician. In fact, he was so prolific in psalm-writing one could almost refer to him as the Poet-Laurette of Israel.

There were a num of devices Hebrew poets employed in their writing and some of them would seem strange to us if were to see them in English. One such technique was structure the lines of the poem as an acrostic wherein each line or verse would begin with the next consecutive letter in the Hebrew alphabet (Aleph, Beth, Gimel, Daleth, He, Waw, Zayin...).

Out of the 150 Psalms contained in the Psalter, only nine (9) are acrostic Psalms. And when we come to Psalm 25, we find ourselves looking at one of them. When you think about it, it must have taken David, gifted as he was, a significant amount of time to put it all together. This kind of complexity doesn't drip from one's pen. Its laborious work that taxes the mind and requires tremendous mental and creative energy.

The reason I tell you all of this is to help us see why this particular Psalm seems so disjointed in its flow of thought. It's not like Psalm 23 where the image of a shepherd caring for his sheep carries the flow all the way to the end. Here in Psalm 25 there really isn't any cohesive flow. David seems to be simply pouring out his thoughts in prayer to the Lord in all its raw and disconnected emotion.

I have been refreshed by this Psalm over the past week and I look forward to unpacking it with you, but let's begin as always by reading the text of Scripture.

Read Psalm 25

Now I said in the beginning that we don't really know what the setting of this Psalm is, but one thing seems clear: David feels overwhelmed by trouble. And its trouble of the worst kind – People trouble. David is the king of Israel and he has very real and dangerous enemies and right now they are causing him trouble.

The fact that David is writing this Psalm in the midst of a difficult trial is evidenced by the very last word in the Psalm, “troubles.” And we see the theme of trouble all the way through this Psalm.

- (2) “Let not my enemies exult over me”
- (115) “The Lord will pluck my feet out of the net”
- (16) “I am lonely and afflicted
- (17) “Troubles” and “Distresses”

- (18) “Affliction” and “Trouble”
- (19) “My foes” and “They hate me”

I suspect there is not a single person in this congregation over the age of 30 who has NOT experienced significant trouble in this life. Perhaps it’s been friction in a significant relationship: a spouse, parent, or wayward child. Perhaps it was someone who has threatened or is sewing you unfairly. It may be a bully at school or an abusive coworker or neighbor. Some of you may be concerned about the family trouble that the Thanksgiving holiday may bring. From time to time we all face trouble that seems beyond and above what we can manage on our own. It feels like too much. It feels overwhelming. What would God have you do then?

I have entitled this message How to Pray in Times of Trouble, because this is exactly what David is doing. In the midst of his trouble he doesn’t complain to others or strategize his revenges. He prays. He runs to the One who alone can help in his time of need. And thanks be to God, he also took the time to carefully record for us what He prayed so that we would know how to approach God in the midst of our trouble.

This will be a very simple sermon this morning, because all I want to do is show you the categories of prayer that David engaged in with the hope that we can learn what it sounds like when a godly man or woman runs to God with their troubles.

How should you pray when you’re in trouble?

I. Declare Your Confidence in God:

1. If we’re going to start from the beginning of this Psalm then we need to start by talking about shame. David says (2) “...Let me not be put to shame; let not my enemies exult over me.” Now this is unexpected. The idea of shame seems out of place here, especially the kind of psychological shame that we are used to hearing about. Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary defines shame as, “a painful emotion excited by consciousness of guilt, distress or dishonor.”

2. Nevertheless, a good student of the bible will be careful to look into the words before him to see if they mean what we think they mean. In this case, we discover that the word “Shame” doesn’t mean what Webster suggests. Not that the bible doesn’t talk about that kind of shame, it does. But in this text the Hebrew word is different. As James Boice explains, “The chief biblical idea is that of being let down or disappointed or of having trusted in something that proves unworthy of our trust.”¹

3. Now that puts a different complexion on this part of David’s prayer, doesn’t it? The kind of shame David mentions has everything to do with biblical Faith and Hope, and really nothing to do with emotional or psychological pain.

4. Notice again what David said (2) “O my God in you I trust; let me not be put to shame.” That is, “Let me not be disappointed. “Indeed (3) none who wait on you shall be put to disappointed” (i.e. put to shame).

5. This is the same idea Paul had in mind in Rom. 5:

Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance,⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope,⁵ and hope does not put us to shame... The NAS reads, “Hope does not disappoint.”

6. In other words, you can have absolute confidence that God is in your trouble doing things for His glory and your good. At the very least he is producing endurance, and proven character, and a deep hope in God’s promises of future grace.

7. Beloved, What I want you to see is that the first thing David prays in his hour of trouble is a declaration of HOPE in God. His first prayer isn’t about being rescued, or begging for justice, or seeking vindication. No, his first prayer is a declaration of Hope. As Paul will say (2 Tim. 1:12), “I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to guard what I have committed to Him until that day.”

8. Nothing will stabilize your heart in the day of trouble like reminding your soul that God is trustworthy. He keeps all his promises and He will never let you down. So, in the day of trouble, Pray. And as you pray, declare your confidence in God.

¹ James M. Boice, *Psalms Vol. 1*, (Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 1994), 23

II. Recall the Attributes of God:

1. I think it is significant to notice that David talks about the attributes of God NOT as a separate category of prayer, but as a theme woven throughout his prayer. As he prays, he repeatedly appeals to the deep truths of Theology Proper – Namely, the study of God Himself. Somewhere along the way David was taught some really important truths about God. And now, in the day of trouble, it really pays off.

2. Notice, for example in verse 6 how he appeals to God's attribute of mercy. From the O.T. scriptures David had learned that God isn't only sovereign, omnipotent, and holy. He is also merciful. As evidence of this, consider Ark of the Covenant that God designed for the tabernacle. The Ark represented the presence of God among His people. It was a box overlaid with Gold, having two cherubim standing on top. Inside the Ark were the carved tablets of God's law, a jar full of Manna, and Aaron's rod. But the lid of the Ark was of special significance. It represented the very throne of God. Symbolically, it was the Judgment Seat of the King And this golden lid had a name. Do you remember what it was called? It was known as the "Mercy Seat."

3. Once a year on the Day of Atonement the high priest would enter the tabernacle with a bowl of blood from the appointed sacrifice and sprinkle some of it on the Ark of the Covenant. Because of the blood of the sacrifice, God withheld from Israel the punishment they deserved for their sin. God covered their sin.

4. Do you remember the difference between grace and mercy? Grace is when someone gives a gift you don't deserve. Mercy, on the other hand, is when a judge withholds from you the punishment they do deserve.

5. David knows he's a sinner who deserves God's judgement, so he prays (6), "Remember your mercy, O Lord, and your steadfast love." That's a great prayer to pray when you are confessing sin to God. "Remember your mercy."

A. There's another attribute of God David mentions: his steadfast love (Heb. "Hessed"), sometimes translated "Lovingkindness." (He will mention that attribute again in verses 7 & 10)

B. In his time of trouble David prays, O' God, remember you Mercy and your great love for sinners like me.

6. Three times David says "remember" in vs. 6-7.

- Remember your Mercy (6)
- Remember NOT the sins of my youth (7)

- Remember me because of your goodness. (7)

7. Another attribute of God that gets woven in David's prayer is (10) His faithfulness. David is counting on the fact that God's infinite perfections never change. He can always be depended upon to uphold His covenant with His people.

8. What I want you to see, beloved, is that David knew the attributes of God and remembering them helped him interpret his trouble properly. Recounting the attributes of God gave Him hope. There is a good lesson for us in this, isn't there? We should never interpret our troubles apart from the active presence of the God who is NOT only perfectly sovereign, but full of mercy and abounding in lovingkindness as well.

9. Is there anything in this world that can comfort our anxious hearts in the day of trouble like meditation on the attributes of God?

10. In his inimitable style, Charles Spurgeon writes:

Would you lose your sorrow? Would you drown your cares? Then go, plunge yourself in the Godhead's deepest sea; be lost in His immensity; and you shall come forth as from a couch of rest refreshed and invigorated. I know nothing which can so comfort the soul; so calm the swelling billows of sorrow and grief; so speak peace to the winds of trial, as a devout musing upon the subject of the Godhead.²

11. If we are going to handle our trouble properly, we should pray, recalling to mind that attributes of our God. And that leads into the third way to Pray in the Time of Trouble:

III. Confess known Sin Against God:

1. In the day of trouble it's always appropriate to engage in humble introspection. Sometimes our troubles are the direct consequence of our own sin. But God has provided a way for our sin to be forgiven.

² J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, (Intervarsity Press...) 14

2. David understands this, so he prays (7) “Remember not the sins of my youth or my transgressions” Later (11) he weaves confession into his prayer again saying, “For your name’s sake, O Lord, pardon my guilt.” Then, several verses later he does it again (18) “Forgive all my sins.”

3. When we find ourselves facing some painful trouble, we should always pray with the kind of humility that’s open to conviction of sin. In fact, it seems David was convinced that his own sin was indeed part of the equation of his trouble.

4. He wasn’t acting like his own defense attorney. He knew what he was capable of. We don’t know if this Psalm was written after his sin against Bathsheba, but it seems like his years of battling his own temptation had humbled him and taught him to be skeptical of his own sense of self-righteousness.

5. And as Sons and Daughters of God we too should sense little inhibition own owning our sin. After all, God treats us like a Father, not a judge. He is always slow to anger toward us and quick to forgive.

6. David knew that Yahweh was His Redeemer. Hence, he repeatedly prays as if God were on his side even though he is very much aware of his past sin. He prays:

- (5) “You are the God of my salvation
- (7) “Remember NOT the sins of my youth or my transgressions according to your steadfast love”
- (20) “I take refuge in you”

7. I think that last statement summarizes David’s whole approach to trouble. “I take refuge in you.” These are the words of one who believes what God has said; that He is FOR us and NOT against us. Notice how David prays (10) “All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness for those who keep his covenant and his testimonies.” Then in the next verse he says, “Pardon my guilt for it is great.” Doesn’t it seem that those two statements are mismatched?

- “...steadfast love and faithfulness for those who keep his covenant...”
- “Pardon my guilt for it is great.”

8. You see, David understood that he was both a sinner AND a covenant keeper. And that’s the way it has always been since God first redeemed for himself a people. All

true Christians experience the tension of being both sinners and saints. We keep covenant and we also sin. None of us attains perfect righteousness in this life. Unlike those who hate God, we hate our sin. We are humbled by our sin and look to Jesus whose blood cleanses us from all sin. We NOT only hate our sin, but we LOVE God. He is our Refuge. To Him we lift up our souls (1). In Him is all our confidence (2). He is our Counselor from whom we receive wisdom and truth (5). He has made Himself our Friend (14). He is our Refuge (20)

9. The greatest prayer of honest, broken-hearted confession in the Bible is Psalm 51. And who is confessing there? None other than David. And what does he say? “Against you, You only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.”

10. So in times of Trouble we Confess Sin Against God.

IV. Seek Guidance from God

1. In the day of trouble what do we need? We need the wisdom of God. We need guidance. We need to discover the will of God.

2. In the N.T., James declared, “If anyone lacks wisdom let him ask of God who gives to all liberally...” David knew this about God even in the O.T. So, in the day of trouble David knew where to turn for guidance.

3. Notice how he prays (4)

- (4) “Make known to me your ways, O Lord, and teach me your paths.”
- (5) “Lead me in your TRUTH and teach me
- (9) “He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way
- (14) (those who fear the Lord) “Him will he instruct in the way that he should choose” (14)
- My personal favorite is in v. 8 “He instructs sinners in the way.” We would expect him to say, “He instructs The Righteous in the way, but No! He instructs sinners! That gives me hope, because I am a sinner.

4. But the midst of my trouble I can go to Him for wisdom. I can ask, seek, and knock knowing that the door will NOT be closed to me. I can always say to God what David said (5) Lead me in your truth and teach me”

5. How does God bring the guidance you need?

- First, through the objective teaching of His word – His positive and negative commands.
- Second, from the wisdom of wise counsel
- Third, through a conscience that is trained in discerning what is pleasing to the Lord.
- Fourth, through sanctified desires (What do you want to do?)

6. John MacArthur wrote a little book years ago asserting that God wills five things for your life:

1. That you be Saved
2. Spirit-filled
3. Sanctified
4. Submissive, and
5. Willing to Suffer

7. Even then, however, it may be unclear how God wants you to respond specifically in trouble. But David knew he could go directly to God to ask for wisdom believing that his Heavenly Father would grant the wisdom he needed through whatever means he chose.

8. So in the day of trouble seek guidance from God.

9. One of the reasons I love this Psalm is because it’s written in a way that is consistent with real life. It’s not neat and clean. It’s messy and disjointed. Even though I have broken it down into neat categories for the sake of presenting a cohesive sermon, it’s clear that David didn’t have it all together. But he knew to whom he should turn in his hour of need.

What is the message of this Psalm? I think Peter summarized it well when he wrote (1 Pet. 3:12), “*the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are attentive to their prayers.*” So, when you find yourself in the day of trouble, run to him and pray.