

Psalm 26 “Vindication at the Altar”
Psalm 26
1 Corinthians 10

May 7, 2023

How can David – of all people – sing Psalm 26:

“Vindicate me, O LORD, for I have walked in my integrity,
and I have trusted in the LORD without wavering.”

Really David?

You were walking in integrity with Bathsheba?

You were trusting in the LORD without wavering when you sent Uriah to his death?!

Which David are we talking about here!!

The way of discipleship – the way of Jesus –
is the way of integrity – the pursuit of holiness.

There is a tendency today to say

“Hey, don’t worry about it, man, we’re all sinners! We all make mistakes!”

Have you ever noticed that the Bible never talks like that?

Hebrews 12 – which we read a couple weeks ago – says

“lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees”

“see to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God...”

“strive for the holiness without which no one will see God.”

God never says “don’t worry about your sin” –
he says “repent” of your sin!

There is an equal tendency today to pretend that everything is fine –
when it’s not.

We don’t want to admit that we have problems.

Well, maybe problems, sure – but not *sin*!

But it is only when we admit that we *have* a sin problem
that we can repent of that sin and become innocent.

Our culture says that our problem is that we feel guilty and we need to get over it.

God says that our problem is that we *are* guilty and we need to repent of it!

And if we repent of it – if we actually *turn away* from our sin –
then we can begin to walk in *integrity*.

In other words, everything we saw last time in Psalm 25
sets us up for Psalm 26.

At the end of Psalm 25 – after repenting of his sin – “pardon my sin, for it is great” (v11) –
David says “may integrity and uprightness preserve me, for I wait for you” (v21).

In other words, *you cannot* sing Psalm 26 – you cannot ask God to vindicate you – unless you have first sung Psalm 25 – and turned away from your sin!

Sing Psalm 26
Read 1 Corinthians 10

There are times in life when you really want to defend yourself!
You want to say – “There’s more to the story!”

Psalm 26 is a reminder that trying to vindicate yourself is *not your job!*
David is not worried about trying to vindicate himself.
He is content to leave that to God.

By the way, we see that same pattern in David’s life in the book of Samuel.
When Absalom chases David out of Jerusalem,
and Shimei starts throwing rocks and cursing David –
David says, “Leave him alone – Perhaps God has sent him...”
(2 Sam 16)
After all – whose verdict do you care about?

Whose vindication matters?!

If the LORD vindicates you – who cares what man does!
And on the other hand – if you are in the wrong before God,
no earthly vindication will do the slightest good!

Book 1 of the Psalter is all about how to live in the kingdom of God.
In Book 1, all of the psalms presuppose that the King is on the throne.
The kingdom has come –
but things are still not as they should be.
And that fits our context as well.
Jesus is the King.
In him the kingdom has come!
And yet things are still not as they should be.

We saw that Psalms 20-24 are five songs about the Messiah – the King – the Son of David.
We’ll be looking for the next few weeks at Psalms 26-30 –
five songs about the sanctuary (Psalm 30 even has the title –
“A Song at the Dedication of the Temple”!)

Last time we heard that Psalm 25 is the centerpiece of these 11 songs
that explore the relationship between the King and the Temple –
the Messiah and the Sanctuary.

How can the LORD's Messiah bring his people into his holy sanctuary?

Through God's covenant –

when the LORD's anointed walks in the ways of God –
then keeping his covenant and his testimonies –
then God will redeem Israel (and all nations!) out of all his troubles.

Psalm 20 was a prayer of the people of God as they prayed for their King:

“May the LORD answer you in the day of trouble...
May he send you help from the sanctuary”

Psalm 21 was a song of thanksgiving –

“O LORD, in your strength the king rejoices” –
and “the king trusts in the LORD,
and through the steadfast love of the Most High he shall not be moved.”

But then in Psalm 22, there is a problem:

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”
Why is God so far away from saving his anointed king?
And yet Psalm 22 ends on a note of confidence,
when God delivers me I will praise him in the midst of the congregation.

I hope that you are seeing a pattern here:

there is an awful lot about the *king* and the *sanctuary* (the temple)
and the *congregation* – the assembly.

Psalm 23 focuses on the experience of the King

passing through the valley of the shadow of death,
confident that God will bring him safely through – to the table
where he might dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

And Psalm 24 speaks of ascending the “hill of the LORD” –

Who may stand in the holy place?
He who has clean hands and a pure heart,
who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully.
This is plainly pointing to the Son of David – the Messiah – the Anointed One of Ps 2.
And yet Psalm 24 also says that the King of glory is coming:
Who is the King of glory.
The LORD of hosts – he is the King of glory.

Psalm 25, as we saw last week, is the prayer of a King who has fallen short of Psalm 24.

David and his sons have fallen short of “clean hands and a pure heart” –
“For your name's sake, O LORD, pardon my guilt, for it is great.”
My failures combined with my enemies' assaults
have troubled Israel –
and so it is only if God has mercy upon us that we can stand before him.

And yet he calls us to stand before him!

We can sing Psalm 24 as well!

Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?

He who has clean hands and a pure heart. (Psalm 24)

(Psalm 26 says “I wash my hands in innocence”)

How can I wash my hands in innocence?

After all, I have *sinned*.

And that’s why Psalm 25 says

“Remember your mercy, O LORD, and your steadfast love,
for they have been from of old.

Remember *not* the sins of my youth or my transgressions;
according to your steadfast love *remember me*,
for the sake of your goodness, O LORD.”

And God *did* remember his mercy and his steadfast love.

He sent Jesus – the King of Glory – in order to become the Son of David
who could come into the heavenly sanctuary
with clean hands and a pure heart.

In this way, we need to see Psalm 26 as the Song of the Innocent One – our Lord Jesus.

He is the David who has walked in his integrity and who has passed the test
and entered into the Holy of Holies.

But we cannot stop there.

If we stop there, if we never learn to sing Psalm 26 for ourselves,
then *we* will never enter the Holy of Holies.

What are all these Psalms doing?

How do they fit together?

They are teaching us – better yet – they are *showing us*
how discipleship prepares us for worship.

Discipleship prepares us for worship.

As we walk in a certain path – as we develop habits and patterns in a certain direction –
we are orienting ourselves toward a certain goal – we are learning to love.

In Psalm 26 we learn how to love –

to follow the path of our Lord Jesus –

so that we, too, might love the place where his glory dwells.

1. Opening Plea for Vindication (v1-3)

a. I Have Walked in My Integrity (v1)

26 Vindicate me, O LORD,

for I have walked in my integrity,

and I have trusted in the LORD without wavering.

The opening verb simply means “to judge.”

But it would be inappropriate to translate it “judge me”

because in English, to “judge” someone usually means to “condemn” them.

In Hebrew the meaning is very clear:

“judge me, O LORD – render a verdict in my favor.”

Declare me innocent.

How can David say this?

He had just said in Psalm 25:11,

“For your name’s sake, O LORD, pardon my guilt, for it is great,”

and in 25:18,

“Consider my affliction and my trouble, and forgive all my sins.”

Um, which one is it?

Is David innocent? Or is he guilty?

It is only because David has confessed his guilt that he can now stand innocent before God.

If you *pretend* that you are innocent,

then your guilt remains.

If you *confess* your guilt, and trust in the LORD without wavering,

then he declares you innocent,

thereby enabling you to walk with integrity.

Indeed, that was the concluding theme in Psalm 25 –

as David said in 25:21,

“May *integrity* (same word as 26:1) and uprightness preserve me, for I wait for you.”

Psalm 26 picks right up where Psalm 25 left off.

I want you to see the threefold pattern of David’s plea in verses 1-3:

First, David asserts that he has walked in integrity –

Second, David calls for God to test the case – test my heart and my mind –

And third, David appeals to God’s steadfast love – “I walk in your faithfulness.”

The first point is crucial.

“I have walked in my integrity.”

Integrity has to do with being *whole*.

To walk in integrity means to be the same person in public as in private.

To be the same person at work as you are at home.

Of course, that’s only the horizontal aspect of integrity.

And you can easily imagine an awful version of this!

I met a man once who was just as brutal in public as in private –

he was just as awful at work as he was at home!

I suppose you could say that he had a sort of “integrity” –
which is why true integrity requires a third statement:

It’s not just to be the same person in public as in private –
not just the same person at work as you are at home –
but also to be the same before *God* as you are before man.

This is why Psalm 25 opened, “To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul.”
That brutal, awful man was *dis-integrating*.

And every time we talk one way and live another –
we are dis-integrating.
We are falling apart.

How can we become whole again?

David says:

“I have trusted in the LORD without wavering.”
The pattern of my life has been shaped by your Word.
It is not a claim of sinless perfection.
It is a claim that my confidence is in God (not myself).

My wholeness is found in him.

b. Test Me (v2)

² *Prove me, O LORD, and try me;
test my heart and my mind.*

David has confidence that if God tests his heart and mind, God will vindicate him.

How can David be this confident?

Because David believes in principle what Paul will say clearly a thousand years later.

What God has done for Jesus has a profound impact on us:

“For our sake, He made him to be sin who knew no sin
so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21).

Our problem is that we don’t believe either half of this!

We don’t believe that God made Jesus to be sin.

And we don’t believe that in him we become the righteousness of God.

Do you really believe that God made Jesus *to be sin*?

If *your sin* was really placed on Jesus –

or to use the shocking language of Paul if God *made Jesus to be sin*,
then that means that your sin was fully paid for at the cross.

And if God has truly forgiven you,

then that means that when God declares his verdict regarding you,

you are *innocent*.
Do you really believe that?

Because if you do, then the second part of Paul's statement in 2 Cor 5:21 is also true:
"that in him we might become the righteousness of God."
And yes, this is talking *first* about our justification –
we are *declared* righteous before God –
but as Paul goes on to say in 2 Corinthians,
"Since we have these promises, beloved,
let us cleanse ourselves of every defilement of body and spirit,
bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God." (7:1)

If all your sin is washed away,
if God has forgiven everything that is lacking in you,
then what is left for him to judge?

Why can the Psalmist say "test my heart and my mind":

c. For I Walk in Your Faithfulness (v3)

³ *For your steadfast love is before my eyes,
and I walk in your faithfulness.*

The foundation of my integrity – the appeal of my conscience before God –
is *not* found in me.
It is *your* steadfast love – your covenant loyalty – your faithfulness to your promises.
If I was asking God to judge me simply and solely based on my performance,
I would not last long!
But the Psalmist does not make his appeal based on his own performance!
The Psalmist says that God's steadfast love and faithfulness
is the path upon which he treads.

When we become the righteousness of God we become righteous.
Not just forgiven – but righteous.
We become those who *do* what is right
(as Hebrews 12 said, "strive...for the holiness
without which no one will see the Lord")
And so we no longer walk in the counsel of the wicked –
we walk in *your faithfulness*.

2. The Evidence for Vindication (v4-10)

And in verses 4-10, the Psalmist gives the argument for why God should vindicate him.
First, I hate the assembly of evildoers.
Second, I love the place where your glory dwells.
Therefore, do not count me among the wicked.

There are two assemblies in Psalm 26:

(and the word for “assembly” is the word translated “church” in the LXX).

There is the assembly of evildoers (v5),
and there is the “great assembly” (v12).

What does it mean to *hate* the assembly of evildoers?

Is it okay for Christians to *hate*?

Well, it’s important to pay attention to the language of “hate” and “love” in this passage.

After all, what you *love* – where your heart is –
there will your treasure be also.

If you love God above all else,
then you will love all that reminds you of the one you love!
Whenever you see another human being, you love that person
because that person is created in the image of God –
and insofar as that person reflects the one whom you love,
you love that person!

But of course, that is why you *must* hate the assembly of evildoers –
because in their attempts to lie, to cheat, and to kill,
they are destroying the image of the one you love!

And so the Psalmist says in verses 4-5:

a. What I Hate – the Assembly of Evildoers (v4-5)

⁴ *I do not sit with men of falsehood,
nor do I consort with hypocrites.*

⁵ *I hate the assembly of evildoers,
and I will not sit with the wicked.*

What is this talking about?

The assembly of evildoers is not just a bunch of random people.
Sitting with men of falsehood would mean joining with other powerful people
in order to perpetrate wickedness on the helpless.

After all, who “sits” together?

The image is of the elders sitting in the gate.

(After all, the singer here is *David* – this is the voice of the king speaking).

Let me give you a scenario you may face someday:

your colleagues at work are trying to push something through
that will seriously hurt people – what do you do?

Depending on who you are – and what influence you have –
there may not be a whole lot that you can do to stop them.

But there is one thing that you can do:

“I will not sit with the wicked.”

You can get up and leave.

It may cost you.

You may get called names – you may lose your job – you may be ostracized.

But if you stay in your seat –

if you act as though nothing is wrong,

then *you* are the hypocrite –

the two-faced one who professes to do right,

but acquiesces in doing wrong.

To be a person of integrity means to walk before men just as you walk before God.

It takes strength to do what is right.

It takes courage to speak up for the helpless –

or even to stand up and walk away.

Where do you find that courage?

There is only one way to truly *hate* the assembly of evildoers:

and that is if you truly *love* the habitation of God's house.

The language of verses 6-8 is not the language of the conspirators of verses 4-5,
rather this is the language of the temple – the language of public worship:

b. What I Love – the Place Where Your Glory Dwells (v6-8)

⁶ *I wash my hands in innocence*

and go around your altar, O LORD,

⁷ *proclaiming thanksgiving aloud,*

and telling all your wondrous deeds.

⁸ *O LORD, I love the habitation of your house*

and the place where your glory dwells.

Everyone has something that they *love* above all else.

And everyone *hates* that which interferes with the thing that they love.

Politicians generally love power –

so they hate those who would keep them from obtaining power.

Some people are so transparent in their hatred –

in the way that they despise those who interfere with what they love –

that they help us to see how important it is

for us to be cleansed of those deplorable loves!

What is it that you love above all else?

You all know the “right” answer.

But what is the real answer?

If you would find out what it is that you really love,

then tell me this, what do you hate?
What gets under your skin?
What sets you off?
“Oh, I hate it when someone cuts me off on the road...”
“I hate it when people interrupt me when I’m talking...”

If you look carefully at the things that bother you,
you will see more clearly what you really love.

The Psalmist says “I love the habitation of your house and the place where your glory dwells.”
My heart is oriented towards the temple.
And this is expressed in the *actions* of the Psalmist:
“I wash my hands in innocence and go around your altar, O LORD,
proclaiming thanksgiving aloud, and telling all your wondrous deeds.”

John Ortberg says it well:
“You must arrange your days
so that you are experiencing deep contentment, joy, and confidence
in your everyday life with God.” (Ortberg)

We all *know* that we should love the LORD and his dwelling place.
But how do we develop this love?
Through the practices of God’s house.
If you engage in the practice of holiness – you will become holy.

Think about the practices that the Psalmist mentions:
“I wash my hands in innocence and go around your altar...”

The priests would wash before beginning their sacrificial duties.
What is the point of washing?
Cleansing.

In the ancient world they were not thinking so much of “germs”
as they were of uncleanness.
Over the course of the day, you might have touched something unclean.
So you wash your hands to purify them –
so that you might lift up “clean hands” and a pure heart.

Of course, washing your hands does not guarantee a pure heart!
(Think of Pontius Pilate washing his hands of the blood of Jesus!)
You can go through the outward motions without developing a pure heart.

The only way that you can have a pure heart is through faith in Jesus Christ.
Pontius Pilate washed his hands of the blood of Jesus.
And yet, the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin.

If only Pilate had washed his hands *in* the blood of Jesus!

But the symbolic actions of the temple are joined together with the proclamation of the word!

That is why the Psalmist adds,

“proclaiming thanksgiving aloud, and telling all your wondrous deeds.”

The outward actions are joined with the *word*.

Because we *must* bear witness to the wondrous deeds of God before all the peoples.

Notice how the Psalmist says that this has become the pattern of his life.

Why do we sing the Psalms?

Why do we use these old prayers?

Why do we eat a morsel of bread and drink a mouthful of wine?

Why do we recite the Shorter Catechism?

Because we recognize that we need for our hearts and minds to be retrained.

Our hearts and our minds have been drawn away to other gods!

Or at least other things.

Jesus said, “love the Lord your God with *all* your heart.”

Our culture would tell you that it’s okay to love God with *some* of your heart –
but don’t be too radical about it.

Make sure that you love other things besides God – have a balanced life!

Jesus said, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your mind, all your strength”

Not just some. ALL.

Your love for God must be so complete
that *everything else* is guided by that *one* love.

Yes, you will love your neighbor –

because your neighbor is created in the image of God!

Yes, you will love all that God has made –

because you love the one who made it!

But you never love anything else for its own sake.

Why do I say that?

Because if you love a creature for its own sake (independent of God)
then you are worshiping the creature rather than the Creator.

I love my wife.

But if I ever love her for her own sake – apart from God –
then my love has become twisted and perverse.

My love for her should always be so directed

that she becomes more of what God made her to be.

She was not made for me.

She was made for *him*.

Verses 9-10 show us what happens when we prize the creature over the Creator:

c. Do Not Judge Me with the Wicked (v9-10)

⁹ *Do not sweep my soul away with sinners,
nor my life with bloodthirsty men,
¹⁰ in whose hands are evil devices,
and whose right hands are full of bribes.*

In verses 9-10, the Psalmist distances himself from the wicked.

While he uses two generic terms for wickedness – “sinners” and “evil devices” –
there are two particular terms as well:

“bloodthirsty men” – those who are willing to *kill* to get what they want;
and “whose right hands are full of bribes” –
those who are willing to corrupt and pervert justice by bribery.

Who are these sinners? These bloodthirsty men?

They are those whose loves have become disordered.

Their loves have become twisted

so that they are willing to shed innocent blood to achieve their goals;
they are willing to corrupt justice with their bribes.

They will say anything and they will do anything to get what they want.

I don't want to be with them!

“I wash my hands in innocence” –
but their hands are full of bribes.

I devote myself to the altar of the LORD – where the blood of bulls and rams is shed –
but they are bloodthirsty men – who shed the blood of their fellow man.

Don't sweep me away with them – don't judge me with them –
Why not?

Because I'm not with them.

I'm not like them.

3. Closing Plea for Vindication (v11-12)

a. I Will Walk in My Integrity (v11a)

¹¹ *But as for me, I shall walk in my integrity;*

The opening plea said “I have walked in my integrity.”

Now he promises that he will continue to walk in his integrity –
living before man the same way that he lives before God.

But he never forgets how he got there:

b. Redeem Me (v11b)

redeem me, and be gracious to me.

The opening imperative was “prove me” – “try me” – “test my heart and my mind.”

But in closing, the Psalmist comes back to his need for God’s redeeming grace.

Yes, we are called to seek the holiness without which no one will see the Lord –

but we only seek that because God was gracious to us first.

Salvation is always and only from the Lord!

And because God has redeemed me and been gracious to me,

c. Then I Will Bless the LORD in the Great Assembly (v12)

¹² *My foot stands on level ground;*

in the great assembly I will bless the LORD.

Here in the final verse of Psalm 26 we see the whole assembly gathered in the temple.

The word “assembly” is translated in the Greek by the word “ecclesia” – “church.”

Psalm 1 ended by saying “the wicked will not stand in the judgment,

nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;

for the LORD knows the way of the righteous,

but the way of the wicked will perish.”

The congregation of the righteous refers to those who will stand at the final judgment day.

As such the congregation of the righteous

is what the “great assembly” will be on the final day –

and what Hebrews calls “the assembly (or church) of the firstborn

who are enrolled in heaven...” (12:23)

And because Jesus is there – the mediator of a new covenant –

therefore, let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken,

and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe,

for our God is a consuming fire.”