

Psalm 25: The ABC's of Facing My Brokenness

Psalm 25 is an alphabetic acrostic psalm that is notable for its brokenness. It is missing one Hebrew letter, repeats another Hebrew letter twice, and includes a final verse that doesn't fit the acrostic pattern at all. "This brokenness reflects the way troubles break the pattern of life itself," one commentator observes about **Psalm 25**. (Motyer, *New Bible Commentary*, 501)

In its broken alphabetic acrostic pattern, **Psalm 25** *also* is an individual prayer of lament in which "the supplicant challenges God to live up to the psalmist's feeling of trust, to follow through and save him from his enemies." (Tremper Longman III, *Psalms*, 142) Christian tradition cites praying **Psalm 25** both to begin and end the work day and to pray as we pursue "finishing well," not just today's tasks, but our lives.

Psalm 25 can be divided into 2 parts: *prayer* in **25:1-7**, and then a *repeat of the prayer* with confident assertions about God in **25:8-22**.

1. Psalm 25 begins with a confident assertion of self-abandonment to God. As troubled as the psalmist's life is, as we will learn, he's still focused on entrusting all of it to God. **What words or word order get your attention in verses 1-2a?** (Check out our eucharistic liturgy in the BCP, p.115)

What is the first petition? (v. 2b) What does this quotation add to your understanding of this request?

Biblical Israel was an honor and shame society, in which honor refers to the experience of being esteemed by one's group or other social entities on the basis of embodying that which is deemed desirable, virtuous and socially productive. Shame refers, generally, to the opposite experience of being devalued and belittled on the basis of failing to measure up to or transgressing the same...To be shamed publicly has negative connotations...loss of social position which negatively affects every familial relationship and business interaction. For an enemy to take honor (status) at the psalmist's expense is no small matter in a society with foundations built on the bedrock of honor and shame...We don't know precisely how his enemies are trying to devalue him, but we do know that standard by which he would judge his worth, namely righteous living (See Ps. 15). Psalm 24 may give us a shorthand answer: "The one who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not trust in an idol or swear by a false god;" (v.4) Such an attitude and behavior would win the praise of the community of the faithful. The psalmist's present situation is problematic, however, because his enemies, who are *treacherous*, are trying to shame him...(Tremper Longman III, *Psalms*, 143)

The Hebrew verb “be ashamed” actually means to be destroyed or ruined. “Treacherous” may refer to faithless desertion of God, the opposite of patiently waiting for him. (Ross, *Psalms*, Vol. 1, 597-8) **How do these definitions impact your understanding of 25:3?**

2. Psalm 25:4-7 contains four further requests directed to God. List or underline them.

How would you describe what the psalmist is longing to know and be taught? (4-5)

In **Psalm 25:6-7**, “remember” is an action word in Hebrew, and “mercy” and “steadfast love” are both plural in Hebrew. So the psalmist wants God to act in accordance with God’s tender mercies and God’s acts of loyal love. **What do 25:6-7 add to your understanding of praying for forgiveness?**

3. In Psalm 25:8-22, the psalmist continues to pray for forgiveness for sin, for instruction/guidance in living the LORD’s “way” and on the LORD’s “paths,” and for deliverance and preservation from enemies/foes.

He speaks with candor about the difficulties of his life, some brought on by his own sins as acknowledged in verses **8, 11, and 18**, and some by enemies/foes who want him destroyed and his life ruined (verses **2-3, 19-20**)

Yet he also faces his brokenness with hope, with confident expectation (3a, 5b, 21b). “Hope/wait” is a word for faith that stresses waiting for or longing for the results, accepting the tension, and waiting with confident expectation, actively preparing oneself for the LORD’s intervention.

Look back through the psalm for clues to the basis for his hope. **How would you describe the basis for his hope?**

After carefully “reading, marking, learning and inwardly digesting” **Psalm 25**, **what do you think motivated the psalmist to compose this “broken,” imperfect acrostic lament?**

How hard is it for you to identify with the difficulty and threat the psalmist faced?

Psalm 25 is a much-loved psalm with lots of “coffee mug” verses. How has reading the whole psalm changed or deepened your understanding of any of its “coffee mug” verses? What verse or verses (whether well-known or not) are important to you in Lent 2021?