

Psalm 26 from Book 1 of the Psalms: Crying Out to God When Plagued by Enemies

Book 1 of the Psalms (Psalms 3-41) reveals our human condition of limitation and our struggle to trust the steadfast love and power of the LORD. It is dominated by Psalms “of David” in which the psalmist is constantly beset by problems, difficulties, trials—most often at the hands of others who are determined to make life difficult for him, though sometimes he makes his own trouble. (**Psalms 32** and **38** are penitential.)

1. *What is your response to this observation about **Book 1** of the Psalms?*

Many who have set out to read the Book of Psalms right through have not managed to get through **Book 1** because many of the psalms in this book seem to emerge from such similar situations, those in which the psalmist is beset by enemies and cries out to God to deliver him. In fact, this is such a marked feature of **Book 1** that it is impossible even to find a half a dozen psalms in it where this is not referred to, whether explicitly or by implication. (Grogan, *Prayer Praise and Prophecy*, p. 196)

Consider your own experience with reading and praying **Book 1, Psalms 3-41**, introduced by Psalms 1 and 2.

*How has your interaction with the Psalms of **Book 1** changed over time? What are some of your thoughts and feeling about the psalmists' troubles and his enemies?*

2. *What is your response to these observations about **Book 1** of the Psalms?*

The lesson of **Book 1** is spelled out loudly and clearly: God's general promise that the LORD watches over the way of the righteous (**Ps. 1**), and his specific promise to uphold the king (**Ps. 2**) are fulfilled, but not without considerable pain and agony, both of mind and body.

It is, however, particularly the theme of the king under attack and turning to God for refuge and deliverance that quite dominates this book. It seems at times to be almost continuous... (Grogan, p. 194)

3. Reflect on Jesus' experience with the Psalms of **Book 1** during his earthly life. We know that he heard, read, memorized and prayed these Psalms. In fact, **Psalms 22** and **31** were in his heart and on his lips as he was crucified and breathed his last breath. He models the Psalms' use and power in an open, submitted human heart, using them to speak to the Father and about the Father.

*How has a psalm from **Book 1** helped you to pray, to speak to God, to dialogue with God, to lift up your mind and heart to God? How has a psalm from **Book 1** helped you speak about God with more clarity and conviction to yourself and others?*

4. In *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer includes a chapter entitled “Guilt.” He first explains that “Most Psalms presuppose complete assurance of the forgiveness of sins.” (p. 50) He then describes Psalms that are prayers of repentance from sin, like the seven penitential psalms (6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143), and other psalms that “lead us into the total depth of the recognition of sin before God.” (p. 51) After a brief exploration of how Jesus Christ prays with us, he moves to his next topic:

It is often particularly striking and offensive to evangelical Christians that in the Psalms the innocence of devout people is spoken of at least as often as is their guilt (cf. Psalms 5,7,9,16,17,26,35,41,44,59, 66,68,69,73,86). Here it seems obvious that there is a vestige of the so-called Old Testament works righteousness, with which the Christian can no longer begin. Yet this outlook is completely superficial and knows nothing of the depth of the Word of God. It is clear that a man can speak of his own innocence in a self-righteous way, but do we not also realize that a man can pray the most humble confession of sin very self-righteously? Talk about one’s own guilt can be just as far from the Word of God as talk about one’s innocence...The assertion of innocence is particularly evident in the Psalms which have to do with the affliction that goes from godless enemies...It is thoroughly unbiblical and destructive to think that we can never suffer innocently as long as some error still lies hidden with us... (p. 52 and 54, italics mine)

How do Bonhoeffer’s remarks impact your reading, understanding, and praying of **Psalm 26**?

5. **Psalms 25-28** seem to have been written during one period of time. (One possible setting is the time of David’s son Absalom’s rebellion, but the behavior of wicked people of any age makes this psalm relevant.) The common motifs in **Psalms 25-28** include the psalmist’s undeserved accusation and opposition by unidentified enemies, consistent loyalty to the LORD, prayer for vindication and deliverance, and confidence that God will answer the prayer.

What is the psalmist’s plea in **26:1-2**? Vindicate means “You judge me, you declare me righteous, you set things right for me and in me.”

What are the *reasons* for his plea? (Notice that the image of “walking in integrity” is repeated in **26:12**.) What do you learn about his motives, his way of life, and his way of relating to God?

A similar prayer occurs in Psalm 139:23-24, “Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way of everlasting life.”

The root for “test my heart and mind” (ESV) and “examine my heart and mind” (NIV) at the end of **26:2** means to “refine, smelt, test,” and might best be translated “purify” in this context. So the psalmist seems to know that his life, especially his motives, need further refining. God is not yet finished with this person.

6. *What reasons does the psalmist give in 26:3 for his openness and longing for God to examine him and vindicate him? How does he relate to these aspects of God’s character?*

*In 26:4-5, how does he describe what he does not do? (This reminds me of C.S. Lewis’ chapter called “Connivance” in *Reflections on the Psalms* in which Lewis points out our temptation to condone the behavior of “very bad people who are powerful, prosperous, and impenitent.” p. 68)*

The psalmist seems to be seeking to have an “audience of One,” appealing “neither to his friends to defend him or his enemies to change their minds. This is the secret of true independence, as Paul found when he said he cared not at all what people thought—friends or foes—nor even how he assessed himself. ‘It is the Lord who judges’ (1 Cor. 4:4). Only God’s opinion counts.” (Keller, p. 67)

What has helped you be less preoccupied with people’s opinions of you (self-referenced) and more focused on and aware of God’s presence and activity (God-referenced)?

7. What do you learn about the psalmist’s practices of worship in **26:6-8**? How does his relationship with the Temple/tabernacle and Holy of Holies inform your worship as part of the Body of Christ?

8. In **26:9-10**, what is he urgently asking for? How does he describe his commitment to the LORD and the basis for it in **26:11**?

One commentator recommended that **verse 11b**, “redeem/deliver me and be gracious/merciful to me” be used as an antiphon repeated after every verse of **Psalm 26**. Try that and see how it works for you.

Finally, how does the psalmist describe his *confidence* in God in **26:12**? See also **Psalm 17:5**. How do you think confidence in God and self relate?