

With single-minded devotion this contemplative psalm celebrates the believer's sole dependence upon *my Lord*:

for *preservation* - "for in you I take refuge;"  
for *provision* - "apart from you I have no good thing;"  
for *community*, "the holy people. . .in whom is all my delight;"  
for *a sense of place*, "the boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;"  
for *daily guidance*, "the Lord, who counsels me;"  
for *everlasting life*, "you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead;"  
and for the path of life, "you will fill me with joy in your presence."

When perceived as a singular expression of faith and trust in Yahweh Psalm 16 bears poignant testimony to the Lord's all encompassing providence and the fullness of salvation. In this moment of poetic praise the psalmist captures the essence of human flourishing. But this is no ordinary human flourishing – "not as the world gives, give I unto you" (John 14:27). This is the life that is centered on God. It is not what we achieve on our own but what we receive by the grace of God. Everything is dependent on the Lord from whom all blessings flow. The New Testament caption for Psalm 16 could be the apostle's testimony, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Phil 1:21).

*Single-minded, Whole-hearted Discipleship*

*Keep me safe, my God  
for in you I take refuge.  
I say to the Lord, "You are my Lord;  
apart from you I have no good thing."  
I say of the holy people who are in the land,  
'They are the noble ones in whom is all my delight.'Those who run after other gods will suffer more and more.  
I will not pour out libations of blood to such gods  
or take up their names on my lips.*

Psalm 16:1-4

Gratitude pervades the trusting believer's passionate prayer. This is not the distraught prayer of a desperate person. Faith, not fear, motivates this prayer. "I say" declares the psalmist's resolute conviction. Strictly speaking only the first sentence of the psalm is prayer. It only takes one sentence for David to capture the essence of prayer. If God is our refuge, everything from physical safety to eternal salvation is covered. The exclusivity of our God-dependence is absolute in every respect. The goal of life is knowing God, not simply human flourishing, and all temporal blessings are seen in the light of his everlasting blessings. The psalmist prays for a safety that extends into eternity. David refuses to hedge his bets. He is all in. God alone is his everything. "Apart from you I have no good thing." Asaph echoes a similar conviction when he prays, "Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you" (Ps 73:25).

Over lunch one day I listed a litany of petty grievances I had against people in the church who were making life difficult for me. Dick, an elder in the church and a food broker by trade, patiently heard me out. He empathized with the struggle, but then added, “Doug, if you have been crucified with Christ and you no longer live but Christ lives in you, what can anyone do to you?” His timely reference to Galatians 2:20 has stayed with me over the years. If the life I now live in the body, is lived by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me, then this reality ought to be reflected in my daily outlook on life. God as refuge has taken on an even more specific and personal meaning in Christ than that envisioned by the psalmist. Refuge is a metaphor for finding in God our exclusive security and well-being.

David’s confession of faith in God leads to his commitment to the people of God. He identifies with “the holy people who are in the land. They are the noble ones in whom is all my delight” (Ps 16:3). The descriptive language for the people of God resonates with the church’s high calling. To know Christ is to know and belong to his people. The solidarity of the saints is a consistent New Testament theme. Jesus used metaphors and analogies, such as the “little flock” and the vine and the branches to picture the emerging church (Luke 12:32; John 15). The apostles spoke of God’s chosen people and members of God’s household (Col 3:12; Eph 2:19). Peter emphasized, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Pet 2:9-10).

Early Christians had a sense of place, a feeling of being at home, not in a facility but in a family of shared faithfulness to the Word of God. There was no outward temple or tall steeple to symbolize their place, but as they met together there was a powerful presence of the risen Lord Jesus. The early Christians knew that “the Most High does not live in houses made by men” (Acts 7:48). The relational and spiritual character of this “house” built by God *of people* is no less material, temporal, spatial, and concrete than if it had been built with stone and steel. The good news is proclaimed and lived through the local church, through the community, rather than through the individual. In a world of hostility the church is an alternative society, a visible sign of the kingdom of God in a fallen world.

“We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ,” wrote Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Consequently, we no longer seek our salvation, our deliverance, our justification in ourselves but in Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup> We belong together not because of what we bring to the community, but because of who Christ is and what he has done for us. “The more genuine and the deeper our community becomes, the more will everything else between us recede, the more clearly and purely will Jesus Christ and his work become the one and only thing that is vital between us.”<sup>2</sup>

The psalmist’s delight in the people of God is set in contrast to “those who run after other gods” (Ps 16:4). The implication is that there is a tension between the faithful and the faithless running through the psalmist’s home culture. The noble people to whom the psalmist refers may be a

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<sup>1</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 21.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

minority among a syncretistic majority, who want the best of two worlds. They have no qualms about verbalizing their loyalty to Yahweh while pursuing pagan gods. They have hedged their bets. They want to honor the cultural gods as well as the god of their heritage. Libations of blood stand for costly sacrifices offered in a liturgical setting contradicting true worship. They see nothing wrong with bowing and sacrificing to the pagan gods as long as they respect Yahweh. In stark contrast, David declares, boldly and emphatically, that he will have nothing to do with this dangerous compromise. Those who set up idols alongside Yahweh are inviting disaster. He will not even mention the names of the pagan gods.

Following the giving of the Ten Commandments, Yahweh issued specific worship instructions: “Do not make any gods to be alongside me; do not make for yourselves gods of silver or gods of gold” (Exod 20:20). These worship instructions broadened the prohibition against idolatry. They ruled out any competing visualizations or existential experience that competed with absolute fidelity to Yahweh. We might have expected the command to say, “Do not make any gods in place of me,” or “instead of me,” but the command goes further. Idols can neither substitute for God, nor be placed alongside God. Those who use visual representations of God to make worship of Yahweh more accessible are put on notice that this is unacceptable.

It is the idolatry *alongside* God that is most troublesome. Pagans are expected to worship idols, but when those who follow the one, true and living God place something *alongside* God to make worship more exciting or more visceral, they expose an even greater problem than pagan idolatry. The “alongside” variety of idolatry is a far greater problem for us than we may wish to acknowledge. When we place something alongside God to make the gospel more exciting or more attractive, we say in effect, that Jesus and his sacrifice are not enough. We need a value-added gospel. When we place something alongside God, like sports or technology or work or success we compromise our commitment to Christ and invite disaster.

Technology is a form of soft idolatry that comes alongside authentic Christian devotion and competes for our devotion. Steve Jobs, an iconic figure in today’s techno-Tower of Babel, represents a twenty-first century quest for solidarity and salvation through technology. The people of Shinar are the ancient precursors to the modern inhabitants of Silicon Valley. Steve Jobs’ passionate drive for product perfection is a modern variation of “Come, let’s make bricks and bake them thoroughly.” Microchips and the Cloud are the modern equivalent to oven-baked bricks. What “gorilla glass” is to Apple, Shinar brick baking was to Babel. The human belief that innovative products meet not only physical needs but also satisfy spiritual needs dates back to the ancient times. The mesmerizing myth of wholeness through very cool, sexy, devices misses the reality of what our technology is doing to the self. Instantaneous connectivity substitutes for intimate community. Somewhat playfully Steve Jobs offered the iconic apple as the forbidden fruit able to make one wise. In his post-Christian myth Jobs flipped the story. Now, it is God who lies and the devil speaks truth. The serpent no longer deceives, but inspires: “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:5).

Andy Crouch's WSJ article, “Steve Jobs: The Secular Prophet,” came out the week Jobs died

(October 8, 2011). “That bitten apple was just one of Steve Jobs's many touches of genius, capturing the promise of technology in a single glance,” wrote Crouch. Jobs “turned Eve's apple, the symbol of fallen humankind, into a religious icon for true believers in technology.” Jobs was able to “to articulate a perfectly secular form of hope.” He was “the perfect evangelist because he had no competing source of hope.” “This is the gospel of a secular age,” writes Crouch. “It has the great virtue of being based only on what we can all perceive - it requires neither revelation nor dogma. And it promises nothing it cannot deliver - since all that is promised is the opportunity to live your own unique life, a hope that is manifestly realizable since it is offered by one who has so spectacularly succeeded by following his own ‘inner voice, heart and intuition.’” Steve Jobs married Eastern spirituality with Western materialism with the result that innovative products became the essence of salvation. Like the Tower of Babel our technology defines our hopes and dreams and promotes the myth of self-reliance. They make us who we are. Supposedly, we are saved from being “scattered over the face of the earth” by these ingenious devices.

Soft idolatry takes its toll. Fictitious gods that masquerade as “angels of light” come alongside and compete with true faith. They threaten to rob believers of their single-minded devotion and true dependence upon the Lord. The escapist salvation of the gods serves only to promote a false transcendence and grandiose efforts of human achievement. Yet however devious and deceptive their demonic attraction may be, the psalmist exhorts us to resist the gods. Our worship pastor intends to lead us by example. His one verse warning against suffering for the wrong reason by paying homage to our culture’s gods ought to hit home.

### *The Priesthood of All Believers*

*Lord, you alone are my portion and my cup;  
you make my lot secure.  
The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;  
surely I have a delightful inheritance.  
I will praise the Lord who counsels me;  
even at night my heart instructs me.  
I keep my eyes always on the Lord,  
With him at my right hand, I will not be shaken.*

Psalm 16:5-8

At the center of the psalm is a declaration, “the Lord is my portion.” This profound statement conveys a significance that eclipses the promise of the promised land. The psalmist’s language sends a telling signal. Phrases such as “my portion,” “my cup,” and “my lot,” coupled with “boundary lines,” “pleasant places,” and “a delightful inheritance” suggest the allocation of the promised land. The psalmist is the recipient of his allotted heritage – the beneficiary of his tribe’s physical property. But the description of this landed inheritance is a metaphor for King David’s personal relationship with Yahweh. It is not about the land at all. The psalmist is like the priestly Levites to whom the Lord said, “You will have no inheritance in their land, nor will you have any share among them; I am your share and your inheritance among the Israelites” (Num 18:20). The

Lord himself is the believer's everything, his portion, his destiny, his counsel, his all in all.

The fulfillment of the promised land in King David's relationship with Yahweh points forward to the believer's inheritance in Christ and the priesthood of all believers. The language of Psalm 16 serves as a type preparing the people of God for the redemptive trajectory fulfilled in Christ. This new reality will exchange the territorial, ethnic, and national identity of Israel for the worldwide Body of Christ drawn from every nation, tribe, people and language (Rev 7:9). In Christ we have a *living hope*, a *lasting inheritance*, and a *coming salvation through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead* (Pet 1:3-4). The apostle Peter encouraged believers to live into this new reality with confidence and joy. Christ's followers have an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading. This inheritance fulfills and transcends the covenant promises given to Israel. It is no longer tied to the land or to political autonomy. "The notion of a holy land is superseded by that of a holy community (1 Pet 2:4-10).<sup>3</sup> This is the inheritance Jesus promised when he said: "*Truly I tell you, no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields – along with persecutions – and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first*" (Mark 10:29-31).

The psalmist's single-minded devotion to Yahweh continues to be expressed in bold terms: "I will praise the Lord who counsels me . . . I keep my eyes always on the Lord." Echoes of Psalm 16 can be heard in Hebrews when the preacher exhorts believers to fix their eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of the faith, since they are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken (Heb 12:2, 28). The psalmist is an example to the believer of how to set apart Jesus Christ as Lord (1 Pet 3:15). Through constant contemplation of the Lord, David is "ever mindful of the Lord. He gives priority to the Lord in all his thoughts and actions."<sup>4</sup> "To set God before us," wrote Calvin, "is nothing else than to keep all our senses bound and captive, that they may not run out and go astray after any other object. . . . When we shall have thus turned our eyes towards him, the masks and illusions of this world will no longer deceive us."<sup>5</sup> We might say the Lord has his back; the psalmist said, "With him at my right hand, I will not be shaken" (Ps 16:8).

### *Resurrection Hope*

*Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices;  
my body will also rest secure,  
because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead,  
nor will you let your faithful one see decay.  
You make known to me the path of life;  
you will fill me with joy in your presence,  
with eternal pleasures at your right hand.*

Psalm 16:9-11

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<sup>3</sup> Elliott, *1 Peter*, 336.

<sup>4</sup> Ross, *Psalms*, 408.

<sup>5</sup> Calvin, *Psalms*, 228

David is glad inwardly and joyful outwardly. His tongue confesses his heart's song. He is confident that his life rests secure in the protection and providence of God. His confidence extends beyond the immediate crisis to the final question of life after death. "David knew, as all the saints have known, that God did not establish a covenant with him and provide for him and guide him throughout his life, only to abandon him at the moment of his greatest need, death."<sup>6</sup> The distinctive testimony of the psalm points beyond the immediate crisis and deliverance and expresses an ultimate resolution to the crisis of mortality. The powerful description, "You will not abandon me to the realm of the dead," goes well beyond getting out of intensive care. And the line, "You will not let your faithful one see decay," cannot be reduced to a positive prognosis. David's words "are extravagant for his own experience" and hint at a deeper hope than temporary healing and physical well-being.<sup>7</sup> There is of course deep gratitude for God's daily provision of health and material well-being, but there is something more going on here than "the provision of everyday needs."<sup>8</sup>

Resurrection hope pervades the New Testament understanding of Old Testament faith. The apostles had no trouble reading the Bible backwards in the light of the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus set the precedent. He challenged the Jewish religious leaders when he said, "Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God? . . . Now about the dead rising — have you not read in the Book of Moses, in the account of the burning bush, how God said to him, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken!" (Mark 12:24-27).

The apostles sought to avoid this narrow-minded religious skepticism. They were convinced that the risen Lord Jesus Christ had "destroyed death and [had] brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (2 Tim 1:10). This is why the apostle Peter quoted freely from Psalm 16:8-11 in his Pentecost sermon. Peter credited David with the eyes of faith that saw beyond the realm of death. Peter declared, "Seeing what was to come, he spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, that he was not abandoned to the realm of the dead, nor did his body see decay. God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are witnesses of it" (Acts 2:31-32).<sup>9</sup> The apostle Paul quoted from Psalm 16 in his synagogue sermon at Pisidian Antioch. He declared, "We tell you the good news: What God promised our ancestors he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. As it is written in the second Psalm: 'You are my son; today I have become your father.' God raised him from the dead so that he will never be subject to decay. As God has said, 'I will give you the holy and sure blessing promised to David' (Isa 55:3). So it is also stated elsewhere: 'You will not let your holy one see decay' (Ps 16:10, LXX). Now when David had served God's purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep; he was buried with his ancestors and his body decayed. But the one whom God raised from the dead did not decay" (Acts 13:32-37).

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<sup>6</sup> Ross, *Psalms*, 409.

<sup>7</sup> Ross, *Psalms*, 410.

<sup>8</sup> Goldingay, *Psalms*, 234.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Hays, *First Corinthians*, WJK, 1997, 256. Hays commenting on 1 Cor 15:4 writes, ". . . the Scriptures that point to the resurrection are probably those Psalms that praise God for deliverance of the righteous sufferer; for a clear example of this sort of exegesis in the early tradition, see the reading of Psalm 16 in Acts 2:24-32. The psalm is understood here as prefiguring 'the resurrection of the Christ' (Acts 2:31)."

David's confidence was based on faith in God's redemptive provision. His hoped for expectation was articulated memorably, "You will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand." What David says in Psalm 16 about life liberated from death corresponds to the later explicit New Testament truth of the hope of the resurrection. We believe he was inspired by the Holy Spirit to say what he said, but to what extent he envisioned how this resurrection hope would be realized we do not know. But what we can say is that "the later truth . . . is intimately related to the truth he did know; so that, in hitting out something like it, he was in touch with the very same reality in which the fuller truth is rooted." C. S. Lewis continues, "Reading his words in the light of the fuller truth and hearing it in them is an overtone or second meaning, we are not foisting on them something alien to his mind, an arbitrary addition. We are prolonging his meaning in a direction congenial to it. The basic reality behind his words and behind the full truth is one and the same."<sup>10</sup>

We believe that David's expectation was realized in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The saints who lived by faith before the time of Christ and his life, death, and resurrection, experience the same hope and realized eschatology that today's saints who live by faith experience. To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (2 Cor 5:8). When we leave this space and time continuum through physical death we enter into God's presence and his eternal present time. At his right hand all things past, present, and future are present to God in that moment. In that day, memory, experience, and hope will converge.<sup>11</sup> We are not subject to decay and we do not go down to the pit. "For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality." And we will say with the apostle Paul, "Death has been swallowed up in victory" (1 Cor 15:53, 54). For "if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you (Rom 8:11).

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<sup>10</sup> Lewis, Reflections on the Psalms, 102-103.

<sup>11</sup> Frederick Buechner, Telling Secrets. New York: HarperCollins, 1991. 35. Buechner writes, "Maybe the most sacred function of memory is just that: to render the distinction between past, present, and future ultimately meaningless; to enable us at some level of our being to inhabit that same eternity which it is said that God himself inhabits."