

This is an everyday, all-day prayer; a congregational prayer that is both personal and communal. The first line, “To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul” (Ps 25:1 ESV) is a personal response to the worship requirement posted in the previous psalm: “Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? 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” (Ps 24:3-4 ESV). Patrick Reardon sees the rest of Psalm 25 as commentary on this first verse. The whole psalm reflects on what it means to lift up our hearts to the Lord and is succinctly expressed in the ancient Latin liturgy, *Sursum corda*, “Hearts up!”¹

In concert together, Psalm 24, a creation psalm, and Psalm 25, a redemptive torah psalm, serve to re-orient the worshiping congregation. They re-fresh the worshiper by celebrating the foundational truth of the Lord’s sovereignty. They remind the faithful who remain vulnerable to shame and opposition that Yahweh is worthy of all trust and the true source of forgiveness, guidance, and deliverance.

Psalm 25, like Psalm 9 and 10, is an acrostic or alphabetical psalm. The order of the Hebrew alphabet guides the psalm but it is not perfectly followed. This poetic device helps, but does not dictate the outcome. “The alphabetical form suggests that the psalm is designed to cover the bases of prayer from A to Z.”² Goldingay suggests that it was designed as a model prayer in order to teach people to pray.³

Psalm 25 is a “teach us to pray” psalm. It weaves lament and confidence in a real world picture of faithfulness. David is fearful of being put to shame, threatened by his enemies, conscious of his own sinfulness, and overwhelmed by his distresses. But David’s lament is overshadowed by his unwavering confidence in the guidance, loyal love, goodness, and forgiveness of Yahweh.

Lift Up Your Soul

In you, Lord my God,
 I put my trust.
 I trust in you; do not let me be put to shame,
 nor let my enemies triumph over me.
 No one who hopes in you
 will ever be put to shame,
 but shame will come on those
 who are treacherous without cause.
 Show me your ways, Lord,
 teach me your paths.
 Guide me in your truth and teach me,
 for you are God my Savior,

¹ Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 47.

² Goldingay, *Psalms*, 367.

³ *Ibid.*, 368.

and my hope is in you all day long.
Remember, Lord, your great mercy and love,
for they are from old.
Do not remember the sins of my youth
and my rebellious ways;
according to your love remember me,
for you, Lord, are good.

Psalm 25:1-7

The antiphonal response between the people of God and the processional choir in Psalm 24 is answered personally in Psalm 25. The call, “Lift up your heads, you gates; lift them up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in,” serves as both conclusion and introduction. The call to lift up the city gates segues to a call to lift up one’s soul. “To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.” Fling open the ancient doors so the King of glory may come in and open up your heart to worship Yahweh your God.

The NIV explains in a word what lifting up our heart and soul to the Lord means: Trust. However the use of the metaphor, “lift up our soul,” gives us an image that is important. To anyone tempted to be downcast, the psalmist’s call to worship is an encouragement and challenge. One of the first things nurses and doctors want patients to do after surgery is to get up and get out of bed. They want you to rise up and walk. If you fall off a horse, you get right back up.

We have a responsibility when it comes to worship to get up, rise up, lift our souls to the Lord. Worship is not something done to us or for us. Worship is an act of trust in the Lord. We declare our dependence upon the Lord. The psalm begins with the same essential truth that Jesus began the Sermon on the Mount with, “Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3). This prayer while deeply personal is meant to be prayed in the company of God’s people.

In the previous psalm, David cites the alternative: if we don’t lift up our soul to the Lord, we lift it up to an idol (Ps 24:4). The danger of idolatry is real. We face tempting alternatives to trusting in the Lord. We may seek the worldly esteem of our professional colleagues and avoid the shame and vulnerability of our Christian identity. We may prefer the ideological and political bent of our social class and secular culture over the teaching of God’s word. We may prefer the strategies of self-deception over the hard work of confessional humility. Worship is a true counter-cultural move that defines trust in real, concrete, practical terms.

With that said, lifting up our soul to the Lord, is not arduous but joyous. We are empowered by God’s grace to draw near to God. God takes all the initiative, gives all the grace, and offers up all the redemption. In other words, all “the heavy lifting” belongs to God. On our side we have openness, repentance, acceptance, submission, trust, and faith. Christians pray Psalm 25 well aware that the way to faith and trust in Yahweh is costly. It involves Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Glorification. All this and more, including Pentecost, the Church, and the mission of God, empowers us to lift up our souls to the Lord. On our side, we have receptive

hearts, real confession, deep repentance, willed passivity, and cross-bearing, but God does the heavy lifting.

The psalmist knows that genuine trust in Yahweh generates enmity with the world. Rarely, do we gain the world's respect for trusting in the Lord with all our heart and leaning not on our own understanding. The world is not impressed with our submission to the word of God (Prov 3:5-6).

On the night that Jesus was betrayed he prayed to the Father on behalf of his disciples. He prayed, "I have given them your word and the world has hated them for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world" (John 17:13-14). William Temple wrote, "The world hates anything which it cannot understand which yet seems to contain a judgment of itself."⁴ John Chrysostom chalked it up to "the natural course of things," because Christian virtue "engenders hatred." "Let us not grieve," Chrysostom wrote, "for this is a mark of virtue." This is why Christ said, "If you were of the world, the world would love its own."⁵

Dale Bruner's reflection on the world's hate is especially helpful. The world's hate for the Word and the Church is "a great mystery" stemming from the fact that believers are rooted "in Jesus, his Father, the Paraclete Spirit, the Church, Holy Scripture, the major creeds, and world mission." The world finds these roots provocative and translates each one into something to be despised: "an otherworldly Teacher, an unreal God, a specious Spirit, a hypocritical Church, a misleading Scripture, dogmatic creeds, and an arrogant mission."⁶

The world is ingenious when it comes to shaming the Church and making Christians feel inferior. If we believe that homosexual practice is wrong, we're branded homophobic. If we are pro-life, we are judged as anti-women. If we share the gospel, we're accused of proselytizing. If we believe that Jesus is the only way to salvation, we are bigots. To be dishonored in this way is to be betrayed by people who for all practical purposes live as if there is no God (Ps 14:1).

When David says, "No one who hopes in you will ever be put to shame," he is doubling down on what it means to be a resilient saint. He is depending on the promises of God to face the pressures designed by his enemies to erode his confidence and weaken his faith in Yahweh. Against all these attacks he declares his trust in God's ultimate vindication and victory.

The psalmist's plea, "Show me your ways . . . Teach me your paths," finds its dynamic equivalent in the apostle Peter's admonition to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18). Worship heightens our felt need for understanding and insight. Spirituality and ethics go hand-in-hand. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus put a priority on visible righteousness – the kind of righteousness that the world needs to see – love instead of hate, purity instead of lust, honesty instead of dishonesty, reconciliation instead of retaliation, and prayer instead of revenge. Jesus emphasized the virtues that interface with the world before he discussed the hidden righteousness of prayer and fasting and giving. The psalmist is

⁴ Temple, *Readings in St. John's Gospel*, 322.

⁵ Chrysostom, *Homilies on John*, 302.

⁶ Bruner, *John*, 991.

challenging us to do the same.

If this is truly our prayer, “Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior,” we will earnestly give ourselves to the prayerful study, discussion, and practice of God’s word. We will not reduce the wisdom of God down to *Life’s Little Instruction Book*. Jackson Brown’s five hundred and eleven random one-liners may be a clever idea but reducing life to little proverbs is not what the psalmist had in mind. We need more wisdom than to be told, “Compliment three people every day,” or “Watch a sunrise at least once a year,” or “Remember other people’s birthdays.” Life is way too complicated for one line maxims.⁷ We need the wisdom of God.

This first section closes with the psalmist’s plea for forgiveness: “Do not *remember* the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways.” But he sets up his plea by praying, “*Remember*, Lord, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old.” And then immediately after his appeal, he pleads to be forgiven, “according to your love *remember* me, for you, Lord, are good.” His confessional scheme, “*remember. . . remember not. . . remember*” makes forgiveness dependent on the Lord’s great mercy. “The psalmist first establishes God’s own history of forgiveness and then seeks to participate in that history through the forgiveness of his own sins.”⁸

The particular sins he had in mind were the sins of his early adulthood. Worship has made him sensitive to old sins which he may have tried to forget or excuse or rationalize away. But after all these years, he remembers and the memory is painful. The British abolitionist William Wilberforce observed, “We tend to see only those things which we have recently fallen into, and overlook wrongs committed a while back. If recent, we will have deep remorse for such sins and vices. But after a few months or years, they leave but very faint traces in our recollection.”⁹ Thankfully, true moral sensitivity runs against the grain of our ethical amnesia.

C. S. Lewis argued that it was “indispensable to a real understanding of the Christian faith” for all believers to detect the “real inexcusable corruption under more and more of its complex disguises.” When a person is getting better, Lewis reasoned, “he understands more and more clearly the evil that is still in him,” but when a person is getting worse, “he understands his own badness less and less.”¹⁰ Detecting sin’s complex disguises is on an on-going challenge for every disciple of Christ. Diagnostics requires prayerful diligence and the wisdom of insightful spiritual directors. We tend to overlook wrongs committed some time ago. “We have a strange illusion,” wrote Lewis, “that mere time cancels sin.” We recount past sins of our youth with laughter, as if the sins themselves make us more interesting people. “But mere time does nothing either to the fact or to the guilt of a sin. The guilt is washed out not by time but by repentance and the blood of Christ.”¹¹

⁷ H. Jackson Brown, Jr., *Life’s Little Instruction Book* (Nashville, Tennessee: Rutledge Hill Press, 1991).

⁸ Craigie, *Psalms*, 219.

⁹ Wilberforce, *Real Christianity*, 114.

¹⁰ C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 58-59.

¹¹ Lewis, 61.

A Meditation

*Good and upright is the Lord,
therefore he instructs sinners in his ways.
He guides the humble in what is right
and teaches them his way.
All the ways of the Lord are loving and faithful
towards those who keep the demands of his covenant.
For the sake of your name, Lord,
forgive my iniquity, though it is great.
Who, then, are those who fear the Lord?
He will instruct them in the ways they should choose.
They will spend their days in prosperity,
and their descendants will inherit the land.
The Lord confides in those who fear him;
he makes his covenant known to them.*

Psalm 25:8-14

When we lift up our souls to the Lord and put our trust in the Lord who alone is good and upright, we have come to the right place; we have come to the right Person. The plea for forgiveness causes the psalmist to meditate on the goodness of the Lord, who “instructs sinners in his ways,” and “guides the humble in what is right,” and “teaches them his ways.” The request for forgiveness prompts a meditation on the Lord’s loving and faithful investment in his people.

If the psalmist had been tempted in the past to conceal or excuse his old sins, he admits that the Lord has withheld nothing from him. The Lord has been loving and faithful in all his ways. In the middle of a deeply personal psalm the psalmist realizes that what is true for him is true for all the Lord’s people. The Lord in his mercy puts his own name on the line and stands ready to instruct, guide, teach, bless, and confide in those who hear him. The bottom line is this: the Lord is good and upright and makes his covenant known to those who trust in him.

David’s meditation corresponds with the apostle’s Paul description of “God’s chosen people,” as “holy and dearly loved.” They are encouraged to clothe themselves with “compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.” Forgiveness is the key to their life in Christ and their life together. “Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity” (Col 3:12-14).

The meditation in the middle of Psalm 25 can be likened to a synopsis of an effective and faithful sermon (Ps 25:8-14). The message is bracketed by the opening and closing first person prayers (Ps 25:1-7; 15-22). This structure reminds me of a faithful pastor who although embattled and struggling delivers an edifying sermon to the congregation. The threats of his enemies and the anguish of his heart do not interfere with preaching the truth of the Lord’s goodness and his loving and faithful ways. Of course what is said here about the pastor relates as well to a parent or a friend or any believer who chooses to face their personal trial with God and strengthen their

public witness. This makes the meditation itself an act of faithfulness. The person who lifts up their soul to the Lord is able to put aside their personal anguish and declare the faithfulness of the Lord.

Hope in the Lord

*My eyes are ever on the Lord,
for only he will release my feet from the snare.
Turn to me and be gracious to me,
for I am lonely and afflicted.
Relieve the troubles of my heart
and free me from my anguish.
Look on my affliction and my distress
and take away all my sins.
See how numerous are my enemies
and how fiercely they hate me!
Guard my life and rescue me;
do not let me be put to shame,
for I take refuge in you.
May integrity and uprightness protect me,
because my hope, Lord, is in you.*

*Deliver Israel, O God,
from all her troubles!*
Psalm 25:15-22

The middle section of the psalm concludes confidently: “The Lord confides in those who fear him; he makes his covenant known to them.” But by Sunday night or Monday morning whatever anguish or distress expressed in the first seven verses has returned with a vengeance. The psalmist feels trapped, lonely, afflicted, and hated. Dependence upon the Lord is not so much a good choice or a calculated move, but a desperate act of faith. For the psalmist there is no one else to turn to but God. Only the Lord can provide deliverance.

With the line, “My eyes are ever on the Lord” (Ps 25:15), the psalm returns to the meaning of the opening line, “To you, Yahweh, I lift up my soul” (Ps 25:1). True spirituality explores the depths of what it means to trust in the Lord. The true worshiper acknowledges that there is no other place to find relief from “the troubles of my heart,” and there is no other place to find freedom from “all my sins” than the Lord. Only the Lord guards our lives, rescues our souls, shields us from shame, and protects us from the evil one.

David concludes, “May integrity and uprightness protect me, because my hope, Lord, is in you.” Are these attributes of integrity and uprightness given to the psalmist by God, or are they the “personified attributes of Yhwh?”¹² Is David claiming “his penitent state and determination to

¹² Goldingay, Psalms, 377.

obey God”¹³ or is he testifying to Yahweh’s integrity? Either way the attributes of integrity and uprightness belong to God and David clings to them as God’s protection against the troubles of his heart and the hatred of his enemies. Delitzsch writes, “These two radical virtues (see Job 1:1), he desires to have as guardians on his way which is perilous not only by reason of outward foes, but also on account of his sinfulness.”¹⁴ There can be little doubt that in the mind of the psalmist integrity and uprightness are his earnest desire, in a way that anticipates Jesus’ imperative, “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things shall be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:33) and his greatest blessing, in a way that anticipates God’s abundant provision of grace in the gift of righteousness through Jesus Christ (Rom 5:17).

The postscript breaks with the alphabetical pattern and ends the psalm with a shout: “Deliver Israel, O God, from all their troubles!” The final word is a plea for all the people of God. It is reminiscent of the meditation in the middle of the psalm. The personal pleas for guidance, protection, forgiveness, and redemption are shared by the entire Church, not just the individual. Calvin admonished that whenever we bewail our “private miseries and trials,” we should extend our desires and prayers to the whole Church.”¹⁵

¹³ Craigie, Psalms. 221.

¹⁴ Delitzsch, Psalms, 347.

¹⁵ Calvin, Psalms. 436.