

In this sequence of royal-worship psalms (Psalms 24-28), David focuses on the house of the Lord. We begin with a processional psalm (Psalm 24) that describes the true worshiper and pictures the festive throng praising the King of glory. The choral call to lift up the city gates turns personal when David declares, “To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul” (Ps 25:1). Anticipation turns to expectation when the psalmist explores the believer’s personal need for guidance, forgiveness, and deliverance. Psalm 26 profiles the true worshiper who loves the Lord’s house and welcomes personal scrutiny and examination. Grace-based worship requires clean hands and a pure heart, moral integrity, a teachable spirit, and trust in the Lord. When we arrive at the house of the Lord we are praising God in “the great congregation.” We have entered the external city gates and we have passed through the existential “liturgy at the gate.” We have come into the sanctuary, the house of the Lord, eager to express our confidence in the Lord.

Dwelling in the house of the Lord is an important New Testament theme as well. The author of Hebrews encouraged the people of God to fix their thoughts on Jesus, because Jesus was “worthy of greater honor than Moses.” He explained that “Moses was faithful as a servant in all God’s house. . . . But Christ is faithful as the Son over God’s house.” We are at home with the Lord, he encouraged, “if indeed we hold firmly to our confidence and the hope in which we glory” (Heb 3:1-6). Psalm 27 corresponds to the message of Hebrews by pointing forward to a lasting confidence in Christ. We have “confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water” (Heb 10:19-22). Confidence is not just an attitude but a way of life lived in anticipation of God’s great reward in heaven.

Scholars draw attention to the psalm’s two distinct halves. Some have suggested that Psalm 27 was originally two psalms: a psalm of confidence (Ps 27:1-6) and a psalm of lament (Ps 27:7-14). However, from a pastoral perspective we can appreciate the psalmist’s weave of significant themes and the wisdom of linking confidence and lament in a psalm that ends on a resounding note of confidence in the Lord. “To gaze upon the beauty of the Lord,” and to “Seek his face,” unite both halves of the psalm. Translations can obscure this weave by using different words for the same Hebrew word. Peter Craigie identifies the following words that knit the psalm together: “salvation” (Ps 27:1,9); “opponent” (Ps 27:2,12); “heart” (Ps 27:3,8,14); “rise” (Ps 27:3,12); “seek” (Ps 27:4,8); and “life” (Ps 27:4,13).¹ Psalm 27:1-6 picks up where Psalm 26 concludes. The worshiper’s bold affirmation of unwavering faith is declared “in the great congregation” for all to hear. Psalm 27:7-13 echoes the conclusion of Psalm 25:15-22. Prayer expresses the besieged psalmist’s desperate need for God. We discover that not only does Psalm 27 weave together confidence and lament but the sequence of royal-worship psalms unites these themes.

¹ Craigie, *Psalms*, 231.

To Gaze Upon the Beauty of the Lord

*The Lord is my light and my salvation –
whom shall I fear?*

*The Lord is the stronghold of my life –
of whom shall I be afraid?*

*When the wicked advance against me
to devour me,*

*it is my enemies and my foes
who stumble and fall.*

*Though an army besiege me,
my heart will not fear;
though war break out against me,
even then I will be confident.*

*One thing I ask from the Lord,
this only do I seek:
that I may dwell in the house of the Lord
all the days of my life,
to gaze on the beauty of the Lord
and to seek him in his temple.*

*For in the day of trouble
he will keep me safe in his dwelling;
he will hide me in the shelter of his sacred tent
and set me high upon a rock.*

*Then my head will be exalted
above the enemies who surround me;
at his sacred tent I will sacrifice with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make music to the Lord.*

Psalm 27:1-6

Two rhetorical questions defiantly open the psalm and challenge any reason to fear. The opening declaration of trust in Yahweh echoes throughout the psalms. It is how worship was meant to begin. Rather than begin with an account of his troubles or a description of his enemies, David begins with an affirmation of confidence in God – “The Lord is my light and my salvation.” David begins with a personal statement of faith and trust in his God. Three metaphors, light, salvation, and stronghold, open up a dynamic picture of God’s power to save. The power of these metaphors grows as God reveals himself through salvation history until they find their fulfillment in Jesus Christ. The defiant question of “whom shall I fear,” finds its exclamation mark in the silence that follows. Augustine puts the first line in his own words, “Go on! Find someone more powerful, and be afraid! I belong so thoroughly to the most powerful one of all...that he both

enlightens me and saves me; I shall fear no one except him.”²

“The Lord is my light” invokes a flood of biblical allusions. The metaphor is loaded with meaning, drawing Christian worship back to the beginning when God commanded, “Let there be light” (Gen 1:3) and propelling the believer into the future when the garden city of God will have no need of the sun or the moon because “God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp” (Rev 21:23). “Light” recalls the Exodus and the pillar of fire to give the people light (Exodus 13:21; Ps 78:14) and foreshadows the prophet Isaiah’s messianic expectation, “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned” (Isa 9:2). “Light” is associated with the coming of the Messiah (Ps 118:27) and the apostles bring the metaphor to a climax. “In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind,” wrote the apostle John. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” Jesus Christ is “the true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world” (John 1:4-5, 9).

David’s confident declaration, “The Lord is my salvation (savior),” defines the object of his trust and explains the reason he has no fear. Since the Lord is his light, his salvation, and his stronghold, he is able to say, “So, with him on my side I’m fearless, afraid of no one and nothing” (Ps 27:1 MSG). Calvin drew out the pastoral implications of David’s confidence in God’s protection.

“Let us learn, therefore, to put such a value on God’s power to protect us as to put to flight all our fears. Not that the minds of the faithful can, by reason of the infirmity of the flesh, be at all times entirely devoid of fear; but immediately recovering courage, let us, from the high tower of our confidence, look down upon all our dangers with contempt.”³

The psalmist envisioned such confidence in God’s illuminating joy, invincible deliverance, and impenetrable refuge, that he expected the great congregation to join him in extolling the power of God, “that it would ravish our hearts with admiration” for God.⁴ In the *light* of Jesus Christ’s *salvation* and *refuge* believers deepen and extend this confidence. “If God be for us,” wrote the apostle Paul, “who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? . . . Nothing . . . will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:31-39).

David frames his confidence in the Lord by describing three worse case scenarios. The description parallels the three-fold shield that God has set against his various fears.⁵ Against the light, evildoers attack like wild animals seeking to devour his flesh. But in the darkness they will only stumble and fall. Against salvation, even a besieging army cannot prevail. David’s heart will not fail. Against God’s stronghold, warriors wage war, but to no avail. His trust will not falter. Against seemingly impossible odds, David is confident in the Lord. Calvin writes, “Weighing, as

² St. Augustine, *Exposition of the Psalms: 1-32*, trans. Maria Boulding; ed. John E. Rotelle *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* (New York: New City, 2000), 275.

³ Calvin, *Psalms*, 451.

⁴ Calvin, *Psalms*, 451.

⁵ Calvin, *Psalms* 450.

it were, in scales the whole power of earth and hell, David accounts it all lighter than a feather, and considers God alone as far outweighing the whole.”⁶

The intensity of David’s description of evil is matched, if not exceeded in the New Testament. The apostle Paul wrote, “Be strong in the Lord and his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Eph 6:10-12). Peter wrote, “Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers and sisters throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings” (1 Peter 5:8-9).

David adds a fourth metaphor, *the house of the Lord*, to his picture of confidence. He transitions from military language with its focus on protection and deliverance to relational and kinship language. The “house” is a metaphor for the presence of God. David does not minimize the need for security and salvation, but he longs for the presence of God. He is certain that Yahweh will fight for him but he cries out for Yahweh’s companionship. What good is salvation, if there is no Savior? What benefit physical protection, if the presence of God is denied. Communion with Yahweh is the prize, not triumph over the enemy. David’s desire to dwell in the house of the Lord anticipates the coming of the Messiah and the Incarnation of God. We are able to dwell in God’s presence because, “The Word was made flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). The risen Lord Jesus underscored the intimacy of the house of the Lord when he said, “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will go in and eat with him, and he with me” (Rev 3:20).

“The psalmist makes one of the most single-minded statements of purpose to be found anywhere in the Old Testament,” writes Peter Craigie. He adds, “The expression ‘one thing I have asked’ has no parallels among the biblical numerical sayings.”⁷ This is King David’s equivalent to the apostle Paul’s statement, “I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (Phil 3:8). David reminds us of Jesus’s story of the man who found a treasure hidden in a field and he sold everything he had to buy the field. He is like the merchant who sold everything to buy the pearl of great value (Matthew 13:44-46). David’s passion for the presence of God is reflected in Mary sitting at the feet of Jesus listening. Jesus commended her for choosing the one thing needed most and “it will not be taken away from her” (Luke 10:42).

David’s desire “to dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of his life” is not literal in a physical or temporal sense. He’s not asking to become a Levitical priest and work in the tabernacle for the rest of his life. The “house” to which he refers is not a four-walled structure nor an elaborate cathedral. It is a spiritual reality. David’s passion was to live “permanently in

⁶ Calvin, Psalms 451.

⁷ Craigie, Psalms, 232.

God's presence."⁸ We see this in the New Testament when the apostles elaborated on the images and metaphors that describe the community of God's people. They had a sense of place, not in a facility but in the household of faith. There was no outward temple or tall steeple to symbolize their place, but as they met together they experienced the 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 church misleads believers when it states or implies that single-minded devotion belongs to a priestly class. All believers are called to this "one thing." We are all meant to "abide" and "make our home" with Jesus (John 15). We are all called to take up our cross and follow Jesus. We are all called to seek first his kingdom and his righteousness (Matthew 6:33).

David's desire "to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord" and "to seek him in his temple" is radically different from pagan religious customs "in which people gazed on the beautiful statues of their gods."⁹ The whole Hebrew concept of beauty differed from the surrounding cultures. Israel's aesthetics involved "the splendor of a system of relationships." Beauty is to be found in "the totality of meaning of the created order, which for God's people was immediately evident in the whole and in the art." William Dryness writes, "Clearly the enjoyment of beauty was integrated into the whole experience of worship. There the believer joined the congregation in rejoicing before the Lord, an experience of worship. And its temporal setting (the Sabbath) may be the closest approximation to what we might call today an aesthetic experience, but it was something more. It was a timeless present in which the worshiper enjoyed his or her liberty by sharing in the rest that God enjoyed after creation (Ps.46:10). . . . The whole experience is characterized as lovely."¹⁰ For David it was the beauty of a God-centered life, the integration of meaning with every aspect of living, as opposed to a visual object to look at. Loveliness and beauty are conveyed in the Exodus, the City of Zion, and the Day of the Lord. Dryness observes, "It is difficult for us to imagine such a grand harmony and wholeness, for we have gotten out of the habit of seeing things as a whole. . . . We no longer understand the role beauty properly ought to play in our fragmented lives."¹¹

The primary aesthetic experience of worship was never meant to be in the spectacle but in the relationships. "I want to know Christ" is the inspiration (Phil 3:10). The vestments of New Testament worship are "compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience." The fragrance of Christian worship is forgiveness: "Forgive as the Lord forgave you." The joy of worship is the peace of Christ ruling in our hearts. The truth of worship is the word of Christ dwelling in us richly. The sound of worship is singing "psalms, hymns, and songs of praise with gratitude in [our] hearts to the Lord" (Col 3:12-17).

The beauty of worship is related to a host of benefits including physical wellness, mental health, spiritual maturity, and social competence. Worship saves us from living dysfunctional and disoriented lives. Eugene Peterson writes,

"Failure to worship consigns us to a life of spasms and jerks, at the mercy of every advertisement, every seduction, every siren. Without worship we live manipulated

⁸ Craigie, Psalms, 232.

⁹ Ross, Psalms, 628.

¹⁰ William Dryness, "Aesthetics in the Old Testament: Beauty in Context," JETS 28/4 Dec.85:421-432.

¹¹ Dryness, Aesthetics, confirm exact page.

and manipulating lives. We move in either frightened panic or deluded lethargy as we are, in turn, alarmed by spectres and soothed by placebos. If there is no center, there is no circumference. People who do not worship are swept into a vast restlessness, epidemic in the world, with no steady direction and no sustaining purpose. . . . People seek easy and instant centering. . . . Life lurches from one partial satisfaction to another, interrupted by ditches of disappointment. Motion is fueled by the successive illusions that purchasing this wardrobe, driving that car, eating this meal, drinking that beverage will center life and give coherence.”¹²

The purity of heart that wills one thing brings life into focus, controlling our fears, purifying our hopes, directing our energies, and calming our souls. For in the “day of trouble,” we will be kept safe in his dwelling, hidden in the shelter of his sacred tent and set high upon a rock. Or, as Peterson paraphrases verse six: “God holds me head and shoulders above all who try to pull me down. I’m headed for his place to offer anthems that will raise the roof! Already I’m singing God-songs; I’m making music to God” (Ps 27:6 MSG).

The purity of heart to will one thing is the secret behind David’s confidence in the Lord. Soren Kierkegaard expressed this single-minded passion in a prayer:

“So may Thou give to the intellect, wisdom to comprehend the one thing;
to the heart, sincerity to receive this understanding;
to the will, purity that wills one thing;
amid distractions, concentration to will one thing;
in suffering, patience to will one thing.
Oh, Thou that giveth both the beginning and the completion,
may Thou early, at the dawn of day,
give to the young person the resolution to will one thing.
As the day wanes, may Thou give to the old person,
a renewed remembrance of his or her first resolution,
that the first may like the last, the last like the first,
in possession of a life that has willed one thing.”¹³

Seek his face!

Hear my voice when I call, Lord;
be merciful to me and answer me.
My heart says of you, “Seek his face!”
Your face, Lord, I will seek.
Do not hide your face from me,
do not turn your servant away in anger;
you have been my helper.

¹² Eugene H. Peterson, *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 60.

¹³ Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart to Will One Thing*, 31.

Do not hide your face from me,
do not turn your servant away in anger;
you have been my helper.
Do not reject me or forsake me,
God my Savior.
Though my father and mother forsake me,
the Lord will receive me.
Teach me your way, Lord;
lead me in a straight path because of my oppressors.
Do not turn me over to the desire of my foes,
for false witnesses rise up against me,
spouting malicious accusations.

I will remain confident of this:
I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.
Wait for the Lord;
be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord.

Psalm 27:7-14

David's prayer seems to come to an end on a note of praise, "I will sing and make music to the Lord" (Ps 27:6). But the lament that follows is certainly true to our experience of life. David has spoken of the Lord with a heartfelt sense of trust and devotion, but now he cries out to the Lord. He shifts from personal testimony to passionate supplication. "Hear my voice when I call, O Lord; be merciful to me and answer me." He has been leading us in worship, now he cries out for himself. "My heart says of you, 'Seek his face!' Your face, Lord, I will seek. Do not hide your face from me, do not turn your servant away in anger; you have been my helper. Do not reject me or forsake me, O God my Savior."

David's spirituality matches his theology. His understanding of God and his blessings calls for a face-to-face encounter. Contemplation invokes the need for conversation. "One thing I ask," moves the psalmist to pray, "Hear my voice when I call, Lord." The metaphor of the house of the Lord in the first half corresponds to David seeking the face of the Lord in the second half, "My heart says of you, 'Seek his face!'" David's psalm of confidence brings together understanding and experience, melding explanation and expression. He longs for the immediacy of God's presence, the intimacy of God's companionship, the protection of God's guidance, and the assurance of God's deliverance. David's passionate prayer assumes that the "one thing" is about everything that really matters.

David's passion for God reminds me of a child's uninhibited joy. When our daughter was two she greeted me with such exuberance. After a long day at work and a forty minute drive through city traffic, my home coming was celebrated by an ecstatic two-year-old. Her face beaming, her arms waving, and her gleeful voice announcing to the world that I was home. Her two older brothers were somewhat more restrained! The utter excitement of a two-year-old quickly passes but there is something evocative about the enthusiasm. Expressionless Christianity is surely a

contradiction in terms. David is like an ecstatic two-year-old yearning for the impact of God's presence and the experience of God's beauty.

One February, on a particularly frigid Sunday morning in Toronto we arrived at church to find the sanctuary ice cold. In the middle of the night the furnace broke down. We had no heat. It was so cold you could see your breath. Since our small gym on a lower level seemed warmer we decided to have our worship service there. Everyone pitched in, moving chairs, gathering up hymn books, and setting up for worship. In spite of cement block walls, the concrete floor, and creaky wooden chairs, we were eager to worship God. There was a sense of expectation. The small inconvenience heightened our determination to sing out the hymns and listen to the sermon more carefully. We were all bundled up in winter coats but you wouldn't know by how we entered into worship that day. The immediacy of God's presence was felt. We were there "to gaze on the beauty of the Lord," and to help one another "Seek his face!"

Augustine, in his sermon *On the Pure Love of God*, has God proposing to make a deal:

"I will give you anything you want. You can possess the whole world. Nothing will be impossible for you. You will have infinite power. Nothing will be a sin, nothing forbidden. You will never die, never have pain, never have anything you do not want and always have anything you do want--except for just one thing: you will never see my face."

"Would you take that deal?" Augustine wonders. "If not, you have the pure love of God. For look what you did: you gave up the world, and more – all possible worlds, all imagined worlds, all desired worlds – just for God." Augustine asks, "Did a chill arise in your heart when you heard the words 'you will never see my face'? That chill is the most precious thing in you; that is the pure love of God."¹⁴

Everything David says supports his single minded devotion to God and his yearning for the immediacy of God's companionship. Knowing God is the primary relationship from which all other relationships depend. This is the one relationship he cannot live without. He needs the Lord emotionally and ethically. "Teach me your way, Lord; lead me in a straight path. . ." Four "do nots" underscore this exclusive truth. Do not hide your face from me. Do not turn your servant away in anger. Do not reject me or forsake me. Do not turn me over to my foes. He even says that if he is rejected by his parents, "the Lord will receive me." Jesus gave this a surprising twist when he said, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters – yes, even their own life – such a person cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26).

Several years ago one of our church members wrote to me about her experience in our church in San Diego. She started her letter with Psalm 27:10, "Though my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will receive me." She explained how she had grown up in a mean-spirited, negative home environment. She identified with those who have felt forsaken by father or mother. "Even

¹⁴ Peter Kreeft, *Three Philosophies of Life: Ecclesiastes, Job, Song of Songs*. Ignatius Press, 2016. 94-95.

as adults,” she said, “the pain may linger. But God can take that place in our lives, fill that void, and heal that hurt. He can direct us to adults who may take the role of father and mother for us. His love is sufficient for all our needs.”

Her parents made life more difficult by wrapping up their twisted and negative attitudes “in their brand of Christianity.” Over time she absorbed their negative and condemning attitude, which made it extremely difficult for her to relate and find her place in the Body of Christ. But because of God’s help, she has slowly overcome this deeply rooted judgmental attitude. She concluded her letter with these words, “So many people in this church have been so loving, caring and kind to me. Their behavior is truly Christ-like. Because of my fellow church members, I am slowly letting down the walls I’ve built around myself over the years. Please continue to pray for me.”

For David the dangers of this world that threaten to undo him are not to be compared to the horror of the absence of God. The one thing he cannot face is God’s abandonment, and he is confident he never will. Every believer’s security rests on the same ground. Those who have been in the faith for years are no more secure than those who have come to Christ recently. Whether we are young or old in the faith our security rests in God alone. The dangers are real and we need the Lord’s protection.

Our faith cannot be in the third person. It cannot be filtered through an institution. Knowing God cannot be reduced to a vague abstraction or found in a set of principles for living. David’s devotional intensity is a sign of his personal relationship with God. His confidence persists in spite of false witnesses and violent threats. If David could pray, “I am still confident of this: I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.” from his position a millennium before the coming of Jesus Christ, can we not pray this even more boldly after the coming of Christ? What greater goodness could be seen in the land of the living than the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Yet, like David we heed the admonition, “Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord.” From our position two millennium after the coming of Jesus Christ, we wait for the Lord’s return. We remember what the apostle Peter said, “Do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).