

Psalm 25 - Studies in the Psalms

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Psalm 25 is one of nine acrostic or alphabetic psalms (Ps. 9, 10, 34, 37, 111, 112, 119, 145; cf. Prov. 31:10-31; Lam.). Each verse begins with one of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. To express the idea in English, the first verse begins with "A," the second with "B," and so forth. Psalm 25 does not follow this pattern perfectly. It omits a couple of letters, misplaces one letter, and one letter is repeated (verses 18-19). Whether some psalms were written in the acrostic format as a memory aid or for some other reason, it reveals a tremendous poetic talent by the psalmists. It also would suggest that they were very precise and careful about their works of devotion as they expressed their praise to God in song.

What is interesting about Psalm 25, though, is that some of the same departures from a perfect acrostic pattern are also found in Psalm 34. This has led many scholars to conclude that both psalms were written by the same author and that there is some connection between them. Kirkpatrick suggests that Psalm 25 is a prayer and Psalm 34 is a thanksgiving for the answer to that prayer (A. F. Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms*, Cambridge, 1930, I, 132).

Because of the need to start each line with a word for the next letter in the alphabet, the acrostic psalms are not always the easiest to outline. Instead of falling into a rigid, consistent structure, sometimes the key themes are scattered throughout the psalm. That would be somewhat true of Psalm 25. The chief ideas of Psalm 25 are prayers for protection, guidance, pardon and deliverance mixed with "reflections on the character of God" (Ibid., I, 131).

A historical event in the life of an individual like David or in the nation of Israel is often behind many of the psalms. There is no historical event, though, which can be linked to Psalm 25. The beauty of this is that this psalm is all the more applicable to all people of all generations who can relate to the feelings of David, or whoever the author might be. Throughout this majestic psalm, the reader is shown reverent ways to pray to God and pious ways to think about God.

First, the psalmist prays for protection in the face of enemies who want to triumph over him. The psalmist puts his trust in God's just governing of this world (Ps. 25:1-3). At the end of the psalm the psalmist again appeals for protection from enemies (Ps. 25:17-20).

Second, the psalmist prays for guidance in a spirit of humility: "Show me your ways, O LORD, teach me your paths; guide me in your truth and teach me" (Ps. 25:4-5).

Third, the psalmist prays for pardon. "For the sake of your name, O LORD, forgive my iniquity, though it is great (Ps. 25:14). "Take away all my sins" (Ps. 25:18).

Fourth, the psalmist appeals to God for deliverance. "Look upon my affliction and my distress. . . . Guard my life and rescue me; let me not be put to shame, for I take refuge in you" (Ps. 25:18, 20).

The reason the psalmist can make these kinds of appeals to God is because of the kind of God to whom the psalmist is praying. The doctrine or theology of God in this psalm is of the highest order. This psalm is a confession of faith and trust in God's absolute perfection. "Good and

upright is the LORD. . . . All the ways of the LORD are loving and faithful" (Ps. 25:8, 10). The psalmist knows that human merit will not give him victory in his prayers. Redemption will come only because God is a merciful and gracious God (Ps. 25:6, 16). The psalmist is extremely humble and contrite in appealing to God for forgiveness. He does make one brief appeal to his "integrity and uprightness" (Ps. 25:21). After all, we do have obligations to be obedient to God (Ps. 25:10). Nevertheless, the psalmist's emphasis is on his own sinfulness and unworthiness in contrast to God's infinite perfection in which he hopes. "Remember not the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways; according to your love remember me, for you are good, O LORD" (Ps. 25:7).

The psalmist knows that God will forgive, not primarily because of who the psalmist is as a human being, but because of who God is in his inner being, which is what is meant by the "name" of God. "For the sake of your name, O LORD, forgive my iniquity, though it is great" (Ps. 25:11). This is the way God has always been. God's mercy and love "are from of old" (Ps. 25:6). God's basic nature and holy character are unchangeable (Mal. 3:6; Jas. 3:27). Therefore, today we can trust in God in the exact same way as the psalmist did long ago. What this means is that "a man must live by the help of God, not by his wits" (Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, IVP, 116). It is because of the great trust that the psalmist has in God's goodness and moral perfection that this psalm might be called a "prayer of confidence" (Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, WBC, Waco, TX, 217).

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God does not leave mankind in the dark about what is expected of us. The psalmist appeals to God to teach him his ways and paths (Ps. 25:4). "Guide me in your truth and teach me," he writes (Ps. 25:5). God "instructs sinners in his ways" (Ps. 25:8). "He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way" (Ps. 25:9). If people will fear God, he will instruct them "in the way chosen" for them (Ps. 25:12). This is similar to the teaching of the apostle Peter: "He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9).

Not only does the psalmist appeal to the moral perfection of God and God's desire for mankind to know his will, but also he highlights God's sovereign power. Only God is able to deliver the psalmist from the difficult situation with which he is surrounded (Ps. 25:15). There is only one hope, one salvation, and one possible savior—the God of Israel. That is why the psalmist says, "I take refuge in you. . . . My hope is in you" (Ps. 25:20, 21). He expresses the conviction that "No one whose hope is in [God] will ever be put to shame" (Ps. 25:3).

Psalm 25 is a powerful prayer of piety and devotion which can serve as a model for our prayers to God today. Let us approach God in the same spirit of humility and reverence as the psalmist did, believing in God's absolute goodness and sovereignty, as we make our requests known to him.