

## **A PSALM FOR THE PURE IN HEART**

### **Psalm 26**

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I've called this psalm by two titles. It depends on how you use it what title you attach to it. It could be called "The Psalm for the Pure in Heart." Or it can be called "The Psalm of the Pharisee." Remember Jesus' story in the gospel about the Pharisee, who stood up and said, "God, I thank You that I'm not like other people." So what you call this psalm depends upon your attitude when you pray it. And how you project yourself to God and to other people.

What if I stood up on Sunday morning and said before the congregation, "Vindicate me, O LORD, for I have led a blameless life; I have trusted in the LORD without wavering. Test me, O LORD, and try me, examine my heart and my mind; for your love is ever before me, and I walk continually in your truth" (Psalm 26:1-3, NIV). Anybody here a candidate to pray that prayer? You will be by the time this evening is over. "I do not sit with deceitful men, nor do I consort with hypocrites; I abhor the assembly of evildoers and refuse to sit with the wicked. I wash my hands in innocence, and go about your altar, O LORD, proclaiming aloud your praise and telling of all your wonderful deeds. I love the house where you live, O LORD, the place where your glory dwells. Do not take away my soul along with sinners, my life with bloodthirsty men, in whose hands are wicked schemes, whose right hands are full of bribes. But I lead a blameless life; redeem me and be merciful to me. My feet stand on level ground; in the great assembly I will praise the LORD" (Psalm 26:4-12, NIV).

One of the things I love about going sequentially through Scripture is there is probably some part of Scripture I'd never look at if I didn't go through it sequentially. I'd pick more popular themes. I certainly wouldn't tackle anything that seemed initially to be difficult to understand or apply

## **A PSALM FOR THE PURE IN HEART**

### **Psalm 26**

within the concept of New Testament truths. I think Psalm 26 is a little bit like that. One of the neat things about our slowly going through the psalms is that by the time we're done we're going to have a vocabulary of prayer for practically every meaningful event in our life.

I'm doing this series probably more for me than I am for you. I've lived all these years of my Christian life and really never taken the time to spend four to six hours of study on each individual psalm. You take a course in seminary, "Survey of the Old Testament," and in two days you're supposed to know the psalms. Just reading the psalms without having the help of people who have studied it and commentaries sometimes stuff flies right over you. I'd like to have an added vocabulary in my prayer time and my worship to the Lord so I'm not just free-forming prayer. That I can anchor praying out of the psalms.

One of the things I'm trying to do is to link psalms with previous psalms so that we pick up threads of thought as we go along. This psalm bears a strong resemblance to both Psalm 15 and Psalm 24. Those two psalms are psalms that are used by a person getting ready to worship.

Psalm 15 asks the question, "LORD, who may dwell in Your sanctuary? Who may live on Your holy hill?" The answer comes back, the person who walks in moral integrity and righteousness. That's the person who can go up on the temple mount and worship the Lord. Psalm 24:3-4 asks the same kind of question "Who may ascend the hill of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place? The person who has a pure heart."

This psalm picks up those same threads of thought. Psalm 26, unlike Psalms 15 and 24, doesn't ask the specific question "Who may dwell in Your sanctuary? Who may go up to Your hill?" But it is clear by a careful reading of this psalm that what is involved in this psalm is a worshipper getting ready to go to worship at the temple. Psalm 26:6 says, "I wash my hands in innocence, and go about your altar, O LORD" (NIV). In the Bible time this is written there is only one altar.

## **A PSALM FOR THE PURE IN HEART**

### **Psalm 26**

It's the altar on the temple mount. Verse 8 links it to a temple psalm as well. "I love the house where you live, O LORD, the place where your glory dwells" (NIV). Verse 12 also is a link to the temple. "My feet stand on level ground; in the great assembly I will praise the LORD" (NIV). The psalmist is thinking about going up there and worshipping the Lord and realizing that is an auspicious kind of occasion that one ought to make preparation for worship of the Lord.

There's some commentators looking at Psalm 26 that say that this psalm is inappropriate for Christian worship. This is the kind of psalm that rings with the Phariseeism that Jesus condemned when the Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: "God, I thank You that I'm not like all other evil men...I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get" (Luke 18:11-12). The spirit of that praying, the spirit of that Pharisee is based on language coming right out of this psalm. "LORD, vindicate me. I've lived a blameless life. I've trusted in the LORD without wavering. I abhor the evil doers and I refuse to sit with the wicked." (Psalm 26:1,5). This language of prayer is very similar to the kind of language the Lord condemned.

In Jesus' condemnation of the Pharisee what He was not condemning was necessarily the use of prayer language which embodies the truth of this psalm. But what He was condemning in the Pharisee was a lip style that said "I'm living this way" but an actual lifestyle that contradicted what he was praying. The Pharisee in fact was not himself in the moral condition that he was bearing testimony to what he was. It's not simply that God's saying, "Don't ever pray a prayer like that. Don't presume to come before Me and say, 'I've walked before You in integrity.'" He's not saying that to us. Just as He's not saying, "When you come to Me always say, 'I'm sorry I've robbed other people and You know what a crook I am but thank You that You're the great God of grace.'" "

## **A PSALM FOR THE PURE IN HEART**

### **Psalm 26**

What I see happening is a kind of reverse Phariseeism in our day. It's the person who comes and says, "Lord, You know how impossible it is to meet Your standard of righteousness. I'm just a rotten ordinary sinner. I cheat, I steal, I defraud my employer. I sleep around. God, I know You'll have grace and mercy upon me. I thank You I'm not like that self-righteous person who goes to church on Wednesday night. I thank You that I'm not righteous like they are. I'm just an ordinary hypocrite and a dirty rotten sinner. I'm so glad I'm an authentic sinner and not trying to hide anything from You. God just take me as I am." That's kind of a reverse pride. If a person does that with God, "I'm proud of who I am—I'm just a rotten egg but at least I own up to it." And doesn't propose to do any change in their condition. Christ will condemn that kind of attitude just as severely as He would condemn the attitude of the Pharisee who is playacting with God and saying that he's righteous when he's not.

I think we may in contemporary Christian experience have settled into a view of people coming into the body of Christ who want all the benefits of Christ without any of the conversion that He brought. And saying if we are saved by grace then sin as you please. So they basically were saying, "God forgives me anything I do so why not just sin?" And had a disregard for righteousness. We settled into the kind of lifestyle that says, "I know you can never live a completely righteous life and never completely satisfy God so what's the use of trying? I'll be whoever I am." We may have wound up with a view of discipleship that is something far short of what God wants in our life.

I look at the New Testament and I see a tremendous concern to admonish, encourage, and exhort believers to live a righteous lifestyle. For example, Acts 23:1. Paul had been arrested in Jerusalem and is on trial before the Sanhedrin. He says, "My brothers, I have fulfilled my duty toward God in good conscience to this day." That's a mouthful. I have at times struggled with

## **A PSALM FOR THE PURE IN HEART**

### **Psalm 26**

Paul's words. "Good conscience unto this day." That is there is nothing in my conscience that is accusing me. Paul at this moment in his life does not say, "We've all got sin in our life. I realize as I stand here before you, I've been doing a lot of stuff that isn't right. But the blood of Christ has covered all that. I'm ok today." Paul at this moment in his life is in a tremendous place of pressure but he isn't doing a copout, "I'm like everybody else; but God saved me by His grace." He's saying, "I have served God with a good conscience."

That has to be held in balance with Romans 7 where he talks about conflict in spirit. But it seems to me that Paul has come to a maturity in his Christian life where he is not knowingly and openly living a life of deliberate, willful disobedience to the Lord. He is encouraging that kind of righteous style in his letters. In Philippians 2:14–15 he says, "...so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine as stars in the universe."

The same theme is paralleled in Colossians 3:5–10, Ephesians 4:20–5:7, 1 Timothy 3 and endless passages which could be cited in the New Testament indicating that from the New Testament perspective the redeemed life, the life that God gives us by His grace, is meant to produce in us a kind of consistent lifestyle which grows in sanctification and finds ourselves being able to say without Phariseeism, without a better-than-thou attitude towards somebody else, to be able to stand before God with a clean and clear conscience and say, "Lord, I am a person who is seeking to live a life that is blameless and unspotted in this world."

I think given that kind of moral integrity emphasized in the New Testament that Psalm 26 has real application to Christian life. Even within the Old Testament there is also the blend of humility and holiness. There's the two things that always have to come together. If you have

## **A PSALM FOR THE PURE IN HEART**

### **Psalm 26**

holiness without humility you're in trouble. If you have humility without holiness you're in trouble.

The psalmist in Psalm 26 starts off with an emphasis on holiness and winds up with an attitude of humility. Why then does this psalm get in the Psalter? What use did it have? We can kind of guess the use it had and why the language is the way it is. I think the best guess is that this is the psalm used by a worshipper who came to the temple gates maybe at a high festival time and was ready as he/she went into worship with the sense that "We're a pilgrim and we've been called to worship at the temple." And at this high festival, before we're admitted to the grounds of the temple, there is some preparation of the heart that is involved.

One of the things that happens is when we worship there are two kinds of ways that God may manifest himself to us. In one way God will manifest himself in a theophany. A manifestation of God. Like Moses and the burning bush. Or like Elijah and the still small voice. Or like Job and the mighty appearance that God makes to him at the end of the book. When God appears in a manifestation of His presence it is so overpowering that nobody can doubt that God has appeared.

But God often appears to His people in ways other than that. He promises us that when we gather in His presence He will be there. But it's not necessarily a theophany. I've been in services where there is an evident sense of the presence of God. So thick you could almost cut it with a knife. But the Lord in His appearances seems to make that the exception to the rule rather than normalcy. Most of the times that we come to worship we come with an attitude that the Lord has promised His presence and He'll be here whether I feel anything or not. But the problem is, because we don't have this evident sense of the Lord's presence, we may get casual. We may have kind of a familiarity.

## **A PSALM FOR THE PURE IN HEART**

### **Psalm 26**

The psalmist is saying as he goes up to the temple, God may not appear to me today in the temple like He appeared to Moses in the burning bush or to Elijah but that doesn't mean He's not going to be there. I must not approach the temple from the standpoint of familiarity or casualness. I'm to have an attitude that thoroughly prepares my heart for my encounter with God. I think Psalm 26 is part of a conscious attempt to prepare a worshipper for the presence of God. That is not something we see a lot of in worship today.

There is a moment before coming into a worship setting that the psalmist is getting his heart ready.

That's a long introduction to the psalm. I had more introduction than exposition. Sometimes if you just go word by word you may not get the sense of where the psalm is coming from. Where the psalm is coming from is, it's time to go worship. Are we just going to leave home, walk up to the temple, walk through the doors, get there when they're going through their sing-song around the altar or offering a sacrifice and what happens there never vitally impacts our life and it doesn't become a moment of introspection. It doesn't become a changing moment in our life. It doesn't affect the way we live.

The psalmist has chosen to prepare. A great commentary on the psalms divides this psalm into five parts.

#### **I. Verses 1–3—nothing to hide.**

Here David is praying for divine judgment and testing before entering into worship. The word "blameless" does not necessarily mean that David is saying, "I've never sinned." In Hebrew poetry there is something called "parallelism." You'll see this all through the psalms and the prophets. One thing is said and then in the next line there is a restatement of it in different words. The whole phrase is a synonym kind of phrase. If you therefore come across a line that initially

## **A PSALM FOR THE PURE IN HEART**

### **Psalm 26**

sounds odd, read the line after that because it will clarify and add some depth to it. When he says, “Vindicate me, O LORD, for I have led a blameless life,” it is immediately followed by “I have trusted in the LORD without wavering” (verse 1, NIV). The blameless life, from David’s point of view, is not a life in which he has never sinned or done anything wrong. That obviously he has done. But he’s saying that, “In every moment of life when I have come to my senses I have trusted in You. I have not in any period of my life walked away from You, rebelling against You. My heart has been with You.” The whole idea of blameless is associated with “integrity.” It means to be whole, or sound, or all together.

It stands for a person who is living in wholeness and is not dividing up his life into the public role and private role. The church side and the work side. A person who is whole can be counted upon to be the same. So that if the circle of friends at church met the circle of friends at work they see the same guy. What you see is what you get. I am really who I am.

David sees this need of testing. He sees God as the assayer of metal. When you get into His sanctuary He’s going to test and maybe refine and purify. He’s saying, “As I come into Your presence I want to be a genuine person.”

We have other psalms by David that tell us that there may be moments in our life we really can’t say verses 1–2. We need to come and say, “Be merciful to me a sinner.” But it’s certainly the goal of our Christian life that we live life in the everyday world in such a way that we really do want to be this way. “Test me, O LORD, and try me, examine my heart and my mind; for your love is ever before me, and I walk continually in your truth” (Psalm 26:2–3, NIV). In other words, “Search me, O God, and try me and see if there be any unclean or wicked way in me. Purify me. When I come to worship, let no part of me be hidden from You. Look at all of me. Help me not to play games with You in worship.”

## **A PSALM FOR THE PURE IN HEART**

### **Psalm 26**

This worshipper is saying, “Let worship open me up.” Hopefully we can come and worship and say, “I have nothing to hide. Test me, try me, examine my heart and soul.”

Sometimes when we say that, we know the Lord’s got to do some smelting of the metal of our soul in order to purify us. I respect the integrity of a person who, when they’re coming to worship, is trying to relate that worship to everyday life. Trying to let that worship be an experience that produces fundamental and basic positive changes.

#### **II. The next thing that David says, verses 4–5, Nothing in common.**

“I do not sit with deceitful men, nor do I consort with hypocrites; I abhor the assembly of evildoers and refuse to sit with the wicked” (NIV). Hating the company of these kinds of people is not matter of social preference but of spiritual alignment. I’m not spiritually aligning with hypocrites or with the wicked.

There’s a difference between these two categories. Hypocrites are people who are playing religious games. The wicked make no pretense at all to be religious. David’s saying, I’m not spiritually aligned with those kinds of attitudes.

#### **III. The third dimension is the phrase “into his courts,” verse 6–8.**

Once you enter through the temple gates you come to the great altar of burnt offering where the animals were sacrificed. But right in front of that was this tremendous basin for the washing with water. David is saying, “I’m representing my worship first of all as saying I have need for the cleansing which You provide and I need Your washing. As I go about Your altar I begin to think of Your cleansing and I proclaim aloud Your praise and I love being here.”

Isn’t that a better reason than have-to-be? Somebody forcing you to be? But just because someone has made you feel guilty is not a good reason for coming to worship. I’m here because I want to be here. I love being among Your people. I love worship. I love to open my heart to You.

## **A PSALM FOR THE PURE IN HEART**

### **Psalm 26**

#### **IV. The fourth part of this psalm, verses 9–10, speaks of people with no future.**

The Lord is the separator. When we choose to worship the Lord we're choosing to make a distinction. We belong to His company.

#### **V. The last part of the psalm is love without fear.**

These verses have some dimension to them. One is as the psalmist concludes his preparation for actual worship in the temple he says, "I've got a continuing resolve to serve You." He says, "I have led a blameless life" (verse 1); now in verse 11 he says, "I lead [or am leading] a blameless life." The difference is that the second phrase is saying, "It's not only what I did in the past, Lord; I choose to go on being this way for the present and for the future." This is a matter of the psalmist not being just self-righteous but of his having his loyalties correct.

Then he also has a moment that he's honest to recognize that he cannot stand in God's presence without God's help so he cries to God to redeem him and be merciful to him. He doesn't stand on his own merit.

Then he has this great assurance as he ends this time of worship that his feet stand on level ground. The psalm has carried him into authentic worship. His prayer and preparation for worship has not produced a holier-than-thou person. But has allowed him to take his place with others. He is not the person like the Pharisee who prayed alone and to himself. He says, "My feet stand on level ground and as I look around I see a whole lot of other people here. I'm in the great assembly. I'm just one of the company that's chosen in life to be loyal to you and follow you."

I see this psalm as a wonderful preparation. In my worship let me bring integrity. Let me ask for real, practical ways for my life to be set in order before You.

#### **Closing Prayer**

## **A PSALM FOR THE PURE IN HEART**

### **Psalm 26**

Lord, we bring our lives to You in this moment. We want with Paul to say we have served You with a clear conscience. Where our conscience condemns us or accuses us we know that Your righteousness and Your forgiveness are greater than our conscience. For the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin and gives us standing with You. Lord, by virtue of Your mercy and Your grace You have set us free to walk with You in newness of life. You've called us to live a life that has a renewed mind and a renewed heart. Renewed speech, renewed attitudes. Lord, we want to be in possession of all You've called us to be. Thank You for giving us this encouragement that as we come to You we come not just to have some moment in worship where we are titillated in our spirit and simply walk away feeling good. We want to have a time of worship that results in a deep moral sense that being in Your presence is a purifying experience. Being in Your presence is a morally demanding walk of discipleship where You call us to the highest and to the best. Where in worship You are pouring Your character into us and as Your life is poured into us other things no longer have place. There's no room for such things as anger and malice and unforgiveness and lack of charity. And the things which beset and destroy us. We want to leave a time of worship with You inwardly renewed. Thank You for calling us to this time of waiting in Your presence and being cleansed by You. Thank You, Lord.