

My Blameless Life

Psalm 26

Turn to Psalm 26 please. In Ps 26, the worshipper asks God to help and be merciful, because the worshipper has been faithful to God, and leads a blameless life.

We are surprised at this, and probably discouraged. We are surprised that any child of God could ask for help because the person has been blameless, and we're discouraged because we could *never* come to God like that.

Here's how Ps 26 opens and closes: *¹Vindicate me, LORD, for I have led a blameless life. I have trusted in the LORD, and not faltered. ¹¹I lead a blameless life; deliver me and be merciful to me.*

And yet God put this in his songbook, his prayer book for worshippers. Why could they worship this way and we cannot? Israelites on the whole were not more righteous than we are. Why could they pray this way and we cannot? That's the right question.

I will tell you my own spiritual journey in this matter in three stages, and that will begin to give you an answer. This will be a long introduction to Psalm 26. Then we'll go over the psalm, which is also a part of the answer.

First Stage. As a young man, in my teens and early 20s, I had the ordinary struggles of a young man who wants to live in God's ways. I could not live up to what I was taught, and I often felt guilty before God.

I know what it is like to have three quarters of my relationship with God about my own failures. Being God's child was mostly about what I keep doing wrong, and how God is getting more and more upset, and ready to punish.

It is a hard way to follow God, and some leave God for just that reason, it's not worth the steady burden of guilt. I could not leave, but I don't blame them. Being a child of God should bring us joy and confidence, not steady shame and discouragement.

Second stage. Starting in my 20s I learned from good teachers and I read and taught the Bible myself. I found out that God was gracious, full of mercy, he forgives all our sins freely in Christ. Our sins have been put on Christ, and Christ's righteousness has been put on us.

We have peace with God because of Jesus, we are bound to Christ and Christ is bound to us. I learned and began to teach these things, it was and is good news, amazingly good news to those who never enjoyed being a child of God. This is all true, and freeing.

Third stage. Somewhere around age 40, as I kept reading Scripture and other scholars, I noticed something else. The people in the Bible did not know about this problem. The people in the Bible did not live with regular discouragement because of personal sin.

Sometimes people sinned and prayed urgently for forgiveness. But as an ongoing burden, it is rarely mentioned. Even when Paul in his letters points out the sin of the people in his churches, he never tells them to confess this sin to God and be forgiven. He just explains why they should live better.

We do find answers to our steady guilt in Scripture, that is true. But those people don't have this ongoing sense of personal failure before God, either in the OT or in the NT. We know they were not better than us, about the same as us. No regular guilt, though.

There are 150 psalms. Perhaps five psalms are psalms of confessing sin and asking for mercy. One of those is Psalm 51, and I will speak on that somewhere in this series. But five out of 150! If we wrote honest psalms, *fifty* of 150 would confess sin.

And they have other psalms like Ps 26, psalms claiming personal righteousness, and we'd NEVER put any like that in our psalms. (Confidence in righteousness in these eleven psalms: 7:3-5, 8; 17:1-5; 18:21-28; 24:4-6; 32:12; 37:13, 17 [“the righteous” etc.]; 44:17-18; 62:14; 66:16; 86:2; 119)

If we heard someone pray like Ps 26 we'd think them arrogant and spiritually proud. If our song leaders introduced a new song like this, we'd think they were crazy – what are they thinking? But it's in the Psalms.

I read exactly one book that mentions this, Ellen Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds*. In a book on the history of theology, she says she thinks the problem began about the 7th century.

Before that, people who feared God's judgement and anger and wrath came to Christ. They believed and were baptized, they became part of the church and followed Christ, so that they did not need to fear God's anger and displeasure and punishment.

But starting in the 600s, more or less, Christians themselves, believers themselves, began to worry about God's judgement and anger. This should never have happened, but it did.

They never did before that, but from then on to the present, to a greater or lesser degree, Christians began to fear God's anger and punishment on them, on us. Very sad.

I don't know how close Charry is on church history, I suspect she's right, but I know she's right that OT and NT children of God not fearing God in this way. Her book is mostly about other things, and it is a careful knowledgeable book.

A dark lie entered the church, a dark deception, always with truth mixed into it, as with all the most destructive lies. The lie is not gone. It is remarkable persistent.

I am sure it comes from the father of lies. It robs us of our joy and confidence in God, a horrible thing. And that is why we cannot pray Psalm 26.

Biblical scholars have done a good job of showing God's grace in the OT and the NT. But they have **not** shown that we regularly live with a burden of ongoing personal guilt that OT followers and NT followers rarely experienced. I'm troubled by this neglect.

Let's turn now to Psalm 26. The good news here is that once we get past the line "blameless life," which gives us the creeps, you'll find that most of you are indeed living the way this song describes! You really COULD pray to God this way!

Psalm 26 – My Blameless Life

¹Vindicate me, LORD, for I have led a blameless life;

"Vindicate me" means "judge in my favour, show that I am worthy of your care, show the world that I pass your test." In v11 he says, "deliver me and be merciful to me."

The worshipper wants some kind of help, it seems. What help is not clear, does not matter. Maybe people are suspicious that the worshipper has walked away from God.

But we should put these together: vindicate me, deliver me, and be merciful to me. That's what this psalm asks from God: "God, judge in my favour, deliver me, and be merciful to me."

Why should God do this? "For I have led a blameless life." This is the part that makes us cringe. The line is also in v11 – "I lead a blameless life, so deliver me and be merciful to me."

When we look at the rest of the psalm we see that blameless does **not** mean perfect or sinless. But this is the basic argument of the psalm: *Vindicate me, for I have led a blameless life. I lead a blameless life, so deliver me and be merciful to me.*

And we are going to pray this together at the end, today, so I want you to get ready to ask God's help in this way.

Nothing to Hide: I Depend on You (vv1b-3)

I have trusted in the LORD without wavering.

² Test me, LORD, and try me, examine my heart and my mind;

³ for I am always aware of your unfailing love

and have lived in reliance on your faithfulness.

Blameless life part one – "I trust in the LORD without wavering, I am always aware of your unfailing love, I live counting on your faithfulness." This is common in this room, and that's a very good thing. You people know about this, and you live like this.

“Test me, try me, examine my heart and my mind – you will see, God, not that I am sinless but that you’re the one I count on, you’re the one I trust, I depend on your unfailing love.” That’s part one of a blameless life.

Nothing in Common with your Enemies (vv4-5)

The rest of this psalm is about two groups of people, two rival groups. There are those that do evil, and there are those that genuinely worship God. This is not about social preference, whose company I find more pleasant. This is a spiritual alignment.

⁴ *I do not sit with the deceitful, nor do I associate with hypocrites.*

⁵ *I hate the company of evildoers, and will not sit with the wicked.*

This is part two of a blameless life – the blameless person has chosen to avoid people whose lives ignore God or defy him. Deceitful, hypocrites (who say they worship God but in their lives defy him), evildoers, the wicked. Their lives show no respect for God.

I don’t sit with them, or associate with them, I hate their company (I avoid their company with all my might).

In this psalm the difference between the two groups of people is very clear. In real life it does not always seem so clear to us, fair enough, but in this psalm as often in the Bible the dividing line is clear.

Here’s how the NT puts it: *Do not be joined together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?* ¹⁵ *What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? Or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?* ¹⁶ *What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: “I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people.”* ¹⁷ *Therefore, “Come out from them and be separate, says the Lord.”* 2 Cor 6:14-17.

The blameless person trusts in the LORD and counts on his unfailing love. The blameless person also avoids partnering with people who show no respect for God. Again, that’s how you people live, there is lots of that in this room. Two for two on blameless!

I Worship You in Your House (vv6-8)

⁶ *I wash my hands in innocence, and go about your altar, LORD,*

⁷ *proclaiming aloud your praise and telling of all your wonderful deeds.*

⁸ *LORD, I love the house where you live, the place where your glory dwells.*

^{12b} *... in the great congregation I will praise the LORD.*

This is a blameless life, part three: I go around your altar, LORD, I proclaim aloud your praise, I tell your wonderful deeds, I love the house where you live, the place where your glory dwells, in the great congregation I will praise the LORD.

This is a group setting. Verses 4-5 describe the evildoers that the blameless person avoids, and vv6-8 describe the alternative. This worshipper is not alone at the altar, not all alone singing aloud God's praise. This is what Leviticus 23 calls "sacred assembly," "a holy gathering," when Israel got together to worship God.

For NT believers, the people of the local church are the temple. To the Corinthian church: *Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst? God's temple is sacred (holy), and you [Corinthians] together are that temple.* If they are that temple, we are that temple. 1 Cor 3:16.

You are here this morning, singing praises to God, listening to his Scriptures, praying to him. That's part three of your blameless life, according to Psalm 26.

I doubt if group worship has *ever* been a lower priority among God's people as a whole than it is now in our time and place. It is another great deception. Considering all the things that are NOT part of a blameless life, don't neglect what is. You're here today, so I'm preaching to the choir on this, I realize that.

The Prayer (vv9-12)

⁹ *Do not take away my soul along with sinners,
my life with those who are bloodthirsty,*

¹⁰ *in whose hands are wicked schemes, whose right hands are full of bribes.*

¹¹ *I lead a blameless life; deliver me and be merciful to me.*

The sinners, the bloodthirsty, who act on evil schemes, whose hands have dishonest money – God will sweep these people away. God, don't sweep me away with them, vindicate me, I lead a blameless life, so deliver me and be merciful to me.

In other words: "God, I do not live like these people live, and I do not partner with them, so do not treat me like one of them." In Psalm 26, make no mistake, God us urging us to speak to him like this.

In this psalm, a blameless life has three parts: **one**, we trust in the LORD and count on his unfailing love. **Two**, we don't make regular companions of people whose lives ignore God's ways, who live in opposition to God. We treat them well but we do not partner with them, *because we are loyal to God.*

Three, we worship God and praise him in God's house, in his presence, with his people. ¹² *My feet stand on level ground; in the great congregation I will praise the LORD.* If this is "blameless," then there is hope even for us.

Father in heaven, vindicate us, judge in our favour, rescue us, and be merciful to us, because we have shown that we are your people. We trust in you, we rely on you, we hope in your unfailing love, and we turn to you again and again. We do not join ourselves to those that ignore your ways and rebel against you. We do not live as they live, and we do not partner with them. We gather to worship you, Father, we love to meet with you in your house, in your presence, and praise you with your people. In these ways we are as blameless as the Israelites who prayed Psalm 26 to you long ago. Don't treat us like those who defy you. We have shown our loyalty to you. Please should your loyalty to us. Help us, rescue us, and be merciful to us. Amen.