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Psalm 16

Meditation 1—Introductory

After the first two introductory psalms, we have largely read Psalms 3-15 as if they constitute a single united cycle. In Psalms 3-7, enemies attack the Psalmist. As we read these psalms, the attacks take the form of accusation. Asserting his innocence and trusting in God's unwavering devotion to him, the Psalmist expectantly calls out to God for help and deliverance from these enemies. These five psalms are nearly entirely personal, with the Psalmist focused on his own adversity and his personal need for God.

Psalm 8 temporarily breaks from this focus and pattern. Here, in what we have labeled, apotheosis, there are no enemies mentioned. The focus is on God. But, here, the Psalmist perceives God in more universalist terms than he had in the previous five psalms. He understands that God is not only his God but is God the world over.

In psalms 9-14, the fresh universalist insight of Psalm 8 is followed with a second related universalist insight. The Psalmist sees that his private struggles and suffering are universal. There are people the world over who struggle and suffer just as he does. Their suffering is caused by the "malevolently immoral." They too are universal. They seem to have multiplied exponentially and can, at times, seem to have taken over the world. Everywhere, the malevolently immoral attack those whom the Psalmist calls the "oppressed," the "downtrodden," the "destitute," the "disadvantaged," the "innocent," and the "vulnerable." God is not only present to help in the Psalmist's life, but in the life of all who struggle and suffer under the onslaught of the malevolently immoral.

Psalm 1 had introduced us first to the malevolently immoral and the values that drive them. Then, it introduced us to how we resist adopting their values and becoming one of them. We avoid becoming like them by studying and applying the instructions God mercifully provides. So, in like manner, after the characterization of the malevolently immoral in 3-7 and 9-14, the Psalmist turns his attention in Psalm 15 to what it means to be the opposite of malevolently immoral: to be benevolently moral.

This brings us to Psalm 16. It is difficult to see how this psalm connects to the preceding thirteen psalms. Here, the Psalmist seeks shelter in Yahweh but from what he needs sheltered is vague and uncertain. Is he seeking shelter from the attraction of idolatry (vss. 3-4)? Is he seeking shelter from death, Še'ôl (vs. 10)? Though both idolatry and death could be seen as "enemies" there is no such vocabulary in the psalm, nor does this seem to be a focus of this psalm. The Psalmist has mentioned the possibility of death and Še'ôl before, though not as an enemy—that will come in Psalm 18. Then too, the malevolently immoral are not mentioned in this psalm, though, perhaps, one could think of them as those who to rush to other gods. But there has been no discussion of idolatry in the previous psalms to which we can connect this psalm.

Does this Psalm perhaps begin a new series, with a new focus? Psalm 17 and 18 see the return of enemies, Psalm 18 being perhaps the most intense yet in this regard. So, no, it doesn't seem to begin a new series. Does this Psalm stand alone with no connection to what came before or what follows? This does not sit well with my canonical approach, so we will have to wait and see.

Whatever its relationship with surrounding Psalms, the Psalmist expresses the same uncompromising trust in God that he has consistently expressed in previous psalms and that he will express until the final psalm is sung. May we be as consistent as he!

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: august 21, 2024)

meditation 2— psalm 16.¹⁻²

Invocation

¹Watch over me, 'Ēl,
for I seek shelter in You.

²I have confessed to YHWH:
“You are my Lord, my Benefactor.
There is none greater than You.”

As discussed in the introductory meditation, this psalm gives no evidence of enemies, accusation, the malevolently immoral, or the vulnerable whom the latter attack—all of which are dominant in the previous thirteen psalms, causing us to treat them as a united cycle. We have maintained and will continue to maintain that these themes are central to the entire Book of Psalms.

However, there is in the Psalter a theme far more dominant. That theme is God, Himself, His character, His devotion and faithfulness to the Psalmist and to humanity, and His willingness and ableness to help the Psalmist and all others in need. To call this latter a theme perhaps does disservice to it. It is far more than a theme. It is bedrock foundational to happiness and security, both in time and eternity.

As Psalm 16 begins, God is very much on the Psalmist's mind. This psalm begins with a plea, followed immediately with a confession. The plea is one we have seen many times in previous psalms and will see many times in psalms to come. It is the plea that God, Himself, act as shelter, refuge, and hiding place.

Perhaps this plea is simply a general one, the Psalmist being aware of the limitless uncertainties and perils of life that can pop up out of nowhere and change life in the blink of an eye. Or, perhaps, the Psalmist is looking for shelter from more immediate and specific peril. As we understand verses 3 and 4, idolatry is also on the Psalmist's mind. Perhaps the Psalmist asks for shelter against this temptation. Then again, the Psalmist expresses confidence/ hope that God will not abandon him to Še'ōl (vs. 10), so perhaps the Psalmist seeks shelter from a death of unspecified cause. Whatever we might decide about the cause of the plea, we are reminded that God is the most secure source of shelter, refuge, and hiding from life's perils.

This psalm's initial plea is followed by confession.

“I have confessed to YHWH:
‘You are my Lord, my Benefactor.
There is none greater than You.’”

Perhaps the Psalmist uses such confession to state his worthiness and to move God to action. Then again, perhaps the Psalmist is aware of the importance of confession. We may think that words don't matter, but they do. Words reveal character and intent. Religious leaders of Jesus' day knew this very well. They made the executive decision that “if any man did confess that [Jesus] was Christ, he should be put out of the synagogue.”¹ Because of this decision many who believed in Jesus “did not confess him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue: for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God.”²

¹ John 9.²²

² John 12.⁴²⁻⁴³

God, we are informed elsewhere is offended and has “his wrath kindled” by “those who confess not his hand in all things.”³

The apostle, Paul, also knows that confession reveals character and intent. He teaches members of the Roman church.

“... if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.”⁴

Confession is so important that eventually, all will be brought to engage in it.

“... at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; and... every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”⁵

So, the Psalmist’s opening confession is no trivial matter. His confession acknowledges God as both intimate and ultimate. God is not simple *a* Benefactor. He is, confesses the Psalmist, “*my* Benefactor.” Even as God condescends to involve Himself in the life of a mere mortal, He is the greatest of all. This dichotomy between intimate and ultimate is a common theme of the Psalter. In Psalm 113, for example, the Psalmist can acknowledge God’s ultimacy when he asks,

“Who is like YHWH, our God;
the One who sits, exalted;
the One who condescends to look upon
heaven and earth...?”

Then, in the same breath, He can speak of God as

“the One who raises the powerless from their humiliation;
the One who lifts the destitute out of their desperation...”⁶

In the end, God’s intimacy and ultimacy are not dichotomous. They are complimentary. It may be that God is ultimate exactly because of His intimacy and intimate because of His ultimacy. We are not to allow God’s ultimacy to intimidate us such that we do not and cannot enjoy His intimacy. At the same time, we are not to allow His intimacy to distract or hide from us His ultimacy. May we, like the Psalmist, appreciate and experience both.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: august 21, 2024)

³ See DC 59.²¹

⁴ Romans 10.⁹⁻¹⁰

⁵ Philippians 2.¹⁰⁻¹¹

⁶ Psalm 113.⁵⁻⁷, author’s translation.