

Presence Rewarded: Sojourning well with the Lord

Psalm 15

¹ O LORD, who shall sojourn in your tent?
Who shall dwell on your holy hill?

² He who walks blamelessly and does what is right
and speaks truth in his heart;

³ who does not slander with his tongue
and does no evil to his neighbor,
nor takes up a reproach against his friend;

⁴ in whose eyes a vile person is despised,
but who honors those who fear the LORD;

who swears to his own hurt and does not change;

⁵ who does not put out his money at interest
and does not take a bribe against the innocent.

He who does these things shall never be moved.

Every so often in the Bible – both in the Old Testament section as well as the New Testament – you happen upon something that feels like a grocery list of things God looks for in a person's life.

Things God wants us to BE, things God wants us to DO, and things God wants us to AVOID.

And, of course, our tendency may be to run down the list and zero in. “Oh, I'd better correct this!” or “Goodness, I'd better start doing that.” We might even feel a bit convicted and lunge at trying to do this better, or to be more diligent about “staying away from that.” And, indeed, a grocery list can be helpful if we need to go shopping.

But I'm pretty sure God's intention in prompting David to write this song has more to it than merely getting us to “go out and get a few things to tide us over” in the short run.

This Psalm is about answering two very important questions, found right at the very beginning:

- #1 Who gets to travel through life with the Lord himself?
- #2 Who gets to live, dwell continually with the Lord himself?

Hebrew scholars typically wonder what prompted – what was the motivation behind – the writing of the various Psalms. And many of them agree that it is likely David wrote this Psalm after he, as Israel's new king, determined to bring the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. A bit of OT Jewish history here.

You'll remember that King Saul was the 1st of the Kings over Israel (approx..1050-1010 BC). His poor leadership led to Israel being defeated in battles with the Philistines, Saul himself dying in shame with his 3 sons(1 Samuel 31). But when the Elders of Israel enthroned David as King in the small city of Hebron (2 Samuel 5:3), David eventually moved to conquer the city of Jerusalem, called *Zion*, to make it his city (5:9) and the place where (the Lord God) Jehovah's name would be established (cf. Psalm 132:13-18).

David's passion was to bring the Ark of the Covenant (*the symbol of God's presence originally housed in "the holy of holies" of the tabernacle, containing manna, Aaron's rod, and the Tablets of the Covenant*) to Jerusalem from Baale-judah (or Kiriath-jearim), a distance of almost 10 miles.

David hastily attempted to do so in a way that was disobedient to the Lord (on a new cart pulled by oxen. But as the oxen stumbled, it resulted in the death of Uzzah attempting to steady the cart, cf. 1 Samuel 6:5-9). In fear, David left the Ark with Obed-edom (the Gittite), and it took David some time to realize that if He were going to travel with and bring the Ark to Jerusalem, he would have to do so obediently. The Ark was to be carried using poles on the shoulders of the Levitical priests (2 Samuel 6:13, cf. 1 Chronicles 15:2).

David realized that if you were going to travel with the Lord, you would be traveling with Someone who is HOLY. Quite frankly, God expects his travel companions to fear the Lord and eagerly expressing His holiness. And when they finally came to Jerusalem, the tabernacle-tent would be set up, erected with prominence over the city, and the Ark would be placed in the Holy of Holies, on God's "holy hill" (cf. 1 Samuel 7:2, 6-7).

So...who gets to travel through life with the Lord Himself...who gets to dwell continually in the prominent place where God himself can be known and experienced? The Psalm's answer is clear:

**On the journey we all take
only those eager in righteousness sojourn
in the companionship and confidence
of the Lord.**

This Psalm so beautifully expresses what it means to be eager in righteousness. Right "off the bat" the very lead-off questions reveal an eagerness to do life with God.

**An eagerness in righteousness
desires to "do my life" with the Lord**

¹ O LORD, who shall sojourn in your tent? Who shall dwell on your holy hill?

Questions like that speak of a zeal, an anticipation. Maybe, just maybe, there's a way to spend the 30,000 daily laps of life each of us get with God Himself! Really? Lord, can I...I mean, can we?

During the height of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln often found refuge at a Presbyterian church in Washington DC. He would go with an aide, sit with his stovepipe hat on his lap, and never interrupt the meeting because...well, because the congregation would be all in a dither if they knew the president had come to sit in the midweek meeting. He sat off to the side, near the pastor's study, as the minister would open up the Scriptures and teach God's word and lead the congregation in worship. The war was tearing the nation apart, and tearing at his soul. Having just lost his son, Lincoln was on the bottom, and needed solace and sustenance.

As the pastor finished his message and the people began to leave, the president stood quietly, straightened his coat, took his hat in his hand, and began to leave. The aide stopped him to ask, "What did you think of the sermon, Mr. President?"

Lincoln replied, "I though the sermon was carefully thought through, eloquently delivered."

The aide wanted clarification. "You thought it was a great sermon?"

"No," Lincoln said softly, "no, I thought he failed."

"He failed? How? Why?"

"He failed because he did not ask of us something great."

This Psalm wakes us up. It calls us to greatness in God. It says every day can be full of the Lord. We can navigate life with our Creator, our Father, our elder brother the Lord Jesus himself, with God's powerful, engaging, surprising Holy Spirit...who lives inside and flows out of us. An eagerness in righteousness squares our shoulders and lifts our heads with a desire to "do my life" with the Lord.

And...

An eagerness in righteousness loves to align my daily conduct with the Lord

²He who walks blamelessly and does what is right and speaks truth in his heart;

³who does not slander with his tongue and does no evil to his neighbor, nor takes up a reproach against his friend;

⁴in whose eyes a vile person is despised, but who honors those who fear the LORD;

who swears to his own hurt and does not change;

⁵who does not put out his money at interest and does not take a bribe against the innocent.

You'll quickly notice the mix of positive actions and sinful avoidances. The whole person is aligned: what goes on in the heart, what is done with the body, and what comes out of the mouth.

Perhaps Derek Kidner'sⁱⁱ summary is helpful:

His CHARACTER: *TRUE*

²He who walks blamelessly and does what is right and speaks truth in his heart;

HIS WORDS: *RESTRAINED*

³who does not slander with his tongue and does no evil to his neighbor, nor takes up a reproach against his friend;

HIS ALLEGIANCE: *CLEAR CUT*

⁴in whose eyes a vile person is despised, but who honors those who fear the LORD;

HIS DEALINGS: *HONORABLE*

who swears to his own hurt and does not change;

⁵who does not put out his money at interest and does not take a bribe against the innocent.

Rubel Shelly, who several years ago came to Iowa State to debate one of the university's atheists

over the authority of Scripture, offers this important story:

My alma mater (Vanderbilt University) has an honor code that is respected throughout the university. Freshmen pledge to do their own academic work with integrity, and to report those who do not to the student-run honor council.

Student signatures remain on display in the lobby of the Sarratt Student Center throughout their four years at the university. Alongside the signatures is found not only a statement of the honor code itself, but also the often-quoted words of the man for whom the building is named. Madison Sarratt, longtime dean of men at Vanderbilt and a teacher in the mathematics department, died in 1978. He wrote:

“Today I am going to give you two examinations, one in trigonometry and one in honesty. I hope you will pass them both, but if you must fail one, let it be trigonometry, for there are many good [people] in this world today who cannot pass an examination in trigonometry, but there are no good [people] in the world who cannot pass an examination in honesty.”

Sarratt’s former students still speak of the effect those words have had on their adult lives.ⁱⁱⁱ

His character: true. His words: restrained. His allegiance: clear cut. His dealings: honorable.

J.J. Stewart Perowne has a striking summary of this:

Such is the figure of stainless honor drawn by the pen of a Jewish poet. We have need often and seriously to ponder it. For it shows that faith in God and spotless integrity may not be sundered (i.e., divided); that religion does not veil or excuse petty dishonesties. That love to God is only then worthy the name when it is the life and bond of every social virtue. Each line is, at it were, a touchstone to which we should [often] bring ourselves.^{iv}

An “eagerness in righteousness”...delights to “do my life” with the Lord. Aligns my conduct with the Lord.

An eagerness in righteousness enjoys confident stability with the Lord

⁵He who does these things shall never be moved.

What does that mean: “...shall never be moved”?

Isaiah 33:10 “Now I will arise,” says the LORD,
“now I will lift myself up; now I will be exalted.

¹¹You conceive chaff; you give birth to stubble;
your breath is a fire that will consume you.

¹²And the peoples will be as if burned to lime,
like thorns cut down, that are burned in the fire.”

¹³Hear, you who are far off, what I have done;
and you who are near, acknowledge my might.

¹⁴The sinners in Zion are afraid; trembling has seized the godless:

“Who among us can dwell with the consuming fire?
Who among us can dwell with everlasting burnings?”

¹⁵He who walks righteously and speaks uprightly,
who despises the gain of oppressions,
who shakes his hands, lest they hold a bribe,

who stops his ears from hearing of bloodshed
and shuts his eyes from looking on evil,
¹⁶ he will dwell on the heights;
his place of defense will be the fortresses of rocks;
his bread will be given him; his water will be sure.

Psalm 15 teaches

**On the journey we all take, only those
eager in righteousness sojourn in the
companionship and confidence of the Lord.**

THROUGH N.T. EYES

So...how do we understand Psalm 15 through “New Testament” eyes. I mean, is the Spirit telling us this morning that to be “eager in righteousness” means I have yet *another list* to try to follow? What does it mean for me, today, to be a person who is eager about righteousness in my life? Please listen carefully...Here’s what the New Testament wants us to know about righteousness.

#1 It’s about a GIFT of Righteousness:

Righteousness begins as God’s gift
to a person who believes in Christ.

Philippians 3: 8 Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—

Romans 4:4 Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. **5** And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness,

#2 It’s about a GROWING in Righteousness:

Righteous in Christ, we give ourselves to
living righteously

Romans 6:12-13 Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness.

2 Corinthians 5:17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.

The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

#3 It’s about a COOPERATING DEPENDENCE upon the Holy Spirit:

He empowers and enables as we obey

Ephesians 3:14 For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family [□] in heaven and on earth is named, ¹⁶ that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

We cannot live righteously on our own. We cannot be Psalm 15 kinds of persons simply through self-effort, through trying harder, and then trying harder even more. God the Holy Spirit lives in here for one principle, practical reason: *to empower us to live out our gift of righteousness, to walk blamelessly, and do what is right, and speak truth in my heart.*

In *Words We Live By*, Brian Burrell tells

Of an armed robber named Dennis Lee Curtis who was arrested in 1992 in Rapid City, SD. Curtis apparently had scruples about his thievery. In his wallet the police found a sheet of paper on which was written the following code:

1. I will not kill anyone unless I have to.
2. I will take cash and food stamps—no checks
3. I will rob only at night.
4. I will not wear a mask.
5. I will not rob min-marts or 7-Eleven stores.
6. If I get chased by cops on foot, I will get away. If chased by vehicle, I will not put the lives of innocent civilians on the line.
7. I will rob only 7 months out of the year
8. I will enjoy robbing from the rich to give to the poor.

This thief had as sense of a moral code, of what was “righteous,” but it was flawed. And when he stood before the court, he was not judged by the standards he had set for himself, but by the higher law of the state.

Likewise, when we stand before God, we will not be judged by the code of morality or righteousness we may have written for ourselves and “tucked in our wallet.” We will be judged by a higher standard—God’s righteous Law. And the standard will be perfection.^v

Here’s the truth, dear friends. No one gets to sojourn in God’s tent; no one gets to dwell on God’s Holy Hill *without* righteousness. And, no one’s own personal righteousness comes even close to the standard God requires.

And yet His righteousness is available. This blameless righteousness – the very righteousness of Jesus – can be yours as a gift, by faith.

Not only that, once you have been given Jesus’ righteousness, you can grow in righteous living. Every day you can actually live more like Jesus himself through obedient dependence on God’s Holy Spirit.

A gift
in which we grow
obeying & depending
eager in righteousness

To what end? To enjoy each day God’s presence through the journey...and to stand

one day in God's presence thoroughly and completely righteous.

**On the journey we all take, only those
eager in righteousness sojourn in the
companionship and confidence of the Lord.**

It begins with a gift. Take it from God by faith. A gift which leads to a growing lifestyle.

A growing lifestyle that happens by daily, obediently, depending upon the Holy Spirit.

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ⁱ The New English Bible reads: "Saul was fifty years old when he became king, and he reigned over Israel for **twenty-two years**."

ⁱⁱ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* (InterVarsity Press), on Psalm 15.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rubel Shelley, Nashville, TN, in Gaynelle Doll, "The Nature of Virtue," *Vanderbilt Today*, Vol.37. no.1 (Summer/Fall 1999), p.4.

^{iv} J.J. Stewart Perowne, *The Book of Psalms: A New Translation with Introductions and Notes 2 Volumes Complete in One* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1966, 1980), 188.

^v From Craig Brian Larson, *Choice Contemporary Stories and Illustrations* (Baker, 1998), 181; Brian Burrell, *Words We Live By* (S&S Trade, 1997).