

Psalm 26

While I was preparing for this Bible Class I came across three possible settings for Psalm 26, that is three suggestions as to how it was used.

The first suggestion was that the Psalm is the prayer of an innocent and righteous petitioner who has been falsely accused, someone who is devoted to God in all aspects of his or her life. The psalm-prayer revolves around loyalty, not legalism and its emphasis is on the question of in whom to trust, not on the trusting itself. The psalm-prayer could be used at any time by anyone who satisfies the requirements given in Psalm 1.

The second suggestion was that this Psalm is one that could have only been used as a prayer by a priest. This is based on the observation that only a priest could actually do all the actions listed in verses 6 and 7. However, this does not prevent the Psalm from being more widely applicable. Part of the role of a priest is to represent the people before God, and we are, according to 1 Peter 2:9, royal priests.

The third suggestion was that Psalm 26, like Psalms 15 and 24, and Psalm 5, was an element of a ritual for pilgrims at the gates of the temple.

Table 1: Psalm 26 Themes in Common with Psalms 15 and 24

<u>Psalm 26</u>	<u>Theme</u>	<u>Psalm 15</u>	<u>Psalm 24</u>
1, 11	walking rightly	2	
2 - 3	an upright heart	2	4
3	eyes	4	
4	avoidance of ungodliness		4
6	cleanliness		4
8	being in God's dwelling place	1	3, 7, 9
10	bribes	5	
12	secure footing	5	

In Leviticus 1:3, 5 we read of the wash basin and altar at the entrance to the temple. The Psalm anticipates the pilgrims' entrance into the temple. Omnipresent God's presence is often particularly associated with specific places and times, and it is often wise, if not necessary, to prepare for that

presence. Exodus 30:17 - 21 speaks of the need for priests to do so.

Question: Which of the petitioner, priest or pilgrim suggestions do you prefer? Why?

I have already noted the links Psalm 26 has with Psalms 15 and 24. These are not the only Psalms with which Psalm 26 has links.

There are similarities with Psalm 25.

Table 2: Psalm 26 Themes in Common with Psalm 25

<u>Psalm 26</u>	<u>Theme</u>	<u>Psalm 25</u>
1	integrity	21
2	trusting in God	2
3	steadfast love and faithfulness	10
11	redemption	22
11	be gracious to me	16

Moreover whereas Psalm 25 moves from confidence to to plea, Psalm 26 moves from plea to confidence, and both plea and confidence are declarations of faith in God. Psalm 25 indicates that moral failure is not a bar to prayer whereas Psalm 26 implies that if you pray you need to have moral integrity. So prayer depends on God, not on us.

It is possible to see a progression from Psalm 26 through Psalm 27 to Psalm 28. If Psalm 26 is about approaching God's house then Psalm 27 sees God's house as a place of sanctuary and a place to be with God. Psalm 28 sees God's house as a place to offer prayer.

I have already referred to Psalm 1. Echoes of Psalm 1 are clear in verses 4 - 5. The concepts of sit, walk, and stand are found in Psalm 1 as well as in Psalm 26. They are also found in Ephesians.

Three themes run through Psalm 26. All three themes are found in verse 1. Prayer is found in verses 2, 9 - 10, 11b; declaring innocence and integrity in verses 3 - 8, 11a; and confidence that God will hear in verse 12. Verses 2-12 can therefore be regarded as an expansion of verse 1.

The Psalm has a chiasm structure.

Figure 1: Psalm 26 Chiastic Structure

- A 1 - 3 Declaration of personal integrity
- B 4 - 5 Avoidance of the unrighteous
- C 6 - 7 Worshipping God
- B' 8 - 10 Do not treat me as the unrighteous will be
- A' 11 - 12 Reaffirmation of personal integrity

It is debatable whether verse 8 should belong to section C or B'. The contrasting verbs 'hate' in verse 5 and 'love' in verse 8 suggest that verse 8 should be placed in B'; in the context of the Psalm both are choices. However the content of verse 8 more naturally belongs in section C.

Question: In which section of the structure does verse 8 belong? Why?

Now I would like to make some detailed observations which may aid our understanding, and thus influence our exegesis, of this Psalm.

In Hebrew 'integrity' has the sense of integrated wholeness, like the English phrase 'of a piece'. The Psalm shows that integrity has both positive and negative sides. The positive side is knowing what is expected; the negative the avoidance of ungodliness

Verses 1 - 3: Although the writer protests innocence, only God can find someone innocent.

Verse 1: "without wavering" is better translated by a phrase such as "I shall not slip" which more accurately reflects the sense of the Hebrew. This also has the advantage of making the chiasmus, specifically here with verse 12, clearer. In both verses the assertion is that the author's feet are firmly set on the ground.

Verse 2: The author is not afraid of being examined by God, although the imagery here is that of refining metals. "For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness." (Malachi 3:2b - 3)

Verse 6: Washing of the hands is both a ritual action, recognising the need for purification, and a gesture of innocence. “All in vain I have kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence.” (Psalm 73:13) “So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, “I am innocent of this man’s blood; see to it yourselves.”” (Matthew 27:24) Deuteronomy 21:1 - 9 deals with the case of communal guilt but personal innocence.

As the author moves from the everyday world to the religious world, there is also movement from negative to positive regard, from repudiation to affirmation.

The altar was circled at the Festival of Tabernacles.

Verse 8: In the wilderness God’s glory was visible on the tabernacle.

Verses 9 - 10: This is a prayer for purification and an affirmation of integrity. The sense is “there, but for the grace of God, go I”. Hence verses 4 - 5, the corresponding chiasmic section, do not demonstrate a “holier than thou” attitude.

Verse 10: Notice here that the hands are corrupt, whereas, in contrast, in verse 6 they are innocent.

Verses 11 - 12: (A') These verses look toward the future in contrast to verses 1 - 3 (A) which look to the past.

Verse 11b: This hints at humility.

Verse 12: The sense of level ground here is that of the ability to progress forwards in safety. Of those on slippery ground the Bible comments: “Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin. How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors! They are like a dream when one awakes; on awaking you despise their phantoms.” Psalm 73:18 - 20. Other insecure places to stand are with one’s feet in a net (Psalm 25:15), where your foot slips (Psalm 94:18), and where you stumble (Psalm 116:8).

Verse 12, like verse 6, links the everyday world and the life of worship.

Psalm 27

At first reading Psalm 27 seems rather odd - there is a distinct and obvious change of mood from the confidence of verses 1 - 6 to the pleading in verses 7 - 12. This change of mood at first sight is something of a surprise. However Psalm 40 also demonstrates this same change, and the mixture of confidence and pleading can be found on a smaller scale in other Psalms.

Table 3: Confidence and Pleading in the Psalms

<u>Psalm</u>	<u>Confidence</u>	<u>Pleading</u>
27	1 - 6	7 - 12
40	1 - 10	11 - 17
20	6	9
28	8	9
31	3	2
33	5, 18	22
71	3c, 5 - 8, 14 - 17, 19	3a - b, 9, 12, 18
128	1 - 4	5 - 6
139	1, 10, 16	23 - 24

Psalm 27 additionally has a coda, verses 13 - 14, in which the mood while reverting to confidence nevertheless seems rather less confident than that of verses 1 - 6. Verses 1 - 6 can further be split into two sections. Verses 1 - 3 where the situation of the Psalmist is described, and verses 4 - 6 where the focus is on the Psalmist's interactions with God. The prayer of verses 7 - 12 has four requests, each with a reason stated.

Figure 2: Psalm 27 Structure

- I Confidence
 - I.a 1 - 3 The Psalmist's situation: whom shall I fear?
 - I.b 4 - 6 The Psalmist's interaction with God: sanctuary
- II Pleading
 - II.a 7 - 9a In times of trouble I turn to God
 - II.b 9b - 10 My relationship with God is the most reliable one I have
 - II.c 11 Help me in the face of my enemies
 - II.d 12 I am in danger from false accusations
- III 13 - 14 Coda: Believe and wait

Apart from the mood change there is no reason to suggest that Psalm 27 is not a single Psalm. Words and ideas found in the confident section are also found in the pleas and the coda.

Table 4: Common Words or Themes in Psalm 27

<u>Word/Theme</u>	<u>Confidence (1 – 6)</u>	<u>Pleading (7 - 12)</u>	<u>Coda (13 - 14)</u>
salvation	1	9	
enemies/foes	2	11	
adversaries	2	12	
heart	3	8	14
rising up against	3	12	
seek	4	8	
life/living	4		13
seeing God	4	7 - 9	13
hide	5	9	

As in Psalms 25 and 26 the author's agenda becomes clearer the further we read through the Psalm. The concept of sanctuary runs throughout. Verses 4 - 5 are a list of metaphors for this concept. In addition hints of pilgrimage permeate the Psalm.

The Psalm shows the connection between trust and need. Verses 1 - 6 lead to a resolution to trust in God, and verses 7 - 12 are an application of this. God is referred to in verses 1 - 6, but addressed in verses 7 - 12. Psalm 27 teaches what real trust is: the trust confessed in verses 1 - 6 is the basis for the prayer of verses 7 - 12, which moves from the general in verses 7 - 10 to the specific in verses 11 - 12. Such trust is only possible when you know the LORD as your saviour.

The Psalm shows desire for God amid changes and delays. It is the story of the Christian saints and the experience of individual Christians. The Psalmist recognises that God's straight path can often seem anything but straight to those walking along it. The Psalm applies holistically, to the whole of life, not just to life's spiritual side. What we do in worship affects the the rest of our living, and vice versa.

In Psalm 27 we find the themes running through Psalms 26 to 28 writ large: God's protection, the joy of His house, the loyalty and trust of the Psalmist.

And now for some detailed comments.

The author seems fond of using three ways of expressing an idea. In verse 1 there are three descriptions of God: light, salvation, and stronghold. The author's enemies are described as evildoers, adversaries and foes in verse 2. Three metaphors for desire are found in verse 4, and three for hope, symbolised by the temple, in verse 5.

Verses 1 - 6: It has been suggested that there are parallels with Psalm 30 in these verses.

Verse 1: Light is often associated with the sanctuary - see Psalms 36:9, 43:3 and 56:13.

Verse 2: This is the rationale for verse 1, especially if the verse is taken as referring to past events rather than as looking to future ones. Hebrew grammar works rather differently to English grammar. It is not clear into which tense some of the verbs in this and other verses should be translated. It is not obvious whether the verbs refer to events that have already occurred, or that are happening at present, or are yet to come.

In contrast to the author, the enemies stumble and fall - perhaps into the traps they have set for others.

Verse 4: Note that this verse also gives the reasons for the request.

This verse looks back to Psalms 23:6 and 26:8. They all refer to the house of the LORD, to being in God's presence.

Although there is no parallel among the numerical sayings in the Bible to "[o]ne thing I asked", the phrase 'one thing' is significant. "“Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”” (Luke 10:41 - 42). So the essence of worship and discipleship is found in verse 4.

There are other occurrences of the phrase 'one thing' in the New Testament.

There is a problem with verse 4. It was not supposed to be possible to look on God and survive (Exodus 33:20). So perhaps the meaning here is that the beauty of God could be seen in His actions, such as those in verse 11, or in the furnishings of the temple.

Verse 5: This may refer to 1 Samuel 21:1 - 6 when David was given the showbread in the temple to eat, bread that should have been eaten only by priests, and only in the temple.

While 'tent' could mean temple, which is seen as a place of protection, 'rock' is used elsewhere to refer to God.

Verse 6: The Psalmist lifts up his, or her, head in response to his, or her, body having been lifted up.

'Now' implies a new stage in the rhetoric. The actions in the verse imply not only the righteousness of the author but also the wrongness of the enemies.

Verse 8: The imperatives (commands) are plural. They are addressed to more than one person.

The speaking heart implies sincerity.

Verse 9: Having hidden the author in verse 5, does God now hide Himself?

Verse 10: Being rejected by one's parents is a picture of being totally abandoned. However "[c]an a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you." (Isaiah 49:15)

Being taken up by the LORD looks back to verses 4 and 5.

Verses 11 - 12: Rather than two sets of three lines these verses may be three sets of two lines. That is, the last line of verse 11 goes with the first line of verse 12, rather than these lines going with the other lines in either verse.

Verse 11: This verse looks back to Psalm 26:12. They both refer to the idea of a level place to put one's feet.

This verse is a prayer for progress, not for comfort, as the Psalmist's enemies are continually vigilant.

Sanctuary is often found at the end of a path - see Psalms 43:3 - 4, 61:1 - 4, and 84:6 - 7.

Verse 12: When talking of wicked opponents Psalms often refer to their speech - see 31:18, 52:1 - 4, 63:11, 101:7, 120:2, and 114:7 - 8, 11. To be a false witness was to break one of the ten commandments (Exodus 20:16), and the only recourse of an accused innocent was to appeal directly to God at the shrine (Deuteronomy 19:17). False accusation is a metaphor for all the opposition faced by the faithful when they are misrepresented or misunderstood.

The 'will of [the] adversaries' could mean their appetite, a reference back to verse 2.

Verse 13: "[T]he land of the living" is, perhaps, a reference to the temple - see Psalms 52:5c and 116:9.

In the Hebrew this verse is an unfinished sentence. That it is unfinished implies that the Psalmist can pray as he or she has.

Verse 14: This is a positive way of saying 'Do not fear'. "Be strong and of good courage. Do not be afraid or dismayed." - see 1 Chronicles 22:13 and 28:20 and 2 Chronicles 32:7. It picks up the thoughts of verse 1, and, with its reference to 'heart', of verse 3. It is reminiscent of the repeated command given to Joshua "Be bold! Be strong! For the LORD your God is with you!" - see Deuteronomy 31:6 - 8, 23 and Joshua 1:6 - 7, 9, 18.

It is sufficient for the Psalmist that God is worth waiting for.

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