

Psalm 16

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[0 : 00] This is a passage that I'd like to speak on this evening, Psalm 16. The teacher asked the class the question, what is a saint?

And one little boy had recently visited one of the great English cathedrals. So he put up his hand and said, Miss, a saint is someone the light shines through.

He'd seen the beautiful stained glass windows depicting saints, with the sun streaming through them. And he said, a saint is someone the light shines through.

Actually, that little boy's answer had a lot of truth in it. A saint, in the biblical sense, is or should be someone the light of Christ shines through.

And what we have here in Psalm 16 is the testimony of a saint. He was an Old Testament saint.

[1 : 18] He lived long before Jesus came into this world. But he was a saint who trusted in God. And we can learn from the hallmarks of his faith, which are set out for us in this psalm.

The psalm is attributed to David, the shepherd boy who went on to become a great king of Israel. Presumably, it's rooted in a particular situation that David faced at some point.

We don't know what that was. But the psalm begins with a prayer. Keep me safe, O God, David says, for in you I take refuge.

David asks God to preserve his life. We don't know exactly what the danger was. But the psalm is more than simply a prayer for God's protection.

It reads more like David's testimony as to his present faith and his future hope. Whatever dangers he may be aware of, David isn't praying in desperation.

[2 : 37] He's praying with quiet confidence. Because he has found in God his greatest good. And he's convinced that not even death itself can rob him of fellowship with him.

David is praying as an established believer. He knows God intimately and he trusts him implicitly. That's why he's confident his life is safe in God's hands.

He has already experienced the Lord's grace and help in numerous ways. And so he's convinced that the Lord will not let him go now or in the future.

Two things are worth highlighting at this point. The first is that David's language in the psalm is very black and white. Look with me at some of the things he says.

Verse 2. I said to the Lord, you are my Lord. Apart from you, I have no good thing. Can any believer honestly say that he or she has no good thing apart from God?

[3 : 53] That God is all that matters to him or her? How realistic is that? And then there's verse 8 where David writes, I have set the Lord always before me.

Well, we know that David was a sinner. He was guilty of some very serious sins.

And yet he writes in this psalm, I have set the Lord always before me. How can we explain these expressions? Well, I think that what David is articulating here is his aspirations as a believer.

He's describing his essential mindset, his core convictions. As a believer, he knows that God is his highest good. He wants to live in a way that pleases him, even though his achievements may not always match his aspirations.

And of course, as Christians, we face a similar tension. The Apostle John writes in his letter, By this we know that we have come to know Jesus Christ if we keep his commandments.

[5 : 13] Whoever says, I know him but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected.

Christians, says John, keep Christ's commandments. Christians keep Christ's word. But elsewhere, the Apostle writes, If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. So when John says that Christians keep Christ's commandments, he doesn't mean that we keep them perfectly.

What he's saying is that obedience to God is an essential hallmark of the Christian life. Christians obey God. It's how we aspire to live if we're Christians at all.

And when we sin, it's a contradiction of who we really are. That's one thing.

[6 : 29] The second thing I'd like to highlight is this. The future hope that David expresses in the final verses of this psalm. Look at verses 9 to 11.

Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices. My body also will rest secure, because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay.

You have made known to me the path of life. You will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand. There are relatively few references to life beyond the grave in the pages of the Old Testament.

And that makes what David says here all the more remarkable. At one level, David's words may be rooted in his conviction that God will not let him, as his chosen king, meet an untimely end.

As I said, we don't know the exact historical circumstances in which the psalm was written. It may possibly express the confidence which sustained David during his months as an outlaw when he was fleeing from King Saul.

[7 : 52] But there's more than mere physical survival in the short term in what David says. He speaks of fullness of joy in God's presence, and of pleasures which are to be enjoyed at God's right hand forevermore.

Eternal pleasures. So it looks as if David had at least some awareness of life beyond death. Here then, in Psalm 16, we have a prayer, evoked by particular circumstances, in which David asks the Lord to preserve his life.

He prays with confidence because he's a believer. On the basis of all he has experienced of God, he's convinced he can commit himself into his hands.

And as generations of Old Testament saints sang these words, they too must have entrusted themselves, their present and their future, into the hands of God.

They must have had some inkling of life beyond the grave, a life with God, which would be unspeakably blessed.

[9 : 15] But there's another layer of meaning in this psalm which is highlighted for us in that passage we read from the book of Acts. That passage recounts part of the sermon which Peter preached on the day of Pentecost, shortly after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

Peter is at pains to explain to his hearers who Jesus is and what he has done. He tells them that Jesus was crucified but was raised from the dead because death could not hold him.

He quotes verses 8 to 11 of this psalm and goes on, Brothers, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried and his tomb is here to this day.

But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him an oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. Seeing what was ahead, he spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to the grave, nor did his body see decay.

God has raised this Jesus to life and we are all witnesses of the fact. Do you see what Peter's argument is?

[10 : 38] In the psalm, David speaks of not being abandoned to the grave, of his body not being left to decompose. But the fact was that David died and was buried.

His body remained in the grave and it did decay. So Peter is saying, David's words can't have found their ultimate fulfillment in his own experience.

The words he wrote about the conquest of death and the fullness of life must have been fulfilled only in the experience of David's illustrious descendant, Jesus.

In the book of Acts, it's not just Peter who quotes the words of this psalm and applies them to Jesus. Paul does the same thing when he preaches in Pisidian Antioch.

We thus have two apostles bearing witness to the fact that these closing verses are fully fulfilled only in Jesus.

[11 : 40] David may not have been making a conscious and deliberate prophecy of the resurrection of Jesus which was fully intelligible to himself.

After all, the Old Testament prophets often spoke wiser than they knew. But Peter and Paul make clear that there is a layer of meaning in these final verses which relates ultimately to the resurrection of Jesus.

And if that's the case, as it must be in the light of the apostolic witness, Jesus could equally well appropriate the rest of the psalm to himself too.

The black and white expressions which we looked at earlier fit him perfectly. After all, he was sinless. He was truly sinless. He lived a life in unbroken fellowship with his father.

It was to do his father's will that he came into the world in the first place. He could say without qualification, without reservation, I have set the Lord always before me because he is at my right hand.

[12 : 58] I shall not be shaken. And having lived a sinless life, he could be confident in the face of the cross that he would be delivered from death itself.

So we can read this psalm in relation to Jesus as reflecting his determination to do the Father's will in dependence on divine help and his confidence in the face of the cross that he would be raised to life again.

The psalm applied to David, but we can also see how it applies to Jesus.

But how can we apply this psalm to ourselves? Well, if we're Christians, we're united to Jesus by faith. We can therefore read, sing and pray this psalm in and with Jesus in the light of all that he is and all that he has done.

Because he lived the life we should have lived. He died the death we deserve to die. His life is our life. His death is our death.

[14 : 23] And because he defeated death and rose again, we too shall be raised to eternal life. His resurrection guarantees ours.

There's only one way to be made right with God. Nothing we can do will get us into heaven. We cannot work our passage to heaven. Only perfection passes muster with God.

And in Jesus, perfection has been provided for us. He is our righteousness. If we trust in him, his righteousness is put to our account.

The Apostle Paul writes, as by the one man's disobedience, the many were made sinners. So by the one man's obedience, the many will be made righteous.

That's why Horatius Bonner wrote the words, upon a life I did not live. Upon a death I did not die.

[15 : 28] Another's life, another's death. I stake my whole eternity. God the Father sees us in his Son.

We are accepted in the Lord Jesus. And in Jesus, we rejoice in the hope of eternal life. We can say that Psalm 16 reminds us of great David's greater Son and of all he has achieved through his life, death, and resurrection for us and for our salvation.

That's one way in which we can apply this psalm to ourselves. We can see how it applies to Jesus and how in Jesus that psalm is relevant to us today.

But I think we can also apply this psalm to ourselves simply as believers. Remember, the psalm was written originally by David as an ordinary believer.

If we're Christians, not only is the righteousness of Jesus put to our account, righteousness should increasingly characterize our lives.

[16 : 44] We're not saved by good works, but we are saved to do good works. Many years ago, the evangelist Michael Green brought out a book which he called New Life, New Lifestyle.

The basic premise of the book was that Christians receive new life at conversion and that new life should be reflected in a new lifestyle.

And in this respect, Psalm 16 challenges us as to the kind of lifestyle we have, as to how we are living out the life of faith.

And I'd like to draw your attention this evening to five things, very briefly, which mark David's lifestyle as a man of faith. five things which marked his lifestyle and which should also mark our lifestyle if we are Christians.

Number one, David finds his security in God. David finds his security in God. Keep me safe, O God, he writes, for in you I take refuge.

[18 : 08] I said to the Lord, you are my Lord. Apart from you, I have no good thing. It was the Lord who ultimately gave David stability and security in a world of danger and change and challenge.

It was the Lord who gave meaning and purpose to his life. David recognized that the Lord was his ultimate good. Now, I'm sure David appreciated his family and friends and the material comforts he enjoyed, but he realized that it was wrong to focus on these things.

These things ultimately came from God and so he focused not on the gifts but on the giver. Do you find that challenging?

I know I do. I suspect most of us, if we're honest, would have to admit we rely a lot on people and things rather than the Lord.

Perhaps it's our family. Perhaps it's our friends. Perhaps it's our own abilities. Perhaps it's our bank balance. Now, all these things are good but none of them is an ultimate good.

[19 : 33] Only the Lord is 100% reliable. He doesn't change and he promises never to leave us or forsake us. So, the question for you and for me is this, where do we find our security?

In the Lord or in his blessings? David challenges us here to make the Lord our refuge.

Number two, David chooses the company of God's people. Look at what he says in verses 3 and 4. As for the saints who are in the land, they are the glorious ones in whom is almighty light.

The sorrows of those will increase who run after other gods. I will not pour out their libations of blood or take up their names on my lips.

David here draws a distinction between the Israelites who honour God and those who engage in idolatry. He rates the godly and associates with them and he refuses to have anything to do with idolaters.

[20 : 51] others. No doubt he recognises that godly friends will encourage him in his faith and help him lead the sort of life that pleases God while close involvement with those who don't share his faith risks unsettling his commitment to the Lord.

David chooses the company of God's people. I wonder if that's something you need to think about. How wise are you in your choice of friends?

They may be nice people, they may be fun to be with, but do they encourage you to compromise your standards in particular situations?

Our society is becoming increasingly secular. people worship all kinds of idols. It's hard to be a Christian, a consistent Christian.

We need to choose our friends wisely. Over the years, I've found it a great blessing to have close friends who share my faith, who inspire me, and who encourage me to keep on keeping on, not least when the going is tough.

[22 : 13] number three, David is thankful for God's provision.

That's what he says in verses five and six. Lord, you have assigned me my portion and my cup. You have made my lot secure. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places.

Surely I have a delightful inheritance. The terms portion, lot, lines, and inheritance have to do with the apportionment of land.

When God appeared to Moses at the burning bush, he promised to rescue the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and to bring them to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

When in due course the Israelites entered Canaan, the land was allocated to the various tribes by lot. And that may well be the picture that David has in mind here.

[23 : 21] In fact, he may be alluding to the provision made for the services for the tribe of Levi in particular. The Levites, after all, were responsible for the services in the tabernacle and later the temple.

They were not allocated any land. Instead, they were supported by the tithes which the other tribes set aside for the Lord.

In Numbers chapter 20, the Lord says of the Levites, I am your portion. I am your portion and your inheritance among the people of Israel.

the 19th century preacher Andrew Bonner comments on this. The other tribes had a rich inheritance.

Levi had a rich God. I like that. Well, here David thanks God for what he has allotted to him in life.

[24 : 31] He recognizes it's the Lord who has ordered the circumstances of his life. Lord, you have assigned me my portion and my cup.

You have made my lot secure. And David was thankful for all that the Lord had given him. I wonder how often we thank God for the blessings we enjoy.

Gratitude is one of the marks of a healthy Christian. We ought to acknowledge God's goodness and give him thanks. Now, there may be times in life when that is hard, when we find it very difficult to say that the lines have fallen for us in pleasant places.

But even in these situations, we can be thankful that our lives are in God's hands. that he knows what we're doing, what he's doing, even if we don't.

We can draw encouragement from the promise that in all things, the Lord is at work for the ultimate good of those who love him.

[25 : 49] David is thankful for God's provision. Number four, David delights in God's presence.

Verses seven and eight, I will praise the Lord who counsels me. Even at night my heart instructs me. I have set the Lord always before me.

Because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken. David meditates in God's word. He reflects on it even in the night.

God consciously cultivates the Lord's presence. He sets the Lord always before him. And God is at his right hand to uphold him and strengthen him.

And as a result, his life has stability. I shall not be shaken, he says. That's the psalmist's testimony. In short, David lives in the good of all that God is.

[26 : 56] If we delighted more in God's presence, I'm sure there would be much more stability in our lives too. David delights in God's presence.

Number five, David rejoices at the prospect of eternal life. The psalmist looks forward to the prospect of being filled with joy in God's presence.

He anticipates eternal pleasures at God's right hand. That is surely a challenge for us because however much David knew about life beyond the grave, it's certain that we know far more because we live this side of the resurrection.

But the question is, do we share David's anticipation? These days, it's so easy to dismiss that kind of anticipation as somehow super spiritual.

After all, isn't there a real risk that we're so heavenly minded we're of no earthly use? peace? But this world is not our home.

[28 : 13] And if we believe that our glorious and eternal future awaits us, shouldn't that energize us and inspire us? One thing is sure, it's only if we enjoy fellowship with God here and now that we shall relish the prospect of life in his nearer presence.

these then are five characteristics of David's life of faith, five characteristics of the righteous lifestyle he pursued.

David finds his security in God. David chooses the company of God's people. David is thankful for God's provision. David delights in God's presence.

And David rejoices at the prospect of eternal life. There's an obvious intentionality about what David says in this psalm.

He will not take the names of other gods on his lips. He sets the Lord always before him. He consciously follows him. There's nothing haphazard or half-hearted about how David goes about things.

[29 : 32] He makes deliberate choices. In the same way, the Christian life requires effort and intentionality.

We need to work out our salvation, but we can do so only by God's grace, as we play our part. God works in us both to will and to do according to his good pleasure.

I remember a friend telling me how he was in America on one occasion and went to a school closing ceremony and he was intrigued by the fact that the advice that was given by the school captain to the school was your attitude determines your altitude.

I won't try to adopt an American accent. It would work dreadfully. But it is true that in the Christian life so often our attitude will determine our altitude because effort is involved.

It's only on the basis of Christ's righteousness that we are made right with God. But if we have been made right with God we ought to be becoming more righteous in practice.

[31 : 03] And one way of telling if we are is to ask ourselves if we share these five hallmarks of the life of faith which David sets out for us in this psalm.

Remember the definition, the schoolboy's definition of a saint? A saint is someone the light shines through.

May we be people through whom the light shines this year by God's grace. Shall we pray?

Amen. Lord, you know that we find your word so often challenging as we have looked at what David was able to say about his own lifestyle as an Old Testament believer.

Father, we realize just how fitful our Christian lives so often are. Lord, we ask for your grace to be people through whom your light shines.

[32 : 24] May we find our ultimate security in you and may we reflect your glory in all that we do for Jesus' sake.

Amen.