

Alphabetting Toward Deliverance

1

Once every month our church puts on a lunch for university students after the second worship service, and my wife usually volunteers to provide a dessert. However, it is a highly regimented dessert. One cannot freewheel. There may be six or eight people providing desserts. The dessert is specified. Foil pans are provided. There is a standard recipe to be followed. Let's say it is banana pudding. The recipe will specify how many bananas are to be sliced, what kind and how much vanilla pudding mix is to be used, how thick the layer of 'Cool Whip' on the top is to be, and so on. All this 'controls' the process and all contributions are pretty much the same. All dessert-makers have to work within that structure.

That's the way it is with Psalm 25. It follows an acrostic structure, in which each verse begins with the subsequent letter of the Hebrew alphabet (for the most part). Since the psalm must adhere to this alphabetical pattern there can

be certain consequences. For instance, it may be harder to trace connected lines of thought in the psalm. Not a big deal, but those of us with a western kind of thought process like to carve things up in manageable, coherent chunks and that can be harder to do when a writer is focusing on telling about something following an A-to-Z, item-by-item, pattern. However, as long as we don't try to be too rigid, I think we can see certain *dominant emphases* as we walk through the psalm.

The first of these we may call **petitions** (vv. 1-7). There are several matters David prays about here and the first is for *the relief of God's deliverance* (vv. 1-3). His prayer here strikes notes of assurance in verses 1 and 3 with his petition sandwiched in between in verse 2. That plea is: 'Let me not be put to shame; don't let my enemies gloat over me' (v. 2b). Yet note with his plea the sure confidence, especially in verse 3: 'Indeed, all who wait for you will never be put to shame; those who are treacherous for no reason will be put to shame.' Such a resounding, Apostles'-Creed-type certainty in verse 3, and yet in verse 2 the very same matter pressed in urgent prayer. All of which is not contradictory but rather instructive. How are we to express our faith in Yahweh's vindication (v. 3) except in our prayer in instances of such particular need (v. 2)? Indeed, are not most of our prayers a mix of assurance (vv. 1, 3) and anxiety (v. 2), of trust and trouble?

His second petition is for *the enjoyment of God's ways* (vv. 4-5): 'Make me to know your ways, Yahweh, teach me your paths.' And then, 'Lead me in your faithfulness.' What are we to make of these 'ways' and 'paths'? We usually think of them, I suppose, as the ways of God's

commandments, the ways He requires of us. And sometimes that is clearly the sense (e.g., Exod. 32:8; Ps. 119:32, 33). But the more I ponder this text the more I lean to J. A. Alexander's position that here the 'ways' and 'paths' are not referring to the ways God commands but to the ways He *operates*, not to the ways of precepts but of *providence*, not what He demands but how He deals with His people.¹ Verse 5a seems to support this, since the traditional 'lead me in your truth' is better translated 'in your faithfulness'. Moreover, verse 10 seems to carry the same sense: 'All the paths of Yahweh are unfailing love and faithfulness to those who keep his covenant and testimonies.' So he seems to be praying that Yahweh will teach him how He is working in his case (v. 4) and to let him experience His faithfulness (v. 5) as he goes on. Isn't this what so thrills a Christian believer? He or she can look back and sometimes trace those 'ways' of the saving God. Ways and paths that sometimes seemed twisted, looking as if they operated by hook or by crook, and yet we found that disappointments led to deliverances, frustrations to escapes from temptations, and difficulties strangely prevented disaster. And when the Lord gives us a glimpse of those ways, we know why we long for Him all day long (v. 5b).

David's third petition seeks *the warmth of God's compassions* (vv. 6-7). He uses the verb 'remember' (*zākar*) three times, two positively and one in between these two negatively:

1 J. A. Alexander, *The Psalms Translated and Explained* (1864; reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.), 114-15.

Remember your compassions ... acts of grace ...

Do not remember the sins of my youth or my rebellions ...

In line with your unfailing love you must remember me ...

Yahweh's compassions and acts of grace (lit., 'your *heseds*') are 'from everlasting'. So verse 6 speaks of a whole, ongoing history of divine kindness. The phrase 'from everlasting' reminds us that Yahweh has always been this way! Cynical students at a small college sometimes observe that on days when potential new students visit the campus the food service really puts out an impressive meal or two. But after the visitors are gone it all reverts to much poorer fare. But Yahweh is not like that – compassions and grace are His always-style of operating. Then David asks for a particular instance of Yahweh's kindness: 'do not remember the sins of my youth and my rebellions' (v. 7a). David *can* remember them; that's why he asks Yahweh not to do so. How the 'sins of (our) youth' can come parading before us! And they may not have been racy godless ones. Simply that I manipulated people, that sometimes I *desired* to hurt them, that I had little conscious gratitude for all I had received, that I was, as sadly I have always been, wrapped up in an idolatry of self. How marvelous then a non-remembering God!

I hesitate a bit to pass on an anecdote that once appeared in *Leadership* magazine, because it may appear to be too mystical. There was a woman in a town in the Philippines who was said to have intimate converse with the Lord.