

Psalm Twenty-Six

Vindicate me, O LORD,
for I have walked in my integrity,
and I have trusted in the LORD without wavering.
Prove me, O LORD, and try me;
test my heart and mind.
For your steadfast love is before my eyes,
and I walk in faithfulness to you.

I do not sit with the worthless,
nor do I consort with hypocrites;
I hate the company of evildoers,
and will not sit with the wicked.

I wash my hands in innocence,
and go around your altar, O LORD,
singing aloud a song of thanksgiving,
and telling all your wondrous deeds.

O LORD, I love the house in which you dwell,
and the place where your glory abides.
Do not sweep me away with sinners,
nor my life with the bloodthirsty,
those in whose hands are evil devices,
and whose right hands are full of bribes.

But as for me, I walk in my integrity;
redeem me, and be gracious to me.
My foot stands on level ground;
in the great congregation I will bless the LORD.

Founded in 1992, The Innocence Project is a non-profit organization that works to overturn the sentences of people who have been wrongfully-convicted. Their method – DNA testing – has exonerated a growing number of individuals, many of whom have consistently maintained that they are not guilty.*

Psalm Twenty-Six opens with a “protestation of innocence.”* The writer, whom we are told is David, maintains that he is not guilty. He has walked in integrity and trusted God without wavering (v.1b). He has been faithful to God’s ways, and frequented God’s dwelling place (v.8). And so, like the thousands of prisoners who write to the Innocence Project every year, he looks to God for vindication (v.1a)

The writer’s problem, it appears, is the same as the one that they claim to have. He has been falsely accused. And it is no use appealing through the system, because standard judicial methods are flawed. Eyewitness memory is unreliable, suspect misidentification is common, and false confessions are made all the time, if it means serving shorter time or avoiding death row.*

And so, like them, the psalm-writer desperately searches for a more reliable form of defense. He knows that God alone can see the facts for what they really are, and prove the truth of the matter (v.2). God alone can attest to the accuracy of his alibis – that he was not with the worthless, the hypocrites, and the wicked at the time of the crime (vv.4-5).

Scholars debate about the original setting of this psalm. Some have suggested that it is best understood as being written by one who has sought asylum in the temple. Having been subject to condemnation, the writer, who insists that he is blameless throughout, brings his case before God. We sense a kind of urgency and torment as we listen to his prayer. He pleads to be spared the coming punishment. He begs God to not be locked up with the others – the sinners, the bloodthirsty, those whose hands are evil devices and full of bribes (vv.9-10).

How long has he lived with this? The Innocence Project list statistics on their website – 5284 years of prison time collectively served for crimes that were later proven, by genetic testing, to have been committed by someone else. The average age at the time of wrongful conviction is 26 years old. And the average age by the time the ruling is reversed based on scientific evidence is 43.* How long has it been?

We picture him standing at the temple altar, washing his hands – an act of ritual purification (v.6). Whether the accusation came from others or within (or both); whether he has borne it for a day or for years, it does not matter, for he bears it no more. He sings now, thanking the God who is the true Judge and truly just (v.7).

At the end of the day, however, we might still be left with the question as readers. Was he truly innocent? Because I’ve spent time with people who, despite an overwhelming abundance of reliable evidence and testimony, still claim they are the victim of some conspiracy. In this way, Psalm Twenty-Six is perhaps best seen as representing just one part of David’s far-from-guilt-free life, and viewed alongside the psalms of confession that also bear his name.

While prisoner advocacy and criminal justice reform are important issues for our day, there is another wisdom here as well. Because, if you are like me, you are prone to defensiveness, when it comes to the little comments and conflicts we tend to deal with day in and out. We are reminded that there are some things worth arguing about and appealing, and there are some times when it is enough to let it go, and come before God, trusting that God knows the truth of our history and our hearts. It is there that we find level ground to stand on (v.12).

** For this meditation, I relied on James H. Waltner’s commentary on the Psalms (Herald), and information available at www.innocenceproject.org.*