

meditative reflections on Psalm 25:1-10
(14July19)

⁷God, do not remember the sins of my youth and my transgressions; Graciously remember me according to your steadfast love and for the sake of your goodness, O LORD.

The sins of my youth.

Does this Psalm remember when I stole the spray paint from my dad's work bench, tested it out on the back of the garage door, then lied in trying to deny that I was familiar with a certain culprit who'd put that paint there?

Maybe it's the namecalling I used to do in playground competitions or the fierce figuring of identities in middle school, taunts now deemed both culturally inappropriate and individually harmful.

Or perhaps the Psalm's sins of my youth relate to difficulties of having parented me, that I was a little jerk, obstinate, unkind, selfish.

I had a professor at seminary. I think he was about 80, but was still the sharpest guy around. Discussing whether we can actually improve our behavior and become less sinful, he said in older age some sins just weren't as interesting to him anymore. So are those what this Psalm means by sins of my youth?

What about more serious ones that come later? What if I'd just as soon forget some of these things ever happened?

Even though this Psalm prays for forgetting, that those are not remembered, still some of that setting aside begins as we call them to mind. We realize these things *can* be detrimental, harm the relationship, have lasting damage. They aren't just bygones. They are relevant. So we admit. We confess. We recognize that we don't stand blameless and self-confident. We ask for mercy: Kyrie eleison.

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So what to do about those sins of my youth that don't go away?

The Psalm doesn't say Give me another crack at it and I'll be a better boy. It's no claim I used to be a stinker but am a pretty nice guy right now. It's not

asking God to consider my good in comparison and hope it outweighs the bad.

For judicial or legal interpretations, if the sins of my youth are a crime, if I transgress or trespass against God, then God is both the prosecution and the judge, and I can't offer much in defense. In a courtroom, the mitigating factors trying to divert and look at a bigger picture may try to ask for some leniency, some mercy. But they are never enough to cancel the offense. And we live with a reality where convictions don't really ever go away; in our society, functionally you can never be an ex-con. It always defines and limits you.

Yet in this Psalm and the vast biblical understanding of this relationship, the sins of my youth are not definitive. The transgression does not define you. You are much more than the worst thing you've done or the sum of all the little bad things. You are not limited.

You are actually more than the sum of all your parts. It's not only about being critical when you look in the mirror versus overly generous, nor even about complete honesty. It's not just you. As the Psalm recognizes, this is about how God chooses to see you, how God considers you. And that's not just knowing everything about you, God knowing you more than you know yourself. This is knowing God, who God is, and what that means. Your sin doesn't define you because God won't let it. God doesn't operate with those definitions. You are remembered not on account of yourself, but on God's account, with steadfast love and goodness.

This doesn't fit a courtroom setting. It's as if a case were decided not with a verdict of innocence or guilt, not with charges dropped, not even with a leniency of punishment, but decided based on the integrity of the judge.

When God looks at you, God doesn't see good person or bad person, doesn't see somebody struggling to do right. Of course, God knows all those things and is operating within them. But primarily God looks at you and remembers God's own goodness. You are not being evaluated and judged. You, rather, are being loved.

The voice of this God, choosing and claiming you, persists in the assurance, "Do not be afraid; I am with you...I love you and you are mine." (ELW 581)

⁷God, do not remember the sins of my youth and my transgressions; Graciously remember me according to your steadfast love and for the sake of your goodness, O LORD.

At this point, you've remembered the sins of your youth plus more recent ones, maybe up to when you walked through the doors this morning. You've remembered them in order to have them not remembered by God. You are remembered as beloved, according to God's goodness. You are defined not by your worst, nor even portrayed in the kindest light. Your identity instead is summarized in relationship with God whose love is steadfast and whose goodness will never fail.

So now what?

One approach might come through the word "shame," which we read three times and comes up once more later toward the end of the Psalm's alphabet. Joyce Anderson asked about the word at Beer & Bible on Tuesday, so I did some looking through the 115 Old Testament verses where it is used.

Joyce wondered if it related to how others perceive your faith, your relationship with God. Those verses do have a lot of that. You may have concerns about being identified as a Christian, about how that's perceived. For most of us, it isn't physically risky, but may be seen as offensive, as if people like us are the powerful problem causers in this country. Or it may just seem weird, unreasonable, a little foolish. That may fit with shame.

Aside from other's opinions, though this is mainly whether you can trust this relationship as you interact with the world.

A major way this shame term is used is about those who worship other gods, and instead of shame it can be translated as "confounded." For us it's probably less useful to picture graven images and bowing down to carved idols. But we certainly can understand it as worldview. If your whole mentality and project and what you termed "success" were to get rich, to make lots of money, but then you discovered that didn't make you happy and didn't really matter or was even harmful, you'd have to reevaluate your whole life. You would be confounded. You'd be kind of lost. Your efforts would be pointless.

We could say the same if you put all your eggs in the basket of your career or striving for a cause or of parenting or sports or doing new things or maintaining traditions or whatever. Pursuing those paths stand to be frustrated, confounded, perhaps pointless in some degree for your efforts.

Which must prompt the question of why your relationship with God might be the thing that wouldn't be frustrating or would seem so entirely worthwhile. When it seems to have so little direct payoff, why put so high of trust in this?

It may not measure up against those former categories of success. It may not increase your paycheck or your popularity. It may not help you win. Maybe the definition is because this is life, this is the way to live, this is the most in tune. Because this is who you're supposed to be, who you are.

The very first place the shame term is used is in the Garden of Eden. God creates the earthlings, and it says they were wandering around naked, and they were not ashamed (Genesis 2:25). They were who they were supposed to be.

Picture that as your degree of confidence in this relationship with God. It means the sins of your youth, those marks that would seem to besmirch or scar you, what would be labeled as faults are not held against you. You are held in the love and goodness of God. That frees you to live. You are freed to encounter life unadorned, not putting make-up to cover those old blemishes. You, without shame, could walk down 5th Avenue or Old Sauk Road naked as the day you were created (at least metaphorically). You've got nothing that you need to hide, because all that matters in the end is God's goodness. That is how you may live, shameless, confident in understanding yourself and encountering the world. With God, this is who you are.