

Psalm 16:1-4

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/ps/ps-16/psalm-161-4/>

David turns to the Lord for his safety and refuge and acknowledges that the only path to true safety is in the Lord.

Though the Psalms are numbered and we read, study, meditate, or sing individual Psalms, there is an overarching context that will help us keep them connected:

While the individual Psalm may be a lament, a praise, a prayer, or a cry for help, the context is shaped by who God is; the infinite God of all creation,

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”
(Genesis 1:1)

We come to Him on His terms, not ours. Also, by what He does. He establishes His covenant with His people, which is almost incomprehensible,

“I will also walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people.”
(Leviticus 26:12)

This is the context of all we are and all we do. Psalm 16 does not seem to be a cry for help or deliverance in a particular situation, but rather a clarity of vision of who God is as we consider where our true confidence lies.

Psalm 16 is acknowledged as a Psalm of David. However, there is a new term introduced. This psalm is called a *Mikhtam of David*; the word *Mikhtam* has not appeared before in the Psalms. We do not see the term again until Psalms 56-60, also Psalms of David. The term is relatively obscure and while some have tried to give it specific meanings, perhaps the nearest we can come without overreaching is what may be the root meaning of “cover.” However, it is best to exercise caution in trying to determine an exact meaning of this term.

David begins this psalm, writing, *Preserve me, O God, for I take refuge in You*. The word *preserve* carries the meaning of “watch,” “guard,” or “keep” in the original Hebrew language. Since we do not find a specific call for deliverance or help in the rest of the Psalm, it would seem that David is both acknowledging and seeking a continual protection. This, then, can be considered a Psalm of confidence and that confidence can be found in no other place, person, or god: *O God...I take refuge in you*.

Refuge is probably not a word that we use often, or at all. The Webster’s dictionary definition of *refuge* is enlightening: “a shelter or protection from danger or distress, a place that provides shelter or protection, something to which one has recourse in difficulty.” While David proclaims

that his refuge is found in God, man more often looks for a “shelter,” a “place,” or a “something” when we face danger, distress, or difficulty.

David addresses God directly: *I said to the Lord, “You are my Lord.”* We can ask ourselves, “Why would David say that?” Is that not redundant, particularly if this is some kind of prayer or song of praise? For David, this was the center focus not only of this Psalm, but of his life as a servant and worshipper of God. It is therefore worth repeating. As humans we need constant repetition to remember what is true. This would tell us that an ongoing confession of our faith is an important aspect of maintaining our fellowship with God, and staying in touch with reality.

We are reminded of the confession of Peter (Matthew 16:13-20). In response to the question that Jesus asks, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answers, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” When Peter says “You are the Christ,” he is confessing that Jesus is the anointed one, the Messiah, the one in whom they will put all of their hope. This confession of Peter carries the same gravity of that of David when he says, *You are my Lord*. Jesus confirms this when He answers, “I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.” What is this “rock” that Jesus will build His church upon? It is the confession that He, Jesus, is the “the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

For David, and later for Peter, it was more than just words. Living out that confession forms our life that will fulfill God’s purpose (Ephesians 2:10). But both David and Peter made a verbal confession as a part of their walk of faith.

David continues, *I have no good besides You*. This is a rather startling statement! Our first thought is perhaps that this is hyperbole. Sometimes, particularly in a worship setting, we may be tempted to say, think, or pray things that later, in the ordinary movements of life, do not seem to be rooted in reality. What could David possibly mean in this proclamation, that there is *no good* other than God? In our present age, particularly those of us who live in the USA, we struggle to make sense of this because we have access to so many “good” things.

We can gain insight into some of what David meant from other Scriptures. The Psalmist (most likely Asaph, who, according to 1 Chronicles 16:4-5, was appointed by David as a liturgical leader to “celebrate and to thank and praise the God of Israel”) in Psalm 73:25, says “Whom have I in heaven but You? And besides You, I desire nothing on earth.” Paul, in his letter to the church at Philippi, declares that “More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ” (Philippians 3:8).

We still might be tempted to temporize the meaning until we read the words of Jesus in John 15:5, “I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.” Upon reflection, all that is good stems from God. And all that is good is of God. Just as Jesus is the creator and sustainer of all things, all that is good is from and through God (Colossians 1:16-17). Therefore, this is not hyperbole; God is the source and substance of all that is good.

David then reflects on God’s people,

*As for the saints who are in the earth,
They are the majestic ones in whom is all my delight.*

Who is being referred to here as *saints*? The word translated as *saints* means “holy ones.” The idea of being “holy” in both the Old and New testament is to be set apart for special service, like special silverware for a special meal. God’s people Israel were set apart as a special people to serve as priests to the other nations (Exodus 19:6). They had a special job, a holy job, to demonstrate to other nations that God’s ways lead to life. God’s commands to live in a love-your-neighbor manner leads to human flourishing, rather than the violence and poverty that stems from the exploit-your-neighbor ethic of paganism.

This passage however appears to refer to *saints* or “holy ones” as those who look to the Lord God and who declare their faith and allegiance to Him. This is because the psalmist refers to *the majestic ones in whom is all my delight*. Those who walk in the ways of God, obeying His commands, are *majestic*. When God’s people reflect His nature by walking in His ways, David sees it as *majestic*, and it gives him great *delight*.

This verse poses a question for us as we ponder the designation of “saints.” Most of us who are followers of Christ would be reluctant to refer to ourselves as “saints” or “holy ones” because we know we are also sinners (1 John 1:8). However, the scripture designates as *saints* those who are set apart for His purposes. In the New Testament all who have believed upon Jesus are called *saints* (Romans 1:7, 15:26, 16:15; 1 Corinthians 1:2 14:33; 2 Corinthians 1:1; Ephesians 1:1). This is appropriate, since all who are spiritually born again through faith in Jesus are declared righteous in God’s sight because they are placed into the death of Jesus, and raised in His life (Romans 6:3-4). So the set-apartness of the New Testament believer is due to the holiness of Jesus that believers appropriate by faith.

Throughout Scripture, the thread for any designation for “holy” is something or someone that belongs to God. Nothing is holy outside of God; all that belongs to God is holy, and all He makes holy is holy. So, the people of God who are living in His initiated covenant, as referenced above in Leviticus, are holy. Almost all of Paul’s epistles to the churches are written to the *saints*, or holy ones, who are in Christ Jesus, who belong to Jesus. They are His because they are born anew into His family by faith (John 3:3, 14-16).

Peter writes that God’s people in Christ are a “holy nation” (1 Peter 2:9). Peter’s primary audience in his epistle is likely Jewish (1 Peter 1:1) and Israel was called by God to be a “kingdom of priests” to the nations (Exodus 19:6). Peter could be reminding his fellow Jews of their original calling, and is asking them to walk in a manner worthy of that calling. It is perhaps easier to say that “I’m just a sinner saved by grace” and not accept the significant responsibility that comes along with such a great gift. The reality is that all who belong to God are called to walk as Jesus walked (Matthew 5:48). It is true for all who believe that we are a sinner saved by grace. But it is equally true that we are now a child of God, a witness or ambassador of God, a friend of Jesus, a “saint” who belongs to God through Christ.

They are the majestic ones in whom is all my delight. *Majestic* can also carry the sense of “glorious” or “noble” ones. As David declares the truth and his own declaration that his refuge

and keeping are in the Lord and that he has *no good besides Him*, he declares that he takes *delight* in the *saints* in the land. The dictionary defines the word “delight” as a “high degree of gratification, pleasure, or joy.” When used as a verb, it is to take great pleasure or delight in someone or something. Believers in Jesus please or delight God when we walk in faith, trusting that His reward is superior to anything we can gain from the rewards of this world (Hebrews 11:6).

The sorrows of those who have bartered for another god will be multiplied. The word “bartered” carries with it the sense of “running” or “hurrying” after other gods. For David, this seems to be a stark contrast with what he has proclaimed and declared in the previous verses. In running after other gods, one would trade the delight of God for multiplied sorrows.

It is likely that those who are hastening after these other gods are seeking delight, joy, pleasure, and happiness. This is the natural bent for humans. Our basic choice as humans is whether to seek joy and pleasure through the ways of the world, or through the ways of God. The world proposes that joy and pleasure comes through the fulfillment of our lusts (1 John 2:15). We inevitably seek to fulfill lusts through exploitation of others or self-harm. This leads us to choose God’s wrath, which is to give us over to the natural consequences of poor choices (Romans 1:18, 24, 26, 28). This inevitably leads to great *sorrows*. The pagan ways of exploitation and self-abuse lead to *sorrows* that are *multiplied*.

Sorrows is a strong word that can even indicate bruises or sores. If we can follow David’s train of thought, it can be helpful to us in our own journey. If we can come to the place where we can say *I have no good besides You*, that will give us a lens with which to see the other “gods.” The other gods are idols that promise delight in exchange for service, but they instead deliver *sorrows* that are *multiplied*.

We can see the perspective in 2 Corinthians 5:14-16 of looking at life through a different lens, the lens of the love of Christ,

“For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; and He died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf. Therefore from now on we recognize no one according to the flesh; even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him in this way no longer.”

When we can see through the lens that Christ died for us and that this changes everything, we can more clearly see God, His purpose, and experience His love, sometimes even delight. God created us with a purpose to serve others, rather than to merely live for ourselves. It is in serving others in harmony with God that we fulfill the purpose God granted us when He created us ([see commentary on Psalm 8](#)). When we serve others, we are loving our neighbors, and even our enemies (Romans 12:19-21). When we persevere in doing good, it pleases God, and He promises to greatly honor such service to Him (Romans 2:7).

David then highlights two acts of worship that would be expressions of idolatry which are detestable to Him, in contrast to the saints in whom he delights:

*I shall not pour out their drink offerings of blood,
Nor will I take their names upon my lips.*

One act that is detestable to God is to *pour out their drink offerings of blood*. The word “libation” could be used to describe this false worship, in place of *pour out*. People would bring a blood sacrifice to a “god” and *pour out* this sacrifice to whatever god they were worshipping. In performing this act, they were submitting themselves to a particular deity. In return, they may also be asking to be forgiven or delivered from the wrath of their particular god, or perhaps to be granted some favor. The pagan gods were transactional, and provided a moral rationale for self-seeking behavior. Self-seeking behavior is, in reality, self-destructive behavior.

The second act that is detestable to God is *to take their names upon my lips*. Sometimes these acts of worship were taken together. A worshipper might take the cup of sacrifice to his own lips or even drink it in the name of his own deity. David is declaring his own fidelity to Yahweh (the I Am) by firmly stating that he would *not pour out their drink offerings of blood* and that he definitely would not *take their names upon my lips*.

While we may applaud David, we are tempted to basically ignore these declarations because they are not anything we can really relate to. However, they speak to us in terms of our own measures of idolatry. When we think of idolatry at all, we picture someone having a physical idol, i.e. a statue or bust of some god or other that we may chant to or rub our hands on or some other ritual. But the primary principle in play is a self-seeking transaction between the worshipper and the idol.

This passage should remind us of how pervasive and serious the sin of idolatry really is. Idolatry is entering into any kind of self-seeking transaction that is apart from faith in God and His ways to seek our own happiness. The reality of seeking happiness in any manner apart from God’s command to focus on serving and loving others is that it will inevitably lead to misery and self-harm.

The commandments of God are clear: “You shall have no other gods before Me... You shall not make for yourselves an idol... You shall not worship them or serve them... You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.” These do not often make our radar and we give them little thought. However, these commandments are given for our good (Deuteronomy 10:13). The LORD desires that His children prosper and thrive (Jeremiah 29:11). He gives us His commands in order to instruct us in the ways that lead us to life. Paradoxically, the true way to life is through death:

“And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who has found his life will lose it, and he who has lost his life for My sake will find it.”
(Matthew 10:38-39)

It is when we set aside our fleshly desires that we find the fulfillment of our deepest desires.

While we may be tempted to think that God’s commands relating to idols are not relevant for our day, Jesus summarizes them aptly in Matthew 6:24, “No one can serve two masters; for either he

will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.” He follows this up in verse 33 by stating, “But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness.” The end of Matthew 6:33 asserts that all our true needs and deepest desires will be met when we seek first His kingdom, “and all these things will be added to you.”

We live in a world where multi-tasking has taken on a new meaning, especially with our smart phones. We can carry on conversations with multiple people while having a conversation with someone else face to face. Many of us have been trying to multi-task, or compartmentalize with God for a long time. In our modern age in the West, we have many possible “gods” with which to transact. We can trade our service for a promise of happiness with money, pleasure, power, success, material possessions, work, relationships or even religious service. Rather than trusting that God knows what is best for us, and trusting His ways, we can instead try to place God wherever He conveniently fits.

When we compartmentalize God, we typically do not see this as idolatry, but any time we substitute our own transactions in place of obedience to God, we are outside of God’s best for us. David’s words are reminders of who God is, who we are, and that we *have no good besides Him*.

Biblical Text

Preserve me, O God, for I take refuge in You.

² I said to the Lord, “You are my Lord;

I have no good besides You.”

³ As for the saints who are in the earth,

They are the majestic ones in whom is all my delight.

⁴ The sorrows of those who have bartered for another god will be multiplied;

I shall not pour out their drink offerings of blood,

Nor will I take their names upon my lips.