

Who Can Live In God's Presence?

Text: Psalm 15:1-5

Series: Psalms. [#12]

Lyle L. Wahl

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Theme: **God Welcomes And Gives Stability To Believers Living With Integrity.**

Introduction

Access is an important issue. Accessibility to buildings, government services, education and employment receives a great amount of attention. But there also are areas where access must be controlled and restricted. Last Sunday a lady made the headlines when she left the crowds outside St. James Cathedral in Toronto, walked up to the Queen, and struck up a conversation. She carried a black plastic bag which she handed to the Queen. There was nothing dangerous in the bag, just a commemorative St. James Cathedral tea towel. A RCMP spokesman said, "Obviously there was a security breach there." Security protocols will be reviewed.¹ Access to government leaders and others who hold important positions must be controlled and restricted.

Question: *What about God?* What about access to God? This is an important question. The Bible tells us that God created us to know Him, to live in a relationship with Him. So it is important to know the who and how of access to God. In Psalm 15 King David raises the question *Who can live in God's presence?* He also gives us the answer. Let's examine this question, explore the answer and then embrace the promise that God gives.

Examining The Question.

Verse 1. "O LORD, who may abide in Your tent? Who may dwell on Your holy hill?" The Bible touches on several aspects of this question. At the close of the New Testament we read,

"The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.' And let the one who hears say, 'Come.' And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost."

(Revelation 22:17)

But Jesus also said, "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him" (John 6:44). These two reference do mesh and relate to one aspect of the question, to salvation.

But there also is the question of how believers God has called and who have come have ongoing access to God. Jesus said,

"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened." (Matthew 7:7-8)

But in Psalm 66 we also read “If I regard wickedness in my heart, the Lord will not hear” (18). These two statements also mesh and relate to another aspect of the question, to believers having access to God, to believers living in God’s presence.

Psalm 15’s opening question is not about salvation. The Bible makes it clear that salvation, that being forgiven of sin and accepted by God, has always been God’s gift of grace through faith. No one can become good enough or do enough good things to earn God’s forgiveness and acceptance. God’s standard is perfect holiness.

In Genesis 15 Moses tells us that Abram “believed in the LORD; and He [the LORD] reckoned it [Abram’s faith] to him as righteousness” (15:6). The apostle Paul wrote, “having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:1), and, “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Beyond the fact that this Psalm is King David’s personal testimony as a believer about fellowship with God, if this question was about salvation the description of verses 2-5 would mean that one could earn salvation.

The king’s question is about fellowship. It is about how a person of true faith can enter the presence of God while not being free from all sin. Understand that perfection is not the issue. Abraham was not perfect, Moses was not perfect, David was not perfect, Paul was not perfect, yet they were able to live in God’s presence. The answer lies in the desire of our hearts lived out by God’s grace through a commitment to be holy, to be like Christ. Verses 2-5 give us a representative list of what that looks like. We saw another one earlier as we read Psalm 24.

God saved us so we, so each and every believer, could have free, ongoing fellowship with Him. The apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 1:9 that God called us “into *fellowship* with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” The apostle John tells believers in the opening lines of his first letter

“what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our *fellowship* is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ.” (1 John 1:3)

While God does not forget about us, let alone revoke our salvation every time we sin, when we sin we distance ourselves from Him. Remember King David’s testimony about this in Psalm 32. When he did not deal with his sin God’s “hand was heavy upon [him]” (4). He was not close to God. Even though for a time he may have thought everything was fine. As well, he felt the effects in his whole being as his body groaned and his vitality was drained away (3-4). After he confessed and repented of his sin, he wrote, “How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered! How blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit!” (1-2).

Going back to 1 John, the apostle continues his word to believers, telling us to “walk in the Light” and that when we sin, “If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and righteous to

forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:5-9). So the question is how can believers be in God’s presence, how can we enjoy open, full fellowship with Him? The answer which we are going to explore is, in a word, *integrity*. This psalm tells us that *God welcomes and gives stability to believers living with integrity*.

Exploring The Answer.

Yes, believers living in God’s presence, enjoying fellowship with Him have *integrity*. Verse 2 begins the answer to the question, “He who walks with integrity...” This word *integrity* means to be complete, to be whole, to be sound. It is also translated as blameless, perfect, without blemish, without defect, and upright. The idea is to line up with the facts or truth. It pictures a believer whose life lines up with, agrees with the character of God, and so is whole, complete, as it ought to be. In the parallelism of this poetry, David fills out this term integrity with doing what is right before God and speaking truth—that which is correct and so also trustworthy.

Some time after Abram believed in God and was declared righteous, God told him “I am God almighty; walk before Me, and be *blameless*” (Genesis 17:1b). God told Abram to be in fellowship with Him, and He linked that to, described that as being *blameless*. That is, living out God’s character in his heart and actions, and so being complete, being as he should be. There were not to be disconnects between his life and God’s truth, nor between his inner and outer, his private and public life.

While this does not mean that believers with integrity don’t sin (for they do), it means their character and the pattern of their lives line up with God’s character and actions. David states his commitment to live with integrity in Psalm 101. “I will give heed to the *blameless* way. When will You come to me? I will walk within my house in the *integrity* of my heart” (2). Integrity is the underlying quality and overall description of believers who have full, close, rich fellowship with God. All the specifics that follow in this Psalm are part of this integrity.

So we need to examine our lives in terms of and commit ourselves to being people of integrity. That means looking for and dealing with any and all disconnects between our lives and God’s truth, between our inner and outer, our private and public lives. Not being, as James wrote, “unstable” and “double minded.”² That means keeping current with God, confessing and repenting, being cleansed from all sin, living pure lives.

Now, moving on to the examples of integrity, believers who have full and close fellowship with God have *wholesome speech*. Look at verse 3. “He does not slander with his tongue, nor does evil to his neighbor, nor takes up a reproach against his friend.” The three poetic phrases build a picture of unwholesome speech.

Slander. The background of this word is interesting. Originally it described going around, traveling on foot, and then to check out, to spy. Fourteen of its 26 uses in the Old Testament refer to spies or spying. In time the idea of going or traveling around morphed into describing one who passed on, *gave travel to* stories which spoke badly of or slandered

others. The following two phrases in this verse build on that by adding saying and doing *evil* and taking up, throwing about *reproaches*, scorn or ridicule against others.

David describes people with unwholesome speech a number of times in the Psalms. He ran into them more often than he wanted. For example, 5:9, “There is nothing reliable in what they say; their inward part is destruction itself. Their throat is an open grave; they flatter with their tongue.” Then Psalm 50 gives us God’s statement to those with this kind of character and speech.

“You let your mouth loose in evil and your tongue frames deceit. You sit and speak against your brother; you slander your own mother’s son. These things you have done and I kept silence; you thought that I was just like you; I will reprove you and state the case in order before your eyes.” (19-20)

Believers who are people of integrity, who are whole, who are growing in being like Christ, have wholesome speech. They don’t speak badly of others. They don’t pass on bad things that some people say about others. They don’t listen to or tolerate that kind of speech. Instead, they follow the apostle Paul’s instruction, “Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear” (Ephesians 4:29).

The next mark of integrity is having the same attitude God has toward those who reject Him and those who reverence Him. The king gives a clear, sharp, strong, contrasting picture in verse 4, “In whose eyes [the eyes of the believer with integrity] a reprobate is despised, but who honors those who fear the LORD...”

The second part is easier for us, at least at first glance. Certainly we want to honor all those who reverence God. It seems natural to honor believers with whom we agree and feel comfortable, those who share similar backgrounds or conditions. But the true test is our response to believers with whom we do not agree on some things, do not feel comfortable with, who do not share similar backgrounds or conditions. That is the test of loving my Christian neighbor as myself, the test of not showing partiality.³

Now what about the first part, where the king says the person of integrity *despises a reprobate*? At the root of the word reprobate is the idea of rejecting, refusing, despising. The word *despised* in this verse is a synonym, having the same sense as the word reprobate. In the Old Testament these terms were used of God *rejecting* sinners⁴, of God abhorring sinful Israel.⁵ It was also used of people who embrace evil⁶ and reject and despise God and His truth.⁷

“But, isn’t this too strong? After all, ‘God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son...’⁸ And, we are told ‘God loves the sinner but hates the sin.’” What David is saying is that God rejects those who spurn His grace and truth. He does not compromise with sin or sinners. Neither should we, do we if we have integrity. We are to care about

them. We are to reach out to them in love with the gospel. But our allegiance and stand must be with God.

King David gave a personal exposition and application of this brief statement in a later Psalm. Turn to Psalm 101.

“I will sing of lovingkindness and justice, to You, O LORD, I will sing praises. I will give heed to the blameless way. When will You come to me? I will walk within my house in the integrity of my heart. I will set no worthless thing before my eyes; I hate the work of those who fall away; it shall not fasten its grip on me. A perverse heart shall depart from me; I will know no evil. Whoever secretly slanders his neighbor, him I will destroy; no one who has a haughty look and an arrogant heart will I endure. My eyes shall be upon the faithful of the land, that they may dwell with me; he who walks in a blameless way is the one who will minister to me. He who practices deceit shall not dwell within my house; he who speaks falsehood shall not maintain his position before me. Every morning I will destroy all the wicked of the land, so as to cut off from the city of the LORD all those who do iniquity.” (1-8)

The next mark of integrity is to keep our word, to always keep our word. To keep our word even when there is a personal cost. Go to the last phrase in verse 4. The person of integrity “swears to his own hurt and does not change.”

Our word, our promises are important. Just as God always keeps His promises, so should we. Moses told Israel,

“When you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay to pay it, for it would be sin in you, and the LORD your God will surely require it of you.” (Deuteronomy 23:21)

King Solomon wrote,

“When you make a vow to God, do not be late in paying it; for He takes no delight in fools. Pay what you vow! It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. Do not let your speech cause you to sin and do not say in the presence of the messenger of God that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry on account of your voice and destroy the work of your hands?” (Ecclesiastes 5:4-6)

“But,” one might say, “sometimes situations change. Sometimes the consequences and costs might turn out to be too great to keep a promise!” Yes, that may seem to be true. But it not an excuse. That is why Solomon also wrote, “Do not be hasty in word or impulsive in

thought to bring up a matter in the presence of God” (Ecclesiastes 5:2a). This principle applies to our promises to others as well as our promises to God.

One example of this from Abraham is his rescue of his nephew Lot, who had foolishly settled in Sodom.⁹ When war broke out in the area, Sodom and Gomorrah lost. Lot was captured. When Abraham heard this, he gathered his 318 trained men and headed out to rescue his nephew. He defeated those forces, rescued Lot, and brought back a great amount of wealth from the enemies of Sodom as well as the wealth those enemies had plundered. The rescued leaders were so grateful that they offered Abram all the riches he brought back to them. This was a perfectly acceptable offer. But, before this rescue took place Abraham made a promise. He promised God he would not take a thing so that everyone would know God was the One who gave him what he had. Looking at the great amount of treasure and still keeping that promise cost Abraham a lot. But, more importantly, in fulfilling it he demonstrated his *integrity*.

The last mark of integrity we see here is not being swayed by profit to take advantage of or abuse others. Verse 5. “He does not put out his money at interest, nor does he take a bribe against the innocent.” God told Israel not to take advantage of their own people who were poor. We need to frame that in the context of high, exorbitant interest being common in the ancient middle east.¹⁰ God told Israel, “If you lend money to My people, to the poor among you, you are not to act as a creditor to him; you shall not charge him interest” (Exodus 22:25). Again,

“You shall not charge interest to your countrymen: interest on money, food, or anything that may be loaned at interest. You may charge interest to a foreigner, but to your countrymen you shall not charge interest...” (Deuteronomy 23:19-20)

While they could lend with interest to foreigners, God also told them not to take advantage of them.¹¹

As well, they were not to abuse the poor by taking a bribe from the rich or unscrupulous. Exodus 23:8 instructs “You shall not take a bribe, for a bribe blinds the clear-sighted and subverts the cause of the just.” From the positive perspective, Isaiah tells us the one who can live with God

“...walks righteously and speaks with sincerity, [he who] rejects unjust gain and shakes his hands so that they hold no bribe; [he who] stops his ears from hearing about bloodshed and shuts his eyes from looking upon evil.” (33:15)

We are to be like “the LORD [our] God [who] is the God of gods and the Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God who does not show partiality nor take a bribe.” (Deuteronomy 10:17)

Let’s sum up and respond to this truth by looking at and *embracing the promise that God gives with this instruction*.

Embracing The Promise.

Following God's instruction means that God welcomes us into His presence. Verse 1. "O LORD, who may abide in Your tent? Who may dwell on Your holy hill? He who walks with integrity..." *God welcomes believers into His presence who live with integrity.* What a great, amazing, humbling privilege! The privilege of full acceptance and fellowship with the great, almighty, awesome God. In Psalm 65:4 King David wrote,

"How blessed is the one whom You choose and bring near to
You to dwell in Your courts. We will be satisfied with the
goodness of Your house, Your holy temple."

Psalm 84 harmonizes with this joyful note, "How blessed are those who dwell in Your house! They are ever praising You" (4). And, "a day in Your courts is better than a thousand outside" (84:10a).

In addition to the fellowship, God gives security. The last line proclaims, "He who does these things will never be shaken." God will not allow us to be shaken, our feet will not slip. Even when we are weighed or knocked down by heavy burdens and tragedies we will know with David that God "only is my rock and my salvation, my stronghold; I shall not be greatly shaken," yes, that God "only is my rock and my salvation, my stronghold; *I shall not be shaken*" (Psalm 62:2, 6).

Look ahead from Psalm 15 to Psalm 16, verse 8. "I have set the LORD continually before me; because He is at my right hand, I will not be shaken." This verse, along with Psalm 17:5 ties directly into doing "these things," to having integrity. Psalm 17:5, "My steps have held fast to Your paths. [Then we can insert "So"] My feet have not slipped."

Yes, *God welcomes and gives stability to believers living with integrity.* Our part is to know and then *embrace* this truth and the promise God gives with it.

Conclusion.

There is great and wonderful truth in this brief Psalm. The question facing us is "Do we, do I really embrace this truth?" To really embrace it means

- to seek first God's kingdom and His righteousness (Matthew 6:33),
- to "... keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. [To] Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth" (Colossians 3:1-2),
- to keep our feet holding fast to God's paths, His ways.

We need to make the decision, we must make the commitment. But we can't do it on our own. It requires relying on God to change our hearts, to make them ever true to Him, to make us like Him, to make us people with true integrity.

Think carefully about this in your life—not anyone else—in these next moments with God. Evaluate the state of your own integrity, of Christ-likeness as you think about

- your speech,
- your attitude toward those who reject and those who reverence God,
- your faithfulness to promises you make to God and others even when there is a personal cost,
- and your commitment never to take advantage of or do something that in any way could be abusive to others even when it is easy, or offers a benefit to you.

Then commit yourself to integrity.

¹ Caroline Alphonso. “Too-close-for-comfort encounters with the Queen.” *The Globe And Mail*. 05 July 2010. <<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/woman-breaks-free-of-toronto-crowd-to-speak-with-queen/article1627784/?cmpid=rss1>>. Accessed 07 July 2010.

² James 1:5-8; 4:8.

³ cf. Matthew 5:43-48; James 2:1-13.

⁴ Psalm 53:5.

⁵ Psalm 78:59.

⁶ Psalm 36:4.

⁷ Psalm 15:4; 118:22.

⁸ John 3:16.

⁹ Genesis 14:1-24.

¹⁰ Glean L. Archer. “Interest.” *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, Vol. 3*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976, page 295.

¹¹ Exodus 23:9; 22:21; Leviticus 19:33-38.

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