Sunday Sermon Notes

David's Palace Protocol

Psalm 101 · English Standard Version

Psalms is the longest book in the Bible, and the length is part of what makes it feel unmanageable. It has seven named authors and forty-eight anonymous songs. It was written across a thousand years, with no chronological order. Many of the psalms carry superscriptions, and some of those notations are confusing. The book is also an emotional roller coaster. One psalm finds David high and glad, and the next finds him in the depths. Psalms is a difficult book to take hold of as a whole.

For about the last century and a quarter, most readers have approached the psalms by type. The classifications are not hard and fast, and some psalms overlap, but the headings are useful. Some are praise. Some are laments, the cry of a person in trouble. Some are didactic, teaching how to live. Some are creation songs, some are songs of Zion, and some are the hard imprecatory psalms, in which the singer asks God to shatter the teeth of his enemies.

Psalm 101 does not sit neatly in the obvious categories. The opening sounds like praise. Verse 2 asks, "When will you come to me?" which is the question of a lament. Verses 2 through 8 read as teaching. The psalm is none of those, finally. It is a royal psalm, and there are not many of them.

A Royal Psalm

A royal psalm takes Israel's earthly king as its subject. It is often written by a king, and it is about the king. It may concern his coronation, his wedding, the burdens of rule, his enemies, his wars, or the way he intends to govern. The center of the song is the king's relationship with God and his representative role for God. Ordinary Israelites sang these

songs. They could be thanksgiving for a good ruler, or a plea for God to send someone else, or a song sung where a bad king could hear it.

They are also a useful place to think about the people we choose to govern us. At the end of the day the question is not speed limits and zoning ordinances. It is what sort of person we want, if such a person can be found. The royal psalms help with that question.

They do more than that. As they describe the earthly king, they speak of the King in heaven, and they look forward to the coming King, Jesus. When we read them we can learn something about whom to trust with authority. We can also learn about the God who is king, and about Jesus who is king. Psalm 101 is David describing the blameless way, and it is a royal song because it is the king speaking about how his house will be run.

The Palace Protocol

Psalm 101 is David sitting down to decide how his palace will function. He is asking what kind of people he wants at the treasury, the interior, and the defense of his realm, and what kind of people he wants waiting on his family and teaching his children. We know this is palace protocol because he speaks of those within his house, of those who minister to him, and of those who will maintain their position before him. He also speaks of doing what only a king can do. He does not say he will post about the wicked. He says he will destroy them. This is David stating how things will work while he is king.

The question the psalm puts to us is whether we have a personal palace protocol. Most of us do not have a palace. We have a house. The question is still the right one. What are the non–negotiables? David is naming what he will not compromise. What will we not allow in our personal space, our awareness, and our focus?

Outside a radius of about three feet, control is limited. Inside it, control is nearly total. What is on the phone, what the remote selects, what is on the tablet, where the thoughts go, what receives attention, what is being planned: these are governed, or

they are not. What are the non–negotiables for the closest friends and advisors, for the people trusted most and kept nearest? What are they for daily habits, for the things that will not be done at all, or will not be allowed to consume time, attention, money, and effort? What are they for the purpose of a life and for work? What are they for a home and a family: how we talk, what we watch, what we listen to, whom we bring in, and what attitude is permitted under that roof?

The Foundation

The origin of David's protocol is verse 1. He will sing of steadfast love and justice. The foundation is not his opinion, and it is not a guru on governance, a popular psychologist on the family, or a television authority on marriage. He looks at God. Steadfast love is covenant faithfulness. God is faithful to what he has said, and God is just. Because God is that way, David intends to be that way.

Praise was the daily soundtrack of David's life. The question follows naturally. What is the soundtrack of a life? Not only the playlist, though that is included. What is on repeat in the mind? Who is nearby, and how do they talk? What is watched, and what is said?

Psalm 101:1
"I will sing of steadfast love and justice; to you, O LORD, I will make music."

If a book of psalms were made from a person's (your) own words, what types would it contain? Lament, perhaps. Complaint. Dissatisfaction. Or categories the Psalter does not have: gossip, slander, profanity, talk that runs other people down. For David the daily soundtrack was praise. God's character was the standard on which the protocol was built.

I Will Not Be Evil

The protocol has three movements. David rejects personal evil. He severs association with evil people. He pursues fellowship with the faithful.

Verses 2 through 4 are the first movement. He will walk within his house in the integrity of his heart. At home he will behave himself. He will be a person of godliness and integrity there, and he says it because home is where it is easiest to be otherwise. Home is where a person gets to be who he really is. Out in public a face is required. At home the face comes off. Tracy used to say that teaching the little children's class was both the funniest and the most terrifying work in the church, because children will say anything. They will report what happened at home, including what mother and father never intended to leave those walls. What they reveal is that at home we are who we are. David says that at home he will be the right person.

Psalm 101:2

"I will ponder the way that is blameless. Oh when will you come to me? I will walk with integrity of heart within my house."

He will set no worthless thing before his eyes. The application to a screen is easy, and it is not what David meant. The word worthless in the Old Testament very often means idols. David is refusing idols in his house. He also has corruption in mind, the kind that gathers around a king and a cabinet. He has scheming, planning, and manipulation in mind. He has immorality in mind. None of it will be tolerated under his roof. A perverse heart will depart from him. Perverse here is not a sexual term. It means twisted, corrupt, not the way a thing is supposed to be. He will not be that, and he will not do that.

Psalm 101:3

"I will not set before my eyes anything that is worthless. I hate the work of those who fall away; it shall not cling to me."

I Will Not Keep Company with Evil

The second movement is in verses 5 and 7. David will not associate with evil people. He does not mean every person in the world. It is impossible to remove every evil person from a life. Work has to be done. The store has to be entered. What he means is the closest and most consequential relationships: the names that stay at the top of the recent calls and the messages. He means a spouse, and here the unmarried are the ones who can still choose. When a spouse is being sought, David's rule is a better guide than a striking profile, or beauty, or humor, or the prospect of money. The thing to look for is spiritual condition. He means the best friends, the people called when the evening is free. He means the advisors, the people trusted when advice is needed. He means business partners and mentors. In his house, the people depended on will be godly people.

He is specific about whom he will not have. He will not have those who fall away, people who were faithful and then turned their backs. That is a harder case than simple unbelief, because they had it and left it, and the heart that does that is a hard heart. He will not have the secret slanderer. There is no more destructive habit for a relationship, a family, a workplace, or a congregation than slander. David knew it could blow a household apart, and he refused it. He will not have the arrogant heart, because an arrogant heart is a hard heart. He will not have the deceiver. A ruler has to have people who tell the truth.

He is adamant for two reasons. Whatever a person stays around will stick. Honey is pleasant and too full of sugar, and it is also impossible to handle carefully. The bottle is wiped clean, the honey is poured with care, a fork is used so the hands stay clear, and still it ends on the bottle, the fork, and the fingers. Every time. If David stays around these people, it will stick to him, and he will not allow it. The second reason is that they victimize. Many of them hurt other people. Slander is the clear case. The person who

slanders with you will slander you. We tell ourselves otherwise. We have an understanding. He would never do it to me. Of course he would. If he will do it with you, he will do it to you. David removes them from his circle.

I Will Pursue the Faithful

The third movement is positive. David will pursue fellowship with the faithful. He does not mean that he will be at the temple when they are at the temple, and that the rest of the week is his own. He means deep and intentional relationships. The most important relationships need to be with believers. That is what he is saying. A personal palace protocol is not optional. David is attempting to create one, and we need one.

Psalm 101:6

"I will look with favor on the faithful in the land, that they may dwell with me; he who walks in the way that is blameless shall minister to me."

Concluding Thoughts

The plan was serious. At home he would live in integrity, in the kitchen, in the living room, walking the roof of his own house. He would not tolerate slanderers or apostates. He would destroy the wicked and keep company with the faithful. That was the plan. It is hard to hear it without checking off the times he broke it. There is Bathsheba, and the murder of Uriah. There is the failure to punish Amnon, and the terrible way Tamar was treated after she was assaulted. There is the passive, inconsistent, damaging way he dealt with Absalom. There is Joab, a scoundrel employed in a brutal way whose violence was overlooked so long as it was useful to David. There is the ark put on a cart instead of carried as God had said. There is the census, taken to bolster pride and trust in numbers. There is the deathbed that sounds like a godfather's: I forgive them, and when I am dead, kill them all. David's plan was excellent. The execution was horrific.

David's list reads like the ancient equivalent of a New Year's resolution. It sounds right. It does not typically survive the second week of January. We can make lists and plans, and we will not fulfill any of them perfectly. That is why verse 2 contains a question that seems not to belong. "When will you come to me?" David is saying that his intentions are real and that he cannot carry them. He needs to know how God will show up and help him. Only God can enable a person to walk in a blameless way. God's way is blameless. He equips with strength, and he makes the way blameless.

Psalm 18:32

"The God who equipped me with strength and made my way blameless."

Benjamin Franklin was a shockingly accomplished man, and he set himself a project of moral perfection. He wished to live without committing any fault at any time, and to conquer whatever natural inclination, custom, or company might lead him into. That is David's plan in another century. To help himself, Franklin, an early personal–development teacher, made a tracker. He listed thirteen virtues, divided the page into seven days, and at the end of each day marked his failures with dots. The goal was to watch the dots decrease until there were none. Franklin was not a New Testament Christian. He was not a biblical believer. Even he knew he could not do it alone, and every day he prayed that God would increase in him the wisdom that discovers his truest interest, and strengthen his resolutions to perform what that wisdom dictates. If Franklin knew he could not do it, we certainly ought to know that we cannot either.

Only God can forgive and cleanse us when we fail. The word is when, not if. Only God can rebuild what is broken. David's thinking was solid, his intention was sound, and his execution was ruined, because that is how this works. Only God can enable it, empower it, forgive it, and restore it. For us, that means a relationship with Jesus.

1 Corinthians 1:30

"And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption."

Paul says that in Christ there is no room for boasting. By God's doing we are in Christ. Christ is our wisdom. Experience, cleverness, and education are not. If Christ is not ours, we have no wisdom. He is our righteousness. If we are right about anything, it is him. He is our sanctification, which is growth in holiness, obedience, and goodness. He is our redemption. Wanting a personal protocol of integrity is not the same as being able to keep one. A list can be made, David's or Franklin's. It cannot be fulfilled. David failed, and we fail. Paul says that Christ is the one who deserves our faith and trust because it is Him and Him alone who was able to perfectly accomplish and complete the list.