

Mayella Ewell had no friends and was lonely. The Great Depression chased away not just material wealth, but hope too. For some people, it left a poverty of the soul. During the long, hot summer days in Maycomb, AL, Mayella looked for a friend in Tom Robinson. The problem was in the 1930s, in Maycomb, AL, Tom and Mayella could not be friends, or anything more. Mayella was white and Tom was African-American. Mayella did not see it as a problem and sought Tom's affection. Tom knew this could only go one way. He rejected her advances and...<sup>1</sup>

Heav'n has no Rage, like Love to Hatred turn'd,  
Nor Hell a Fury, like a Woman scorn'd<sup>2</sup>

Mayella accused Tom of attacking her. Atticus Finch was the attorney who tried to defend Tom. I do not know if Harper Lee knew Psalm 26 or thought about it when she wrote *To Kill a Mockingbird*. But, I heard Tom's voice when reading the words of Psalm 26, "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."

Who stands with the boldness, even arrogance, to say, "Vindicate me, O Lord"? One who is innocent. When accused, we only seek trial when we know we are not guilty. In Psalm 26, we do not know if it is about a trial. We do not know if it is about false accusations. This particular psalm is elusive. Commentators disagree about its purpose and connection with other psalms. Some say it is connected with Psalms 7 and 17, in which the psalmist seeks justice. Others argue that it is similar to Psalms 15 and 24 and it is an entrance liturgy. Still others find a connection with psalms petitioning God's help against the wicked.<sup>3</sup>

If we look at the content of the Psalm itself, we see, "Prove me, Lord... I do not sit with the worthless... I go around your altar... Lord, I love the house in which you dwell." Paul Mosca suggests that a priest was preparing to go to the altar. In ancient Israel, only priests could go around the altar, and the law required them to wash their hands and feet before approaching it or else they would die. Mosca suggests that this is the private prayer of a priest getting ready for worship.<sup>4</sup> It sounds like a

plea, like, "I want to serve you God. You know me. You know what I do, how I act. Please find me worthy of your presence."

Too often, readers of this Psalm connect it with the Pharisee in Luke 18:11. Jesus is critical of his prayer. The Pharisee says, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people." The Bible lacks stage direction or notes about tone, but I can hear the Pharisee saying, *other people*, with a certain implication in his voice. When we connect Psalm 26 with self-righteousness, we read into it something that is not necessarily there.

There are two troubling aspects of Psalm 26. First, it seems self-righteous. Second, separating the wicked from the righteous sounds elitist. All of this harkens to the Pharisee in Luke 18, and Jesus is critical of him. We do not want to be like the Pharisee. However, this kind of reading ignores the possible context of accusing someone who is innocent. The jury in Tom Robinson's trial ignored the facts and assumed the white Mayella told the truth.

Context matters. The psalmist's plea, "Vindicate me, O Lord," suggests a deep trust in God. In other words, *Lord, no matter what is happening, I trust you*. We can know that God is greater than our problems or circumstances. Maybe we are not in Tom Robinson's shoes. Maybe we do not have someone falsely accusing us. But, we can see in this plea a basis for trusting God. The psalmist believes that God is interacting with us. We are not alone. God cares and God acts in our lives. When we pray, our words do not hit the ceiling and bounce back. God is with us.

The psalmist suggests a divine ethic. "I do not sit with the worthless... I hate the company of evildoers." There is a good and a bad. How we behave matters. James Mays writes, "Psalm 26 reminds us, then, that there is a legitimate form of separatism. Not anything goes! God opposes evil. Those who submit their lives to God's sovereignty will be different from those who follow only the direction of the self."<sup>5</sup> The faith journey has a form. It has direction.

What is it? Is it, as the prophet Micah says, "Do justice and walk humbly with God"? In our gospel lesson, Jesus says, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take

up their cross and follow me." To live out the psalm means having a tangible faith. It means that people recognize God in us. The way we speak, the way we act, and the way we live our lives should reflect the plea in this psalm. It should reflect our trust in God.

How do we trust God? Not, *do we trust God?* The latter is a simple 'yes' or 'no' question. We can say, "Yes, I trust God," and be done with it. But, to ask, "How do we trust God?" implies something deeper for our lives. What do we do to provide evidence for our trust in God? Do we lay ourselves bare, saying, "Search the depths of my soul, Lord, because we know you already know, and I feel confident that my life reflects your love"? Then, as we bear our souls before God, we can live out our trust in tangible ways.

Atticus Finch did not convince the jury to exonerate Tom Robinson. But, God is bigger than the fictional lawyer in Harper Lee's book. We can trust and know that God is God and capable of addressing all of our needs. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (New York: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1960).

<sup>2</sup> William Congreve, *The Works of William Congreve*, ed. D. F. McKenzie, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 60.

<sup>3</sup> James L. Mays, *Psalms*, ed. James L. Mays, Patrick D. Miller, Jr., and Paul J. Actemeier, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1994), 781.

<sup>4</sup> Paul G. Mosca, "Psalm 26: Poetic Structure and the Form-Critical Task," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 47, no. 2 (1985).

<sup>5</sup> Mays, 783.