

Psalms 26 — Judge Me, and Try My Reins — A Psalm of Integrity, the Washed Hands, and the Love of the House of the LORD

Psalm 26: a psalm of David — a plea for vindication from a covenant-keeper who invites God to examine him. He appeals not to his own sinlessness but to the LORD's lovingkindness (chesed), separates himself from the assembly of the wicked, washes his hands in innocency to compass the altar, confesses his love for the house where God's honour dwells, and asks to be redeemed. A Temple-gate psalm of the innocent worshipper; Davidic, tenth century BC.

Psalm 26 is a hard psalm to read carelessly, because read carelessly it sounds like a man bragging to God. "Judge me, O LORD; for I have walked in mine integrity" — the modern ear flinches. Isn't the whole gospel that none of us is righteous, that we approach the throne pleading mercy and not merit? So before we go a verse further, we have to learn the genre, because the genre is the interpretation.

Hebrew Word Studies

***bachan* (H974) / *tsaraph* (H6884) (בַּחַן / צָרַף) — to examine, test, prove (assay) / to smelt, refine, purify (as metal) v. 2.**

Two testing words stacked in one verse, and both come from the refiner's shop. *Bachan* is to examine for genuineness — the word Malachi uses when God says "prove me now herewith" over the tithing altar (Mal. 3:10), and Job's confidence that "when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold" (Job 23:10). *Tsaraph* is more violent: it is the smelter melting ore to pour off the dross, the word behind "I will turn my hand upon thee, and purely purge away thy dross" (Isa. 1:25) and "he shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver" (Mal. 3:3). To ask God to *tsaraph* your reins is to ask for the crucible, not the comfortable chair. Notice what David is *not* saying — he is not claiming the fire will find nothing. He is claiming there is real metal worth the fire, and that he would rather be melted down and seen truly than left alone and misjudged. The Lord answers this prayer for a whole people in the same language: he chose Israel "in the furnace of affliction" (Isa. 48:10; echoed to Lehi's family in 1 Ne. 20:10). Integrity, in this psalm, is not the absence of the furnace. It is the willingness to walk into it.

***tom* (H8537) (טוֹם) — completeness, integrity, wholeness — moral soundness, not sinlessness vv. 1, 11.** The keyword of the psalm, and the one most easily misread. *Tom* comes from the root *tamam*, "to be complete, whole, finished" — it is soundness, the quality of a thing with no crack running through it, undivided. It is emphatically *not* the Hebrew word for flawless or without-fault. When Job is called "perfect and upright" (Job 1:1), this is the root; Job is not sinless — the whole book is God vindicating a man who is whole-hearted, not a man who is faultless. So David's "I have walked in mine integrity" (v. 1) claims wholeness of allegiance, an undivided heart, not a perfect record — which is exactly why he can claim it in the same breath as "redeem me, and be merciful unto me" (v. 11). The two are not in tension: a man of *tom* is precisely the man who knows he needs redeeming and does not pretend otherwise. It is the wholeness the Lord asks of Abraham — "walk before me, and be thou perfect [*tamim*]" (Gen. 17:1) — and the single-heartedness the Book of Mormon prizes when it commends those who serve God "with all their hearts" (Mosiah 7:33). Integrity is not never falling. It is never being divided about whose you are.

***rachats* (H7364) / *niqqayon* (H5356) (רָחַץ / נִקְּיָוֹן) — to wash, bathe / innocence, cleanness, freedom from guilt v. 6.** "I will wash [*rachats*] mine hands in *innocency* [*niqqayon*]." *Rachats* is the ordinary verb for bathing, but here it is priestly — the same act Aaron and his sons performed at the bronze laver before approaching the altar, "that they die not" (Ex. 30:20–21). *Niqqayon* comes from *naqah*, "to be clean, free, acquitted" — it is a *legal* cleanness as much as a ritual one, the state of the guiltless. So the phrase fuses two washings into one gesture: the physical rinsing of the hands and the moral acquittal of the man. Pilate reaches for this exact symbol in reverse — washing his hands to declare "I am innocent of the blood of this just person" (Matt. 27:24) — and gets it wrong, because you cannot wash away guilt you are actively incurring. David gets it right: he washes because he is coming to the altar, not fleeing responsibility but qualifying for worship. Psalm 24 asks who may ascend and answers "he that hath clean hands" (Ps. 24:4); Psalm 26 is a man answering the question with his own hands lifted at the altar. The cleanness that admits us to the house is never self-generated — it is washed on, granted at the threshold, the innocency of the atonement applied to hands that could not clean themselves.

***ma'on* (H4583) / *kavod* (H3519) (מָוֶן / כָּבוֹד) — dwelling, habitation, den / honour, glory, weight, the visible presence of God v. 8.** The two nouns at the center of the psalm's love song. *Ma'on* is a dwelling-place, a habitation — "LORD, thou hast been our dwelling place [*ma'on*] in all generations" (Ps. 90:1) — and here it names the house of the LORD as the place God settles. Paired with it is *kavod*, translated "honour," but the word is far heavier: it means literally *weight*, and it is the standard Hebrew word for the glory of God — the shekinah cloud that "filled the tabernacle" (Ex. 40:34) and the temple "so that the priests could not stand to minister" (1 Kgs. 8:11). So verse 8 says more than the English lets on: David loves the

habitation of God's house *and the place where God's own glory-weight comes down to dwell*. This is temple theology in a single line — a specific place on the earth where the presence of God is not a metaphor but a settled reality, "the place where thine honour dwelleth." It is the same longing Moses could not fully be granted — "shew me thy glory [*kavod*]" (Ex. 33:18) — and the same presence the restored temple promises: a house where "my glory shall rest upon it" (cf. D&C 109:12, dedicating a house "that the Son of Man might have place to manifest himself"). The psalmist's whole plea for cleanness is in service of this love: he wants to be admitted where the glory dwells.

***padah* (H6299) / *mishor* (H4334) (פֶּדָה / מִשׁוֹר) — to ransom, redeem, buy back / level ground, a plain, uprightness vv.**

11, 12. The two words that keep the psalm's ending honest. *Padah* is the redemption verb of ransom — to buy back by paying a price, the word for redeeming the firstborn (Ex. 13:13) and for the LORD who "redeemed [*padah*] you out of the house of bondmen" (Deut. 7:8). By asking "redeem me" right after claiming integrity, David dismantles any reading of the psalm as self-righteous: the man of *tom* is a man who still needs ransoming, and knows it. Integrity and redemption are not rivals; the whole psalm holds them together. Then *mishor* — "an even place" — is level ground, a plain without pit or slope. It is where the foot cannot slide (answering v. 1's "I shall not slide"), and figuratively it is the ground of uprightness itself: the LORD leads his people "in a plain path [*mishor*]" (Ps. 27:11), and Isaiah's valleys are made a *mishor* to prepare the way of the LORD (Isa. 40:4). So the psalm ends with the redeemed man standing where he cannot fall, in the true congregation, blessing God — the vindication he pleaded for in verse 1 already tasted under his feet. He asked to be tried; he asked to be redeemed; and he ends on level ground, worshipping.

From the Chapter's Architecture

*The genuine structural signature here is an **inclusio** built on two words. The psalm opens with a claim to walk in integrity (tom, v. 1) and closes by returning to it (tom, v. 11) — but the second occurrence is wrapped in "redeem me, and be merciful unto me," so the repetition is not flat but deepened: integrity at the start, integrity-plus-grace at the end. And the sliding foot frames it too: "I shall not slide" (v. 1) becomes "my foot standeth in an even place" (v. 12) — a promise at the top answered by an experience at the bottom. Between those brackets sits the tsaraph/washing imagery — the assayer's fire of verse 2 and the washed hands of verse 6 — the two purifications, inward (the reins tried in the furnace) and outward (the hands washed at the altar), that together make a man fit to stand where the glory dwells. The psalm's honest reading depends on keeping that whole frame in view: every claim of innocence is submitted to the fire and answered by redemption. The center is not the psalmist's righteousness. The center is the house he loves — and the whole legal apparatus of the psalm exists only to get him back inside its doors.*