

Psalm 16. You will not abandon me

Context

Psalm 16 begins like a lament (v. 1a), but then continues like a psalm of confidence. The composer, whom the title identifies as David, affirms both God's present blessing as well as his hope that God will rescue him, even from the ravages of death. He contrasts his course of life with that taken by those who worship false gods.

For the title, see the [Introduction](#).

Comment

16:1. *Keep me safe*

The psalm opens with a plea for help (*keep me safe*) and an invocation (*my God*), giving the impression that the psalm is a lament. However, verse 1b indicates that the psalmist has found refuge in God, and the rest of the psalm makes it clear that his relationship with God provides him with security, and no specific trouble is ever mentioned. Thus, the psalm is best categorized as a psalm of confidence.

16:2–4. *God is Lord*

In a lament, the psalmist would complain about enemies and perhaps even raise questions about God's willingness to help him. Here, however, the psalmist confesses that God is his *Lord* and that everything positive (*good thing*) that happens to him comes from his hand. He identifies with the *holy people who are in the land*, that is, those who have set themselves apart by virtue of their special relationship with God. He finds pleasure in his relationship with God and with God's people 🗨️.

In contrast to the holy people are *those who run after other gods*. Throughout the historical books of the Old Testament, we hear story after story about how Israelites, who should worship only the Lord, are worshipping the gods of the surrounding nations, such as Baal, Marduk, and so on. The metaphor of hurrying after gods shows a certain passion and urgency that is unbecoming. The psalmist then dissociates himself from pagan ritual action (pouring out *libations of blood*) and ritual words (taking the names of false gods on his lips). The ritual action of pouring out libations of blood is unclear, but even so, the action is patently obscene. There were legitimate libations in the Israelite

cult, but they were of wine or fermented drink (perhaps beer; [Num. 28:7](#)), not blood. If the sacrifice is seen as a meal offered to the deity (an anthropomorphism, since God does not need to be fed), then the libation of wine and beer accompanies the meal of meat and grain (see [Jer. 19:13](#); [32:29](#) for references to pagan libation offerings, though not specifically with blood). While blood is an integral part of the Israelite sacrificial system, the shed blood indicates the death of the animal that stands as a substitute for the sinner in an atonement sacrifice such as the burnt offering ([Lev. 1](#)), not as a drink accompanying a meal.

The psalmist distances himself from such pagan activity, since he knows that, while the worship of the true God brings good things (v. [2b](#)), the worship of false gods brings suffering. The psalm does not specify the type of suffering, but the history of Israel and Judah demonstrates that their persistent worship of false gods eventually led to destruction and exile.

16:5–8. A delightful inheritance

The psalmist then affirms his exclusive (*you alone*) loyalty to the Lord and his confidence that he finds security in him (*you make my lot secure*). He refers to God as his *portion* (*heleq*). The noun comes from the verb ‘to divide’ (*hlq*) and is used to refer to the apportionment of plunder ([Gen. 14:24](#)) and food ([Lev. 6:10](#)), but most often to the division and distribution of land ([NIDOTTE 2: 162](#)), which makes the most sense in this context (see v. [6](#)). He then calls God his *cup*. ‘Since a cup can convey love, comfort, strength and fellowship, biblical writers sometimes use cup as a symbol for all the benefits God provides’ (see also [Pss 23:5](#); [116:13](#); [1 Cor. 10:16](#); Ryken, et al., 1998: [186](#)). And then finally, he refers to God as his *lot* (*gôrāl*). *Lot* can refer both to a device such as the Urim and Thummim used to indicate God’s will ([Exod. 28:30](#)), employed in the distribution of land following the conquest ([Josh. 14:2](#)), as well as to that which is allotted through such a means. God is the One who determines the psalmist’s life and provides him with what he has. Again, the reference may be specifically to land, or land may be used metaphorically here to refer to the course of his life.

As previously mentioned, the vocabulary of verse [5](#) (at least of *portion* and *lot*) suggests the language of land distribution. The psalmist may be speaking literally, figuratively, or perhaps both, as he happily exclaims that *the boundary lines have fallen for me*

in pleasant places. His allotment is a precious one, *a delightful inheritance*. Such divine gifts lead him to praise God and to listen to his guidance, both day and night (*even at night my heart instructs me*). His intention is to stay loyal (*my eyes are always on the LORD*), and as a result his life will maintain an even course (*I shall not be shaken*; perhaps we should see an intentional connection to the final verse of [Ps. 15](#)).

16:9–11. The path of life

God is his Lord, and his Lord has given him many good things, so (*therefore*) he experiences inward happiness (*my heart is glad*) and whole-bodied confidence (*my body will rest secure*), which lead him to worship God publicly (*my tongue rejoices*).

Even so, the psalmist piles on more reasons for his praise before ending his song. How exactly to understand the import of verses [10–11](#) is a matter of some debate. Is he rejoicing because at present he is enjoying good health and perhaps has recently been healed from a life-threatening illness? Most scholars today take this view, believing that the doctrine of the afterlife is not clearly taught in the Old Testament, with the exception of [Daniel 12:1–3](#).²⁴ However, the statement seems even more confident and far-reaching than that interpretation allows. Even in its Old Testament context, the idea of not seeing decay and enjoying eternal pleasures in God's presence seems to point to something beyond the grave.

Meaning

The psalmist is aware that he needs God in order to be safe in this world, and so he calls out to him to keep him safe (v. [1a](#)). The rest of the poem expresses his deeply felt confidence in God's good gifts and ability to provide the security that he needs. At the end, he asserts God's ability to keep him safe even from death itself (vv. [10–11](#)). While some believe his confidence extends only as far as death at a young age, we would say that the psalmist is a voice that expresses hope in life even after death, and that this text provides an Old Testament background to the belief in the afterlife that comes to full blossom in the New Testament with its teaching on bodily resurrection. Certainly, reading the psalm from the vantage point of the New Testament brings out this deeper meaning.

²⁴ For instance, Goldingay (2006: [233](#)) says that v. [11](#) asserts: 'Yhwh will open up a way that leads to life rather than ending in *premature death*' (italics mine).

Thus, for the Christian reader, [Psalm 16](#) provides a basis for both our confidence that God's blessings begin in this life as well as our sure hope that our life in God's presence does not end with our death.

Peter cited [Psalm 16:8–11](#) (Septuagint) in his Pentecost sermon and applied it to Christ ([Acts 2:25–28](#)). He pointed out that David himself died and was buried, so he must have had someone else in mind, namely Jesus Christ, who was his descendant and the Messiah. Later, Paul cited [Psalm 16:10](#) (Septuagint) during a sermon in Pisidian Antioch ([Acts 13:35](#)) and also applied it to Christ, who was raised from the dead and thus was a fulfilment of the promise that 'you will not let your holy one see decay'.

How did [Psalm 16](#), a psalm that fits well within its Old Testament context, come to be interpreted in this prophetic sense by Peter and Paul, as recorded in the book of Acts? Longenecker has the best explanation when he notes that, in [Acts 2](#), it is quoted along with [Psalm 110:1](#) ([Acts 2:34](#)), which Jesus had earlier treated as a prophetic psalm ([Mark 12:35–37](#)). These two psalms had been brought together, based on the rabbinic interpretive principle known as *gezerah shawah* ('verbal analogy', because of the shared phrase 'at my right hand'). Thus, this rabbinic principle of interpretation, along with 'the church's post-resurrection perspective' brings out this deeper meaning of the psalm as it anticipated Christ's death and resurrection (Longenecker 2007: 746).