

# Psalm 16

## *You Show Me the Path of Life*

Psalm 16 is a prayer of unusual proportions. It begins with a brief petition for the protection of God (v. 1). The psalmist asks that “the keeper of Israel” watch over his life (Psalm 121). The petition is supported by a motive clause, a declaration that the psalmist has made the LORD his refuge. “In you I take refuge” is a formula for trusting one’s life to the care of God (see the comment on Pss. 7:1 and 2:12). The rest of the prayer is an exposition of that trust. The psalm teaches that trust is not merely a warm feeling or a passing impulse in a time of trouble; it is a structure of acts and experiences that open one’s consciousness to the LORD as the supreme reality of life. ❖

1. Trust is first of all the relationship ❖ that determines all else about a person. The psalmist confesses, “You (YHWH) are my lord (*’adon*).” The reverse of that confession is, “I am your servant (*’ebed*).” The psalmist knows himself as a person who belongs to another. As servant of the LORD, he receives the goodness that comes to him in life as coming from no other source than his lord (on the lord-servant relation, see Introduction, sec. 6.16). Because he belongs to the LORD, he is confident that his needs will be met.

Trust is monotheistic, not pluralistic ❖ . The psalmist’s commitment to the LORD is exclusive (vv. 3–4). He enacts the first commandment in his life. For him, there is no other God. The holy and mighty deities whom others in the land worship are a source of troubles, not joy, and he does not recognize them or participate in their worship. The text of verses 2b–4a is uncertain. The comment understands “the holy” and “mighty” (NRSV, “noble”) to be references to other gods. See the translation of NJPS.

Trust takes the very relation to God itself as the greatest benefit of the LORD’s way with the servants of God (vv. 5–6). When the psalmist calls the LORD his “portion and cup” and speaks of lot and lines and heritage in describing the goodness of his destiny, he is using the vocabulary and concepts that are employed in the Book of Joshua to describe Israel’s occupation of the promised land as the outcome of God’s salvation of Israel. Tribes ❖ , clans, and individuals were given a portion as their heritage that was laid off by lines determined by casting the sacred lot. The psalmist sees the LORD as the

benefit that has come to him through God's way with Israel. See the comment on [Psalm 142:5](#).

Trust concentrates the mind on the LORD (vv. 7–8). Through praise the psalmist keeps the LORD in the center of his attention, practices the presence of the LORD. In this way he is open to the instruction of the LORD that comes to him through the guidance of his conscience in the still hours of the night. The conscience (literally, “kidneys” as organ where the conscience has its seat; NRSV, “heart”) is an instrument of the LORD's instruction when the consciousness is informed and guided by the praise of the LORD. And praise makes the psalmist so conscious of the power and loving-kindness of the LORD that he is not threatened and unsettled by lesser things.

Trust is confidence of life in the face of death (vv. 9–11). All three dimensions of the psalmist's being—heart, soul, and body—participate in this joyous security. It infuses his entire being. The exuberance of his confidence arises from the knowledge that the LORD will not surrender his faithful one to Sheol and the Pit, the realm of death. Death in the thought world of the psalms is not only the polar opposite of life, the loss of one's own vital existence. It is also the loss of the presence of God and the pleasures of that presence. It is God that is lost in death. When God's providence keeps the faithful in the path of life, they receive far more than a continued existence. They receive the joys and pleasures of the presence of God. For the psalmist, life means being able to enjoy the presence of God. See the discussion of this view of death in the comment on [Psalm 6](#).

2. Two features about this psalm have always impressed its readers. The first is the way in which the LORD fills the personal horizon of the psalmist. Every one of the prayer's lines in all their variety says in one way or another, “The LORD is everything to me.” The LORD is my lord, my God, my destiny, my counsel, my vis-à-vis, my security. The whole confesses, “The LORD is my life.” That is why the psalmist is confident of life. It is this focus on God, absorption in God, identity with God, the LORD who is the source of life, that gives faith a confident hold on life.

The second is the way the confession “I have no good apart from you” (v. 2) echoes through the song in its references to pleasant places, goodly heritage, complete joy, and pleasures forevermore. The psalm is full of joy in the LORD. Life and joy go together. Life is consummated in joy. Where death is removed as threat, life is finally free for complete joy in the presence of God, who alone can deliver from Sheol.

Both features turn on the theme of life. It is understandable that the point in the psalm that has drawn the most attention of its interpreters is the psalmist's unqualified statement of confidence that the LORD will not abandon him to Sheol but will show him the path of life. What does that claim mean? It depends on who says the psalm and in what situation. It can be understood as the prayer of an Israelite who, threatened by an untimely death, takes refuge with the LORD at the sanctuary. It could be the prayer of corporate Israel after the exile was over, when they had learned that the LORD would not abandon the people to death ([Ezekiel 37](#)); note the representative Israelite of [Lamentations 3](#), who in the midst of the loss of everything learns to say, "The LORD is my portion" ([Lam. 3:24](#)). It can be read as the general prayer of the faithful who, without any doctrine of resurrection or eternal life to explain just how, nonetheless trust the LORD to keep them with such total confidence that they cannot imagine a future apart from life in God's presence. The language of the psalm presses toward an unbroken relation between LORD and life. Other places in the psalms where this happens are [Psalms 41:12](#) and [73:24](#); see also [Psalms 36:9](#) and [63:3](#).

In the apostolic church, [Psalm 16](#) was read in the light of the resurrection of Jesus. In sermons, both Peter and Paul ([Acts 2:24–32](#); [13:34](#)) cite verse [10](#) as a hope fulfilled for the first time when God raised [Jesus](#) from the dead. In the resurrection of [Jesus Christ](#), the last limitation on the connection between the LORD and life was transcended. Now it is possible to say the psalm in the midst of life and in the face of inevitable death with a trust that matches the language of the prayer. The LORD has made known the path of life.