

Undivided Heart

July 19, 2026

Psalms 86:11-17

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Psalms 86 is a song of an individual person. What I mean by that is that it wasn't written to be said together in a big worship service, or chanted by a procession through the streets. It describes the spiritual place that one person was in thousands of years ago. It doesn't tell us a lot – the writer wasn't very specific about things – but that does help make it accessible to any of us. The themes of the poem are familiar to us, though the events which prompted its writing might not be.

The poet's first concern was, well, concern. The very first words are: "Incline your ear, O LORD, and answer me, for I am poor and needy." The psalmist wrote from a "day of trouble." They had opponents, they had enemies. "O God, the insolent rise up against me; a band of ruffians seeks my life, and they do not set you before them."

The need for help is not just a common theme in the Psalms. It is a common reality in human life. Sometimes our need is the result of other people's actions. We might be targeted for crime. We might be discriminated against in employment or housing. We might be suffering from an injury or illness which doesn't just test our health but also our financial resources and the support of our family and friends. We've all been through a global pandemic, when a shortage of human contact made it even harder to endure economic hardship and the fear of dangerous disease.

We know what need is. We know what it is to pray out of our needs.

Curiously, the Psalmist did not just pray out of their need. There's no shame in doing that; there are Psalms that really do concentrate on the cry for help. This writer, however, spent roughly as much time on a second theme as on their concerns and distress.

The second theme was thanks and praise.

"I give thanks to you, O LORD my God, with my whole heart, and I will glorify your name forever." A lot of the Psalms praise God. You could make a case that, in some way, they all do, but there are a good number that focus on praising God. About half of Psalm 86 praises God for being merciful and generous, for being great and powerful, for abounding in steadfast love.

We know what it's like to pray in thanksgiving. We've enjoyed successes, we've received gifts, we've celebrated the beauties of the world. We've rejoiced at weddings, we've welcomed

births, we've completed difficult things and received rewards. Out of these and more we pray with thanks.

This is a Psalm which simultaneously praises God's goodness and seeks God's aid in some pretty deep distress. It's a Psalm that knows both pain and exultation, both sorrow and celebration. Which made one line really stand out for me:

"Give me an undivided heart to revere your name."

In a Psalm that is divided between opposite themes, the writer asked for "an undivided heart."

I think some people do have the notion that the life of faith is supposed to feel like one thing and one thing only. Once you've made the commitment, somehow your faith is supposed to keep you in a similar state of mind from day to day. A read through the Book of Psalms would tell you, to the contrary, that the life of faith is filled with different feelings. A read through one of the Gospels reveals that Jesus himself, though a remarkably consistent person, displayed a range of emotions and reactions on different occasions.

I'm not sure why anyone thinks that Christian faith means our internal life is supposed to be just one thing, but some do.

You don't have to. At any rate, you don't have to worry about it when you find that your mind keeps changing and your feelings keep changing from one day to the next. That happened to the prophets. It happened to the Psalmists. It happened to Jesus himself.

So how can this Psalmist call for a unified heart?

"Heart" means a lot of things to us. We think of the heart as the center of feelings. Unity of feelings is really unusual in human experience. It happens, but it happens relatively rarely and in pretty intense situations. I can think of a few occasions, mostly while driving, when the only emotion I was aware of fear. I can also remember times when I was overwhelmed with joy, to the point where other emotions simply weren't present. That just hasn't happened all that often, though, and frankly that's a good thing. Overwhelming emotion is overwhelming. Even the most joyous moments in my life were better as moments than they would be as an ongoing reality.

I've also mentioned more than once that our feelings aren't under our direct control. We can do things to influence our feelings – I've found that a good meal reduces my anxieties pretty effectively – but it's really difficult to tell yourself, "I want to feel happy" and then actually do it. So the deepest understanding of the truth of God, for which the Psalmist prayed, isn't going to give us a unified heart. We're still going to feel what we feel, and most of the time that's a mixture, isn't it? A mixture of feelings about what's right in front of it and the things on our mind and the things that linger, good and bad, in our memories.

Did the Psalmist actually mean a unified mind?

I don't think so, and not just because of the use of the word "heart." The whole Psalm argues against it, because it's a Psalm about both need and praise. The Psalm itself is divided in mind.

How do we resolve the paradox of the unified heart in a divided Psalm?

Debie Thomas writes at JourneyWithJesus.net, "It's not that we hold paradox; it's that paradox holds us. We are held in a deep place. An ample place. A generous, sufficient, and roomy place. Though we might fear paradox, God does not, and it is in God's soil that we are firmly planted. We're safe, even in the contradictions. Messy and weedy for sure, but safe."

In our understanding, but even more so in the use of the Psalmists and the writers of the Hebrew Scriptures, "heart" was not just the seat of emotion. It was also a seat of decision: of loyalty. Of commitment. Of devotion. It's one of the reasons that we use "heart" when we think about the way people come together in loving relationships – they're rooted in emotion, but they go beyond that to commitment.

For the Psalmist, I think, the unified heart was able to bring together the needs and the thanksgiving, the feelings of fear and the feelings of joy, the reality of deprivation and the truth of God's presence, into a foundational reliance upon God. That is, what connects need and praise is that we come to God with both.

Unlike emotion, that's something that we can choose. We can bring our burdens to God for help and for comfort. We can bring our hurts to God for healing and for renewal. We can bring our uncertainties to God for guidance and for wisdom. We can bring our griefs to God for comfort and for resurrection.

And we can bring our successes to God for thanksgiving and for continuance. We can bring our celebrations to God for increase and for sharing. We can bring our joys to God for blessing and for remembering.

The unified heart is the one that knows that God cares about our joys and sorrows. The unified heart is the one that lifts the voice in praise and in petition. The unified heart is the one that waits in silence for God's aid and for God's smile.

Don't worry that you feel different today than you did yesterday. Don't worry that you think new things from day to day. Feelings will change, and I earnestly hope that you're learning things as time goes on.

Do raise your needs to God; do raise your thanks to God. That is the practice and the commitment that makes a unified heart.

Amen.

by Eric Anderson