

Psalm 17

How to Secure God's Protective Care, 17:1-15

(17:1-15) Introduction: all of us, on occasion, find ourselves in circumstances where we need immediate help. An imminent threat or unexpected situation arises that places us in a position where we cannot help ourselves, a situation that requires someone to intervene to assist us. A number of things we face, however, cannot be helped or altered by any human being; only God has the power to change them.

David found himself in such a situation when he wrote Psalm 17. Although many of the psalms are addressed to God, this is the first of five psalms identified as a prayer (Ps. 86; 90; 102; 142). The Hebrew word for prayer (tephillah) emphasizes intercession and intervention. Most commentators agree that it was written during the time when David was being pursued by Saul. A number of them specifically link its timing to when he was trapped in the Wilderness of Maon (1 Sam. 23:24-25). Scripture records that Saul and his men had David surrounded there. But God intervened in the situation: word came to Saul that the Philistines had suddenly invaded Israel and the king was forced to cease pursuing David in order to fight them (1 Sam. 23:26-28).

Many scholars view this psalm as being Messianic, that is, a prophetic prayer of Christ. Some believe it was prayed by the Lord in the Garden of Gethsemane. "In reading this precious prayer one feels at once that it belongs to the lips of one who is greater than David....the character claimed and used in this appeal to God, is not David's....To Christ first of all must these words be applied." This is, How to Secure God's Protective Care, 17:1-15.

- 1. Call upon God to bear witness to your righteousness (vv. 1-5).**
- 2. Call upon God to protect you (vv. 6-12).**
- 3. Call upon God to give you a glorious future (vv. 13-15).**

1. (17:1-5) Call upon God to bear witness to your righteousness.

David implored the Lord to listen to his plea (v. 1) and to look intently at his situation (v. 2). Notice two attributes of David's prayer:

- He prayed confidently. David was absolutely certain that his cause was right and his heart was right.
- He prayed urgently. Using three Hebrew synonyms—hear, attend, give ear—David begged the Lord to give full attention to his requests (v. 1).

a. Make sure your prayer is sincere, not deceitful (vv. 1-2).

First, David asked the Lord to prick up His ears and listen to him, and to answer by doing what he requested. Hear (shama) means to heed or obey, not merely to listen. How could David so firmly insist that God grant what he desired? First, David's boldness was rooted in the confidence that his cause was right and that his request was not deceitful. Saul and his men had spread many lies about David in their campaign to turn the hearts of the people against him. They tried to justify their ruthless, unprovoked pursuit of David in the eyes of Israel by slandering their beloved hero. David pleaded with God to hear and judge them according to the truth.

Second, David was absolutely confident that his motive was right. He was not just praying selfishly. He was not twisting the facts involved. He prayed honestly and sincerely for God to act in accordance with His divine will. God had ordained David to be king. David had not ambitiously sought to seize the throne from Saul. He had humbly served in Saul's courts and had waited for God to act according to His divine schedule. If Saul was successful in slaying David, the will of God for Israel would be thwarted and wrong would prevail.

Third, David was confident that God would do what was right. He expected God to judge his case fairly by delivering him from Saul's hand and ultimately establishing him on the throne of Israel. His

exaltation and Saul's defeat would vindicate David in the eyes of Israel and completely clear him of the false charges that had been leveled against him.

b. Make sure God's examination of your life uncovers no sin (vv. 3-5).

David exposed his entire life to the Lord's thorough examination and was confident about the outcome. David's confidence had nothing to do with pride but rather to his close walk with the Lord. He strived to be obedient to God and to keep himself pure. Not surprisingly, then, the examination of David's heart revealed that he was not corrupted by any sinful ambitions or actions toward Saul. Note an important fact: David was not claiming to be sinless in the entirety of his life. He knew he was a sinner and was not perfect. Nor was he boasting of self-righteousness. He was simply proclaiming that he was blameless in this situation: he was innocent of any wrongdoing toward Saul. God had probed every part of his life and had found that David's heart was pure (v. 3a). He had no desire to harm Saul nor to dethrone him. By respecting Saul's position as God's anointed king of Israel, David demonstrated his faith that God, in His way and time, would deal with Saul (1S. 24:6; 26:9-10).

Because his heart was pure, David's conscience was clean. In the quietness of the night there in the wilderness, it was just David and God. And it was there that the Lord relieved David's spirit and declared him innocent. As David searched his own heart in the silence of the night, God had given him peace.

Not only was David guiltless in his heart toward Saul but his mouth was pure as well (v. 3b). He had intentionally purposed or resolved not to speak evil of the king. When Saul and his supporters had slandered David, he refused to repay their evil with evil. Never had he spoken out against Saul in any way. Never had he tried to turn the people against their king. Never had he slandered him or said even one word that was negative about him.

David had also kept God's Word in his behavior toward his enemies: his ways were pure (v. 4). David directed God's attention to the violent works or deeds of Saul and his men against him. David had not retaliated against them. He had not tried to slay them, even in self-defense. Instead, he actually ran from a confrontation, constantly trying to stay a step ahead of Saul's armies. Keep in mind that David was not afraid of a fight. As a younger man, he had stood tall against the lion, the bear, and the godless giant, Goliath (1 Sam. 17:34-37).

In this case, however, he had rightly chosen not to fight but to flee. David could confidently state that, in regard to Saul, he had walked in complete obedience to God's Word. He had not strayed—not even one step—from God's path of righteous conduct (v. 5). His feet were firmly planted on righteous ground, safe from the enticement to retaliate.

Thought 1. David set a marvelous example for us to follow in our prayers. We should never ask God, whose character is perfectly righteous and just, to act unrighteously. And we need to be very careful about what we say—and what we pray—regarding those who oppose or persecute us.

Humanly, it is very difficult not to be swayed by our emotions and desires when we pray. We are often guilty of asking amiss in order to have our own way or to get what we want (Ja. 4:3). It can be even more difficult for us to recognize when we are wrong. David asked God to thoroughly search him, to investigate his whole being and expose any defilement or sin toward Saul. Only then could he pray with the confidence and boldness he displayed. God had given him peace in his spirit that he was innocent. So, with the full assurance that he was in God's will, David prayed with daring determination (1 Jn. 5:14). In the same way, we should ask God to thoroughly examine our hearts and motives for any wrong attitudes or desires. We are commanded to have the mind of Christ in all things! Both our prayers and our fellowship with God are hindered when we pray selfishly or unrighteously.

“Now we know that God heareth not sinners: but if any man be a worshipper of God, and doeth his will, him he heareth” (Jn. 9:31).

“Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts” (Ja. 4:3).

“Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence toward God. And whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight” (1 Jn. 3:21-22).

“And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us” (1 Jn. 5:14).

“And God said unto him, Because thou hast asked this thing, and hast not asked for thyself long life; neither hast asked riches for thyself, nor hast asked the life of thine enemies; but hast asked for thyself understanding to discern judgment; Behold, I have done according to thy words: lo, I have given thee a wise and an understanding heart; so that there was none like thee before thee, neither after thee shall any arise like unto thee” (1 Ki. 3:11-12).

Thought 2. Note this important truth: David did not speak evil against Saul because he made a deliberate decision not to do so. He made a commitment not to sin with his mouth. Doing right is the result of resolving or choosing to do right. We do not automatically obey God; in fact, our human nature is to obey the desires of our flesh and to disobey God. For this reason, we have to determine or resolve to walk in obedience to God. This is especially true with regard to our enemies. Jesus raised the standard that governs how we should treat those who wrong us. We are not merely to refrain from doing evil against them but are actually commanded to do good for them. This is not easy. It is one of the most difficult commandments we have been given. We can keep this commandment only when we make up our minds to keep it. And we can obey it only in the Lord’s strength. Obedience to the Lord in this and

every other matter is not optional but essential. It requires us to continually pray and seek His grace and strength in order to please Him.

“Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you” (Mt. 5:43-44).

“Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men....Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good” (Ro. 12:17, 20-21).

“But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king's meat, nor with the wine which he drank: therefore he requested of the prince of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself” (Da. 1:8).

2. (17:6-12) Call upon God to protect you.

David pleaded with God to give His full attention to a second matter, also a very crucial one. He asked the Lord to shelter him from those individuals who were seeking to take his life. He appealed to God's faithfulness and His love for His people and described the wicked character of his violent enemies.

a. Believe and declare that God will hear your prayer (v. 6).

David was secure in his right to call upon the Lord to rescue him. He knew God would answer him because of the promise (covenant) God had given to His people. Although he requested God's attention humbly, he also requested it boldly and confidently. He was not a stranger seeking a random favor, but one who shared in God's covenant, one of God's chosen, beloved sons.

b. Ask God to show you the wonder of His great love: Because He saves all who trust and take refuge in Him (v. 7).

David was in a dire situation as Saul's men surrounded him and began to close in (v. 9; 1 Sam. 23:26). Yet, despite the grim outlook, David revealed great faith in Jehovah. He called upon God to show His love and kindness (*chesed*) and spoke of God's faithfulness to His covenant (see outline and notes—Ps. 5:7 for more discussion). Throughout Israel's history, God had done many wondrous works, miracles, things out of the ordinary—because of His steadfast love for His covenant people (Ex. 15:11; 34:10; Jos. 3:5). In great faith, David boldly called upon God to perform a miracle for him. His situation was desperate. There was no way to escape Saul's army. Understandably, David's plea was urgent. He turned to God for refuge and called upon God to save him, to intervene and do something miraculous. God had done it before, and David called upon Him to do it again.

c. Ask God to keep you under the shadow of His wings: Because of all the wicked who surround you (vv. 8-12).

David suddenly shifted from a bold declaration of God's wondrous love to a beautiful depiction of His nurturing love (v. 8). He used two familiar and endearing images to request God's loving care. First, he asked God to "keep [him] as the apple of his eye," that is, to protect him the way a person protects his eyes (De. 32:10; Pr. 7:2; Zec. 3:8). Apple (*iyshon*) is literally translated "the little man of the eye." It refers to the reflection a person sees when staring directly into the eyes of another person. Hence, it refers to the pupil, or the middle, of the eye. The pupil is the most tender and sensitive part of the exposed body and is carefully protected because of its great value. David sought from God that same protective covering such as the pupil is given. The second image is that of a bird sheltering her young under her wings, a common picture throughout the Old Testament (Ru. 2:12; Ps. 57:1; 61:4; 91:4). Jesus also used the

imagery in proclaiming His great love for Jerusalem and His attempts to save her (Mt. 23:37).

David needed God's sheltering care because his enemies were fierce and ruthless. They sought David's life and would not rest until they had murdered him (v. 9). Listen to David's description of the wicked men who surrounded him:

- They were hard-hearted and arrogant (v. 10a). Enclosed in fat describes the condition of their hearts (Ps. 119:70). Their hearts were insulated by the gluttony of their wickedness, making them calloused and beyond normal human feelings.
- They actively pursued and attacked the godly (v. 10b). Their pride was manifest in their brazen and belligerent words. Boasts and threats were intended to intimidate their enemies. They spoke as if God was not listening and spread lies about David without thought of judgment.
- They were like lions secretly waiting for a chance to attack their prey (vv. 11-12). They were brutish and unrelenting. They had tracked down David and his men and surrounded them. They were lurking in the shadows, waiting for the right moment to pounce upon them and destroy them.

Thought 1. We need to remember the true reason for David's suffering at the hands of Saul: Saul's willful disobedience to God. God had rejected him as king and anointed David to replace him (1 Sam. 15:26; 16:13). Saul was jealous after seeing the Lord's favor upon David and the people's acceptance of him (1 Sam. 18:8). Consequently, Saul pursued David relentlessly. Scripture is careful to note that David always behaved wisely and appropriately toward Saul (1 Sam. 18:14, 30).

If we live in obedience to the Lord, we should expect to suffer for doing the will of God. Jesus warned His disciples of persecution (Mt. 5:10-11; Jn. 15:20). Peter encouraged believers who were suffering because of

the will of God (1 Pe. 4:16). Like David, we who are suffering need to commit ourselves to the Lord, who is faithful to keep us (1 Pe. 4:19). This was the example Paul set while he was in prison. He faced imminent execution, yet he had full assurance that God would keep all that he had committed to Him (2 Tim. 1:12). In other words, Paul had committed his life and service into God's hands, knowing that he would reap the rich rewards of eternal life and service in the life to come. We ought to have this same confidence in the Lord, not allowing our faith to waver. We can call out to Him in complete confidence that He hears us, that He can do the miraculous to help us, and that what He chooses for us is best.

“Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf....Wherefore let them that suffer according to the will of God commit the keeping of their souls to him in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator” (1 Pe. 4:16, 19).

“For the which cause I also suffer these things: nevertheless I am not ashamed: for I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day” (2 Tim. 1:12).

“In the day of my trouble I will call upon thee: for thou wilt answer me” (Ps. 86:7).

“He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust: his truth shall be thy shield and buckler” (Ps. 91:4).

3. (17:13-15) Call upon God to give you a glorious future.

Through eyes of faith David looked beyond his current situation to what lay in store for his enemies and for himself. He contrasted the future of the wicked with the future of the righteous. Both will stand face to face with God: the wicked in judgment and defeat and the righteous in glorious bliss.

Note that the Hebrew is difficult to translate in verse 14b. Words have to be filled in to establish its meaning. This accounts for differences in versions and interpretations.

a. Call upon God to rescue you from the wicked (vv. 13-14).

David prayed that the Lord would intervene and stop his enemies from slaying him. To disappoint (qadam) means to stand before or to confront. Disappoint him is literally translated stand before his face (panim). Envision the scenario David paints in the psalm: his enemies are circled around him. They are crouching, lurking in the shadows, waiting for the perfect moment to pounce and devour him. Nothing stands between them and their prey until God suddenly appears with His sword raised in His mighty right hand. They now have to face Jehovah and overcome Him before they can get to David and his men.

David asked the Lord to do two things. First, he asked God to cast down his enemies, literally, to bring them to their knees. Second, he asked God to deliver his soul or to save his life by making it possible for him to escape.

The wicked give no thought to their souls nor to eternity; they do not care about what will happen when this life is over. Notice how David describes them:

First, they are men of this world as contrasted to the next world. The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament sheds light on the meaning of world (cheled) as used here: it describes the fleeting nature of this life, its short duration. It does not refer to the physical earth itself “but rather the total scene of life and action on the earth.”

Second, the men of this world have no hope beyond this life. Everything they have—their portion—is received now. No future inheritance awaits them. God, who blesses the just as well as the unjust (Mt. 5:45), blesses them out of His merciful goodness. He provides for their needs (fills their bellies) and gives them children. But notice this inevitable fact:

everything they have is left behind for others. It remains in this world, and they have nothing awaiting them in the next world. The worldly have invested in nothing that has eternal value, and will therefore be bankrupt throughout eternity. When this life is over, they will be confronted by God in judgment.

b. Call upon God to bring about the day when you will see His face and be perfectly satisfied (v. 15).

David found encouragement and hope by looking beyond this earthly life. Even if God chose not to rescue him from his enemies, he would still gain the ultimate victory: when his eyes closed in death, his spirit would awaken in the glorious presence of God (2 Cor. 5:8). What a contrast to the prospect of those who sought to slay him!

Only those who are righteous can enter the presence of God, for He is holy. Therefore a person's righteousness cannot be one of good works but of righteousness by faith (Ro. 3:22; 4:5; Tit. 3:5).

Notice another contrast between the wicked and the righteous: full (v. 14) and satisfied (v. 15) are the same Hebrew word. The wicked only have an appetite for the things of this world. The righteous crave something greater: they hunger for the presence of God (Mt. 5:6). Worldly people are usually satisfied with possessions and children. Righteous people may have these in abundance, but they long for something more. They will not be fully satisfied until they see the face of God.

Translations and scholars vary as to whether David meant he would be satisfied when he beheld God's likeness or when he was transformed into God's likeness. The text is not clear. A study of the usage of the Hebrew word and its root throughout the Old Testament favors the interpretation that David is referring to God's actual, literal presence. That is, he would be satisfied when he was in the physical presence of God in heaven, beholding or seeing God in person.

Thought 1. Every individual chooses his or her own destiny. How we choose to live in the present determines how we will live in the future. The most crucial decision we ever make is whether or not to accept Christ as our Savior and Lord. Why? Because we can only be made righteous or justified by our faith in Jesus Christ. And righteousness is required before we can see the Lord. We have no righteousness on our own; therefore, it is only by our faith that the righteousness of Christ can be imparted to us (2 Cor. 5:21; Phil. 3:9).

Scripture clearly teaches that some who have received Christ will not receive the full rewards available to them. Some believers spend their lives focused only on the things pertaining to this life. They do not invest their resources—their time, abilities, and finances—in heavenly things; hence, they will have nothing to show for their lives in eternity (Mt. 6:19-20; 1 Cor. 3:10-15).

Paul presented to the Philippians the same contrast that appears here. He emphasized that the minds of the ungodly are only on earthly things. As true believers, though, we are citizens of another world, a heavenly world. We should long for the return of Christ, who is going to transport us into the glorious presence of God (Phil. 3:19-21). Paul exhorted the Colossians to set their affections on the things of heaven, not on earthly things (Col. 3:1-2). Everything in this world—its possessions, positions, and pleasures—will pass away. While it is not a sin to have these things, which can be wonderful blessings from God, we should never devote ourselves to these things (1 Jn. 2:15-17). To receive the full rewards available to us, we need to live for heaven and long for the Lord's presence. (2 Jn. 1:8). What a glorious future awaits the children of God!

“Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.... Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God” (Mt. 5:6, 8).

“We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:8).

“Whose end is destruction, whose God is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame, who mind earthly things.) For our conversation is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself” (Phil. 3:19-21).

“If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth” (Col. 3:1-2).

“Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever” (1 Jn. 2:15-17).

“And there shall be no night there; and they need no candle, neither light of the sun; for the Lord God giveth them light: and they shall reign for ever and ever” (Re. 22:5).