

Psalm 17      “The Song of the Innocent”  
Psalm 17  
Hebrews 5

February 19, 2023

Psalm 17 is *A Prayer of David*.

Why does that matter?

When you sit down with your Bible,  
how do you read it?

Often we pick up our Bibles and ask, “What does this say to *me* in my situation?”  
That's a dangerous way to read your Bible!

After all, there was once a man who opened his Bible at random,  
and read the words, “Judas went out and hanged himself,”  
and he thought, what am I supposed to do with that?  
So he opened his Bible at random again,  
and he read the words, “go and do thou likewise.”

If you simply read your Bible with your own situation as the only context,  
then that is how you will tend to apply the Bible.

We saw last week from Acts 2 that Peter says  
that we need to read Psalm 16 in the light of Jesus.  
The Psalms only make sense because of who Jesus is and what Jesus has done.

So      “A Prayer of David” should remind us that this Psalm is all about David and Israel.  
All Israel sings these songs in fellowship with David.  
Therefore the church sings these songs in fellowship with Jesus.  
And this means that Jesus sings these songs first.  
It's not just that Jesus sings these songs *with* you.  
He sang them first.  
He lived them first.

In Psalm 11 he sang about the violence of the wicked –  
as they came to arrest him.

In Psalm 12 he sang about lies and slander – and how no one shows steadfast love –  
as his own friends and disciples abandoned him.

In Psalm 13 he asked his Father, “Will you forget me forever?”  
as he hung upon the cross.

In Psalm 14 he sang about how Jew and Gentile alike all have turned aside –  
as the leaders of Rome and Jerusalem conspired against him.

In Psalm 15 he described himself – the one faithful and righteous man –  
who now dwells at the right hand of the Father! (Ps 16)

So the Psalms are all about Jesus –  
and therefore, since Jesus has united us to himself,  
that’s how they apply to us.

And that’s really important for how we understand Psalm 17.

Psalm 17 helps us to give voice to the frustration and agony of life  
in a world where the *innocent* often suffer –  
where we frequently experience the pain that comes from other people  
sinning against us.

If you read Psalm 17 *without* Jesus,  
you might be tempted to think, “I alone am innocent –  
everyone else around me is an idiot!”

But if you read Psalm 17 *with* Jesus,  
then you must see *him* first as the innocent one –  
the one who suffered because of what *you did!*

Sing Psalm 17

Read Hebrews 4:14-5:10

Jesus was innocent.

He was tempted like us in every way – except without sin!  
He learned obedience from what he suffered – and thus was made perfect!

Therefore he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him.

This is at the heart of what Psalm 17 is all about.

Psalm 17 brings together all the themes that we have seen in this section of the Psalter.

Psalm 11 opened with the theme of taking refuge in the LORD  
when the violent and wicked are destroying the foundations of society.  
The language of Psalm 11 is taken up here in verses 4, 7, and 9.

Psalm 12 speaks of how the faithful have vanished from the sons of adam –  
particularly focusing on the sins of the tongue.  
A theme taken up in verse 10.

Psalm 13 was the song of the depressed –  
those who wonder how long God will allow things to continue like this.  
In Psalm 17, David still pleads with God to answer - “attend to my cry”!  
the only difference is that now he is confident and hopeful.

Psalm 14 showed us the path of the fool –  
those who have become corrupt – and who would shame the plans of the poor.

Psalm 17 describes those same fools seeking to ambush and devour.

And Psalm 15 showed us the path of the righteous –  
the one who dwells on God's holy hill.

And as we sang in Psalm 16 last time, the reason why I can endure through all these trials  
is because God has promised a glorious inheritance,  
and that inheritance has already begun in the resurrection of Jesus.

And Psalm 17 says that this inheritance – this portion – is *mine*  
because I have taken refuge in the LORD!

And therefore, I am righteous in his sight.

Verse 1 and verse 15 open and close the Psalm with the same word.

It gets translated “just cause” in verse 1 and “righteousness” in verse 15,  
but it’s the same word – *tsedeq*.

Psalm 17 moves from the plea for vindication, “Hear righteousness, O LORD,”  
to the confident statement that I will behold God’s face “in righteousness.”

In the same way, verse 2 opens with an appeal to God’s face –  
the phrase “from your presence” literally is translated,

“from *your face* let vindication come; let your eyes *behold* the right”  
which connects with verse 15,

“I shall *behold your face* in righteousness.”

Verses 1-9 give us the “prayer of the innocent.”

### **1. Save Me from My Foes: The Prayer of the Innocent (v1-9)**

#### **a. “Hear a Just Cause” - A Plea for Vindication (v1-2)**

*1 Hear a just cause, O Lord; attend to my cry!*

*Give ear to my prayer from lips free of deceit!*

*2 From your presence let my vindication come!*

*Let your eyes behold the right!*

Calvinists can sometimes have difficulty admitting that someone is *really* innocent.

But let me ask you this:

Did David *deserve* persecution by King Saul?

Did Tamar *deserve* to be raped by her half-brother, Amnon?

Of course not!

There are times when you *are* innocent.

That’s why the ESV translates *tsedeq* as “a just cause” in verse 1.

I think that they are taking the view that David is making a particular claim about a particular case – *this* just cause.  
But it's important to recognize that David is simply saying,  
“Hear righteousness, O LORD.”

David is claiming to be *righteous* before God!

Some people have claimed that David must have written it *before* the whole Bathsheba episode.  
Because *after* that he could never have claimed to be righteous.

But here's the problem:

by the time the psalms were collected and put into a book,  
everyone knew about Bathsheba.

Every time Psalm 17 was sung in the temple as a “prayer of David”  
everyone knew that David was *not* perfectly innocent.

Think about what that means for us!

It is because Jesus is the fulfillment of Psalm 16 – the one who sits at God's hand forever  
that we (with David) can sing Psalm 17.

No matter what you have done in the past,  
you can become innocent again.

I once knew a woman who had made a lot of bad decisions in her youth.

So when her husband sinned horrifically against her,  
she felt she couldn't say anything  
because she “deserved it.”

But that's *not* the way God's justice works.

Just because you have sinned,  
that does not give someone else the right to sin against you!

(And remember, that goes the other way as well:  
just because someone *else* has sinned,  
that does not give you the right to sin against them!)

So David's point in Psalm 17  
is that *before God* I am innocent.

And you see David's argumentation in verses 3-5:

**b. “My Feet Have Not Slipped” - A Declaration of Innocence (v3-5)**

*3 You have tried my heart, you have visited me by night,  
you have tested me, and you will find nothing;*

*I have purposed that my mouth will not transgress.*  
4 *With regard to the works of man, by the word of your lips*  
*I have avoided the ways of the violent.*  
5 *My steps have held fast to your paths;*  
*my feet have not slipped.*

There are three major parts to David's argument.  
First, he says, my *heart* is innocent (verse 3).  
Second, he declares that his *words* are innocent (end of verse 3).  
And third, he says that his *feet* have not slipped.

So in heart, in speech, and in behavior, he is innocent before God.  
But how has David maintained his innocence?  
How has he avoided the ways of the violent?  
"by the word of your lips."  
David has listened to the word of God.  
And his steps "have held fast to your paths."  
When we listen to what God says and when we walk in his paths,  
then our feet do not slip.

Of course, at this point we want to say, "But what about Uriah the Hittite?"  
David says "I have avoided the ways of the violent."  
But David sent Uriah the Hittite to his death –  
all because David wanted to cover up his adultery with Bathsheba.

What does David mean "my feet have not slipped"!?!?

Some have tried to say that David is only referring to a particular case.  
And that may be true.  
David may be referring to a particular situation where he was in the right.

But the problem with that approach is that David's overall point  
has to do his eternal destiny:  
"when I awake, I shall be satisfied with your likeness." (v15)  
So it's not enough to say that this is about a particular case.

And this is why verses 6-9 are so important for understanding David's argument.  
David declares that he is innocent – that he is in the right –  
but his confidence does not rest upon his own righteousness,  
his confidence rests on the faithfulness of God to God's own promises!

**c. "Wondrously Show Your Steadfast Love" - the Faithfulness of God (v6-9)**  
6 *I call upon you, for you will answer me, O God;*  
*incline your ear to me; hear my words.*

I have listened to your words – and ordered my life based on them.  
Now, please listen to my words – *as you have promised*.

7 *Wondrously show[a] your steadfast love* [your *hesed* – your covenant loyalty],  
*O Savior of those who seek refuge*  
*from their adversaries at your right hand.*

David asks God to show *hesed* – steadfast love.  
Why?

Because God has promised.  
*Hesed* has to do with covenant loyalty –  
with being faithful to people that you are bound to.

When David says “Show your steadfast love”  
he is saying, “God you promised that my sons would sit on my throne forever” –  
so make it happen!

We are not dealing here with the question of how God justifies the ungodly.  
This is *not* the question of how a sinner can become right with God!

This is the question of how does God deal with his own people –  
those who already belong to him.

The Westminster Confession says this well.

In chapter 16, section 5, it speaks of the relationship between good works  
and the justification of the *ungodly*:  
“We cannot by our best works merit pardon of sin, or eternal life at the hand of God,  
by reason of the great disproportion that is between them and the glory to come;  
and the infinite distance that is between us and God,  
whom, by them, we can neither profit,  
nor satisfy for the debt of our former sins,  
but when we have done all we can,  
we have done but our duty, and are unprofitable servants:  
and because, as they are good, they proceed from his Spirit;  
and as they are wrought by us, they are defiled,  
and mixed with so much weakness and imperfection,  
that they cannot endure the severity of God's judgment.”

In other words, when it comes to the forgiveness of sins and the gift of eternal life,  
our best works far fall short of God's standard –  
and if God were to judge us based on our own works, we would be doomed.

But then in section 6, the Confession addresses the situation of Psalm 17:

“Notwithstanding, the persons of believers being accepted through Christ,  
their good works also are accepted in him;  
not as though they were in this life  
wholly unblamable and unreprouable in God's sight;  
but that he, looking upon them in his Son,  
is pleased to accept and reward that which is sincere,  
although accompanied with many weaknesses and imperfections.”

When God justifies you in his Son  
he also justifies your works;  
he not only declares *you* righteous in his sight and accepts *you* in Jesus,  
he also declares your ‘good works’ righteous in his sight –  
he *accepts* your works (imperfect as they are) and rewards them,  
according to what Jesus deserves!

This is exactly what David is talking about!  
From your presence – from your face – let my vindication come!  
Let your eyes behold the right!  
“that he, looking upon them in his Son...”

Look at me – according to your steadfast love –  
deal with me according to your covenant faithfulness.

And think back to verses 3-5:  
David said that his heart, his speech, and his behavior was innocent.  
Why was he so confident?  
Because “by the word of your lips I have avoided the ways of the violent.”  
And “my steps have held fast to your paths.”

David’s righteousness comes from God.  
David avoids the ways of the violent because of *God’s* word.  
David’s steps do not slip because he holds fast to *God’s* paths.

Left to himself, David would *not* be innocent!

How can David – a murderer and an adulterer – sing Psalm 17?  
It’s not just, “Oh, I’m forgiven!!”

God is not satisfied just to forgive you your sin!  
God is also intent on making your righteousness *shine*.

And so David begs God to protect him:

*8 Keep me as the apple of your eye;*

[few parts of the body are as well-protected as the pupil of the eye!]  
*hide me in the shadow of your wings,  
9 from the wicked who do me violence,  
my deadly enemies who surround me.*

You can see that David does not think of himself too highly!  
He may have been a mighty king –  
and yet he realizes that he is frail and weak before the power of his foes!  
David can only survive if God protects him –  
and if God subdues his enemies (the point of verses 10-13).

**2. Subdue My Enemies: What God Should Do to the Guilty (v10-13)**  
**a. “They Close Their Hearts to Pity” - The Guilt of My Foes (v10-12)**

*10 They close their hearts to pity;  
with their mouths they speak arrogantly.  
11 They have now surrounded our steps;  
they set their eyes to cast us to the ground.  
12 He is like a lion eager to tear,  
as a young lion lurking in ambush.*

Notice that the enemies are described in verses 10-12  
with the same three-fold pattern (heart, speech, and behavior) as in verses 3-5.  
The wicked close their hearts to pity;  
with their mouths they speak arrogantly.  
They have now surrounded our steps...

Behavior always starts in the heart,  
moves out into words,  
and takes shape in action.

When you see sin in your life,  
this can be a useful paradigm to consider.

All sin starts in the heart, moves out into words, and takes shape in action.  
So, if you want to understand where sin comes from, trace it backwards:  
you see the action – what were the words behind it?  
What were the lies that you believed?  
What were the words that you told yourself?  
And then behind the words, what was in your heart?  
What craving? What desire? What longing was there?

Notice how it works for David’s foes:  
“They close their hearts to pity.”  
More literally, “their fat has covered their heart” –



In other words, they are so obsessed with wealth and power  
that they are insensitive to others.  
“with their mouths they speak arrogantly.”  
When you hear arrogant words – you see the fruit of hearts that are closed to pity.

And the result is action:  
“They have now surrounded our steps; they set their eyes to cast us to the ground.”

And so David pleads with God:

**b. “Deliver My Soul from the Wicked by Your Sword” (v13)**  
*13 Arise, O Lord! Confront him, subdue him!*  
*Deliver my soul from the wicked by your sword,*

Only God can save!  
David may have been a man after God’s own heart,  
but David recognizes that he needs the LORD to take down his foes!

So “Deliver my soul from the wicked by your sword...”

**3. What Will Satisfy You? (v14-15)**  
*14 from men by your hand, O Lord,*  
*from men of the world whose portion is in this life.[b]*  
*You fill their womb with treasure;[c]*  
*they are satisfied with children,*  
*and they leave their abundance to their infants.*

In other words, if you are focused on getting what you want,  
then you may very well succeed at obtaining power and wealth in this life –  
and you may even be able to hand it down to your children and grandchildren.

But David says that he is not content with a “portion in this life,”  
or being “satisfied” with handing down an inheritance to children.

Psalm 16 had said “the LORD is my chosen portion and my cup.”  
Psalm 16 had said that fullness of joy comes “in your presence” –  
“at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.”

And so Psalm 17 develops the same theme:

Their portion is in this life.  
They are satisfied with having children and passing on an inheritance, but,

*15 As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness;*  
*when I awake, I shall be satisfied with your likeness.*

What satisfies you?

Where do you find satisfaction?!

David says that he will behold God's face in righteousness.

When I awake, I shall be satisfied with your likeness.

Last time we heard Peter say in Acts 2 that Psalm 16 was all about the resurrection of Christ.

And since Psalm 17 develops the same point further,

we need to see that if David's song in Psalm 16

pointed to Christ as the one who did not see corruption,

then David's song in Psalm 17 shows us Christ as the innocent sufferer.

Because Jesus is truly the one who was rescued from death by the Father

(Hebrews 5:7 says that Jesus "offered up prayers and supplications,

with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death,

and he was heard because of his reverence.

Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.

And being made perfect,

he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him...")

He who was in the beginning with the Father

took our flesh upon himself so that he might take upon himself the sins of the world –

so that he might take upon himself the innocent suffering of the world.

As C. S. Lewis put it,

"If we consider the unblushing promises of reward

and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels,

it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak.

We are half-hearted creatures,

fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us,

like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum

because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea.

*We are far too easily pleased.* (Weight of Glory, 26)

You were created for God himself.

"When I awake I shall be satisfied with your likeness"

If you are married,

you probably wake up most mornings next to your wife – your husband –

and that is a good thing.

That was designed by God to be a faint picture of the real thing –

waking up to be satisfied with *his* likeness.

Rolf Caylor was an elder here for many years.

He was a lifelong bachelor who had woken up alone for more than 60 years.

When he was dying, the church made a point of having someone always by his side.

During the last two weeks of his life, whenever he opened his eyes,  
he saw you.

And then one day he closed his eyes,  
and when he opened them again, he saw Jesus.

“When I awake I shall be satisfied with your likeness.”

Sing Psalm 17