

A Prayer of the Persecuted

Psalm 17

Studies in the Psalms #17

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A WHILE back I read *Dr. Jeckyll and Mr. Hyde* to the boys. One of the ways reading old books is that you have to imagine what people looked like, where they were, and what it was like. It's like entering a whole new world you've never been to before. Reading the Old Testament Scriptures can be like that as well. Everything is different and we try to imagine what it was like. But one of the hardest things we try to enter into is the suffering, the threats, and even the violence God's people experienced. I mean, look around! We're not in Israel anymore, Toto!

Here in Psalm 17 we have another of David's psalms. It's a heartfelt plea to God. And as we read, we discover that it's a heartfelt *prayer of the persecuted*. And as we've discovered already, this is what makes it so distant from us. But it's also the opportunity for it to be accessible. What? How can it be distant and accessible? The answer is Jesus Christ. We hear here the heartfelt plea of Jesus as he was persecuted. We so often think of his sufferings as happening on the cross. But as our Heidelberg Catechism reminds us, it was "during his whole life on earth, but especially at the end,

Christ sustained in body and soul the wrath of God against the sin of the whole human race” (Q&A 37). And it’s as we are united to Jesus Christ by faith today that we can read this Psalm with understanding, apply its teaching to ourselves, pray it and sing it back to God. Amen?

A Prayer to Justice (vv. 1–5)

This is a *prayer to justice*. Feel the earnestness and urgency in the verbs here: ***Hear a just cause, O LORD; attend to my cry! Give ear to my prayer from lips free of deceit! From your presence let my vindication come! Let your eyes behold the right!*** (vv. 1–2) David needed help. Jesus needed help—and obviously everything this Psalm goes on to say speaks so prophetically and so perfectly of Jesus! The persecuted church in all times and in all places needed and continues to need help. You and I need this help. Again and again we’ve been encouraged by the Psalms to pray in honesty and simplicity. There’s nothing flowery or ornate here. It’s just straight to the point. And what is the point? Justice. We hear so much today about “social justice.” Brothers and sisters, there is no true justice apart from God, who is the standard of equity, justice, and righteousness.

I mentioned that this Psalm illustrates for us the strange world of the Old Testament. We see that as David goes on to illustrate the kind of justice

he means by referring to his own just living in verses 3–5. He says the Lord has **tried** and **tested...my heart...and you will find nothing**, meaning, nothing he has done contrary to what he’s asking. And he says **I have purposed**, meaning, his thoughts and intents are **that my mouth will not transgress** (v. 3) and in his actual deeds he has **avoided the ways of the violent** (v. 4). We read this and think, “I know someone like this? “I’m innocent. What did I do?” There’s a scene in the movie *Braveheart* where the local English magistrate of the land on which William Wallace’s fiancée in Scotland lives says, “All of you know full well, the great pains I’ve always taken never to be too strict, too rigid with the application of our laws, and as a consequence, have we not learned to live together in relative peace and harmony?” All the while he lives in a high fort, surrounded by soldiers, eating the best food in clean clothes while everyone below lives in squalor. Actually, this is not what David is saying. He’s not appealing to his being sinless but steadfast in the ways of the Lord. Look at verse 4: **My steps have held fast to your paths; my feet have not slipped**. The image of **paths** is of the “tracks” of a wagon in the ground that subsequent wagons follow. And they’re the Lord’s **paths** by his use of **your**. He’s not saying he’s perfect but

consistent; he's not saying he's impeccable but loyal.¹ He's saying, "Lord, would you show your true justice in my situation. I am seeking to follow you. I am one of your people. And in contrast to the wicked, I follow your ways."

A Prayer to Love (vv. 6–12)

So David makes a prayer to the justice of God and then continues with *a prayer to love* in verses 6–12. Just like in verses 1–2 in his saying *hear, attend, give ear, let your eyes behold* he prays *I call upon you, for you will answer me, O God; incline your ear to me; hear my words* (v. 6). It's such a wonderful thing to be a child of God our heavenly Father, amen? I mean to know that when we approach God he will actually listen! We know this because if he listens to his Son, Jesus, he will listen to us his adopted sons and daughters.

And he's praying here on the basis of God's love. **Wondrously show your steadfast love** (v. 7). When David uses that verb **wondrously show** he's echoing the Exodus story when the Lord made a distinction between his people and the people of Pharaoh. What he's saying is "make it obvious that I am your child and not the persecutors!" Make it obvious **O Savior of those who seek refuge from their adversaries at your right hand** (v. 7). Again

¹ Davis, *Slogging Along in the Paths of Righteousness*, 71.

the **right hand** is Exodus language as the Lord won victory over his enemy by his right hand in Exodus 15 (vv. 6, 12). And this powerful Savior is a loving Lord: **keep me as the apple** [literally, the pupil] **of your eye**. This “is absolutely the sweetest figure of speech.”² **Hide me in the shadow of your wings** (v. 8) like a mother bird loving her chicks. Again this comes from the Exodus and wilderness narrative in Deuteronomy 32:

He found him in a desert land,
and in the howling waste of the wilderness;
he encircled him, he cared for him,
he kept him as the apple of his eye.
Like an eagle that stirs up its nest,
that flutters over its young,
spreading out its wings, catching them,
bearing them on its pinions,

And just like before when he prayed to the justice of God and then spoke of his just living, so too here he appeals to the love of God but then speaks of **the wicked** who hate God and he as God’s child, as they are seeking to **do me violence, my deadly enemies who surround me** (v. 9). He needs this protection as a chick needs its mother’s wings over it. Here again is that strange world to us. But is it strange to those in Nigeria, South Sudan, or Eritrea today? Is it strange to those in North Korea, China, or Tibet today? Is it strange to those in Turkey, Iran, or Pakistan today? These

² Hieronymus Weller von Molsdorf, in *Reformation Commentary on Scripture*, 129.

wicked and deadly enemies of God's people have no heart: **clos[ing] their hearts** [literally "fat," which is metaphor for tenderness and sensitivity³] **to pity** (v. 10). The **wicked and deadly enemies** of God's people are arrogant as they broadcast their message of hate: **with their mouths they speak arrogantly** (v. 10). The **wicked and deadly enemies** of God's people are schemers like their father the devil, always thinking of how to attack: **they have now surrounded our steps; they set their eyes to cast us to the ground** (v. 11). The **wicked and deadly enemies** of God's people are like their father the devil, a roaring lion seeking whom to devour: **he is like a lion eager to tear, as a young lion lurking in ambush** (v. 12).

What are we to do for our brothers and sisters under persecution from so far away? I was reading this week and came across a helpful section in an old writer on this very Psalm. He said we have to remember that there are two types of persecutors: unknowing and knowing. The unknowing persecutor is like Saul of Tarsus, who thought he was just harming people, but who learned that he really was persecuting the Lord himself. For those who unknowingly are participating in persecution we must pray for their conversion like Saul was converted. For those who knowingly persecute the

³ Motyer, *Psalm by the Day*, 41.

Lord's people because they hate the Lord we are taught here and elsewhere—like in Paul's letters and the book of Revelation—to pray for their plans, their finances, their abilities to persecute to be toppled and crushed by the Lord. And we are to pray for them to be shamed and humiliated by what they have done, either in this life, leading to their conversion, or in the life to come, before the Lord, who will cast them out of his presence.⁴ This all seems so strange to us, doesn't it? But we need to learn to pray more aggressively! **Arise, O LORD! Confront him, subdue him! Deliver my soul from the wicked by your sword, from men by your hand, O LORD, from men of the world whose portion is in this life. You fill their womb with treasure; they are satisfied with children, and they leave their abundance to their infants** (vv. 13–14). Isn't this what we pray when we say, "Thy kingdom come?" For his kingdom to come is for the kingdoms of this world that stand opposed to him to be swept away!

A Prayer for the Future (v. 15)

So David prays to the justice and love of God. And as he's praying for God to help him in this life, and as we pray for the persecuted church's situation in this life, don't forget verse 15: *a prayer for the future*. There is

⁴ Nikolaus Selnecker, in *Reformation Commentary on Scripture*, 130.

more to life and just this life, unlike the persecutors **whose portion is in this life** (v. 14). We pray for that strange world to come, which even St. John spoke of saying, “what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). Listen to David: **As for me**—as the heavenly Father’s child destined for heaven yet persecuted now—**I shall behold your face in righteousness**—not my best efforts in contrast to the wicked, but the perfection of Christ’s righteousness imputed not and realized then—**when I awake, I shall be satisfied with your likeness**. As strange as that may sound, that’s the hope of the persecuted. Amen.