



## Psalm 17- Prayer for Deliverance from Persecutors

A Prayer of David.

### Introduction

This is an individual lament, especially geared toward cases in which the person suffering considers himself unjustly accused of wrong, thus resembling Psalm 7, this time by a worldly enemy. The Psalm is a prayer for vindication, which ends by expressing confidence in the true portion of the faithful, thus resembling Psalm 16. It cannot be identified with a particular incident in David's life for there were too many circumstances that could have led to such words being penned, although there are those that believe it relates to the time when David was being hunted by Saul. This Psalm is remarkable for its trust in God, its lack of confidence in self, and in its glorious heavenly hope.

### Psalm 17:1-2 - Request for Vindication.

The words suggest someone under attack or accusation, asking God to bring the singer's innocence to light.

- 1 Hear a just cause, O Lord; attend to my cry;  
give ear to my prayer from lips free of deceit.
- 2 From you let my vindication come;  
let your eyes see the right.

### Psalm 17:1-2

Hear a just cause, O Lord. As is common in the Psalms, David again prayed from a time of crisis. Here he began his appeal to God by declaring the justice of his cause. He believed God had every reason to attend to his cry because his cause

was just. It is entirely possible for someone to think that their cause is just when it is not; or for both parties in a fight to each be absolutely convinced that their own cause is just. One cannot automatically take these words of David to oneself and immediately judge one's cause as just.

**Give ear to my prayer from lips free of deceit.** Even as David was convinced regarding the justice of his cause, he was also careful to speak honestly about his problem. The idea is that David has not deceived so as to deserve his current problem, and that he was not withholding facts that would undermine his cause. In Psalm 139:23-24 David prayed: *<<Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting>>*. This wonderful prayer - to know one's own heart and hidden motives and sins - is the kind of thing that David prayed before he prayed this Psalm. He comes to God in Psalm 17 with some confidence through a tested conscience.

**From you let my vindication come.** David did not want a vindication that came from himself. In his long struggle with King Saul, David had several opportunities to set things right himself, but he refused all and waited until vindication came from the presence of God: *<<They will receive blessing from the Lord, and vindication from the God of their salvation>>* (Psalm 24:5), and: *<<he who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me. It is the Lord God who helps me; who will declare me guilty? All of them will wear out like a garment; the moth will eat them up>>* (Isaiah 50:8-9). This was an important way that David left his problem to the Lord. 'God, I refuse to take matters into my own hands. I will wait for vindication to come from your presence; I want to know that this is your work and not mine.'

**Let your eyes see the right.** David phrased his request in a way that put more emphasis upon God's justice than on his own cause. He did believe that his cause was just; but he spoke in a manner that gave more importance to the things that are upright. David's idea was something like this: 'Lord, I believe my cause is just and I have searched my own heart for deceit. Yet I wait for your vindication, and I want you to do and to promote what is right. If I am not on your side, move me so that I am.'

#### **Psalm 17:3-5 - Claim of Innocence.**

These verses amplify the assertion of innocence; the claim begins in v.1 *<<lips free of deceit>>*. The singer has opened himself to the Lord's examination (tried, visited, tested), and he recounts his efforts to stay pure (avoided, steps have held fast, feet have not slipped). For the proper use of such claims, refer to the comments made on Psalm 7:3-5.

<sup>3</sup> If you try my heart, if you visit me by night,  
if you test me, you will find no wickedness in me;  
my mouth does not transgress.

<sup>4</sup> As for what others do, by the word of your lips  
I have avoided the ways of the violent.

#### Psalm 17:3-4

If you try my heart. David invited the test in the previous verses; here he speaks having passed the test: if you test me, you will find no wickedness in me. It takes some level of patience and maturity to let God test one's heart in this manner. One must accept the fact that one might be wrong and that someone else may be right in the matter. One must be more interested in God's justice and his standard of right and wrong than one is in winning one's cause: <<*But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I shall come out like gold*>> (Job 23:10), and: <<*In those days and at that time, says the Lord, the iniquity of Israel shall be sought, and there shall be none; and the sins of Judah, and none shall be found; for I will pardon the remnant that I have spared*>> (Jeremiah 50:20). One must come to God and his Word with a heart ready to be convicted and corrected. It is a worthy question for all to ask: 'Do I allow God to test my heart? Can I be corrected? Will I listen to others when they tell me that I may be wrong?'

My mouth does not transgress. David was careful to not speak in a sinful way about his crisis. He could speak in a way that might deceive others or himself, and promote his own cause at the expense of God's justice; yet David purposed that it would not be so.

By the word of your lips I have avoided the ways of the violent. It was this word that gave David the wisdom and the strength to keep away from the paths of the destroyer. The idea is not so much a path where David would destroy, but a path where David would become a destroyer. David learned and displayed this lesson over and over again during his long crisis with King Saul. David had to protect himself, his family, and his men from Saul without becoming himself a twisted, self-interested destroyer like Saul.

<sup>5</sup> My steps have held fast to your paths;  
my feet have not slipped.

#### Psalm 17:5

My steps have held fast to your paths. David felt that he was in danger of falling or slipping into disaster; he needed God to hold up his steps, so that his feet have

not slipped. This again shows the significant humility of David's prayer. He wants to be upheld, but only on God's ways: <<*Vengeance is mine, and recompense, for the time when their foot shall slip; because the day of their calamity is at hand, their doom comes swiftly*>> (Deuteronomy 32:35). Included in this is the unspoken prayer, 'Lord, if I am not on your path, please put me there. I want to be in your paths, not my own.'

#### Psalm 17:6-9 - Request for Protection.

The song makes a general request for an answer to the prayer (v.6) and then specifies the request; namely, for protection from violent adversaries (vv.7-9).

- 6 I call upon you, for you will answer me, O God;  
incline your ear to me, hear my words.
- 7 Wondrously show your steadfast love,  
O saviour of those who seek refuge  
from their adversaries at your right hand.

#### Psalm 17:6-7

I call upon you, for you will answer me, O God. David's calm confidence in the midst of his crisis is encouraging. Although his problems were not yet gone, he still was confident that God would hear when he called: <<*In the day of my trouble I call on you, for you will answer me*>> (Psalm 86:7).

Wondrously show your steadfast love, O saviour of those who seek refuge from their adversaries at your right hand. This is the first appearance in the Psalms of the wonderful concept of God's steadfast love. David asked that this special love be shown to him by the special power of God, i.e. your right hand: <<*Rise up, O Lord; O God, lift up your hand; do not forget the oppressed*>> (Psalm 10:12).

- 8 Guard me as the apple of the eye;  
hide me in the shadow of your wings,
- 9 from the wicked who despoil me,  
my deadly enemies who surround me.

#### Psalm 17:8-9

The apple of the eye. This colourful biblical term for the pupil is used elsewhere: <<*He sustained him in a desert land, in a howling wilderness waste; he shielded him, cared for him, guarded him as the apple of his eye*>> (Deuteronomy 32:10), <<*keep my commandments and live, keep my teachings*>>

*as the apple of your eye*>> (Proverbs 7:2) and: <<*For thus said the Lord of hosts (after his glory sent me) regarding the nations that plundered you: Truly, one who touches you touches the apple of my eye*>> (Zechariah 2:8). It was used to describe something precious, easily injured and demanding protection. David wanted to be kept by God as if he were something valuable and even fragile. To be kept as the apple of the eye means:

- To be kept with many guards and protections.
- To always be kept safe.
- To be kept from the small things, like dust and grit.
- To always be kept sensitive and tender.
- To be kept clear and unobstructed.
- To be kept as something beautiful and eminently useful.

In the shadow of your wings always refers to a place of safety. It is another powerful figure of speech. The idea is of how a mother bird shields her young chicks from predators, from the elements, and from dangers by gathering them under her wings. This figure of speech is also used in three other Psalms: <<*How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings*>> (Psalm 36:7), <<*Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me, for in you my soul takes refuge; in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge, until the destroying storms pass by*>> (Psalm 57:1), and: <<*for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy*>> (Psalm 63:7). Jesus used this same word picture to show his love and desired care for Jerusalem and its people: <<*Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!*>> (Matthew 23:37).

From the wicked who despoil me, my deadly enemies who surround me. The threat in David's life was real. He faced not only oppression that made his life difficult, but also deadly enemies who wanted to end his life.

#### Psalm 17:10-12 - The Pitiless Enemies.

No appeal to the attackers' pity or remorse is possible, since they close their hearts to such feelings, preferring instead to speak arrogantly (v.10). They eagerly watch for the opportunity to trip up the innocent singer and then to destroy him (vv.11-12).

- <sup>10</sup> They close their hearts to pity;  
with their mouths they speak arrogantly.
- <sup>11</sup> They track me down; now they surround me;  
they set their eyes to cast me to the ground.

12 They are like a lion eager to tear,  
like a young lion lurking in ambush.

### Psalm 17:10-12

They close their hearts to pity. David here begins to describe the deadly enemies who oppressed him so. They were insensitive and spoke proudly. God instructed his prophet to go to such people so that they may find salvation by turning back to God: <<*And he said, 'Go and say to this people: "Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand." Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed'*>> (Isaiah 6:9-10).

They track me down; now they surround me; they set their eyes to cast me to the ground. They are like a lion eager to tear, like a young lion lurking in ambush. David described the dangerous, wild, beast-like actions of his enemies. They would destroy him as a lion destroys its prey.

### Psalm 17:13-14 - May God Defeat Them!

In such an environment of threat and faith, the proper recourse is prayer for the enemy's defeat. Although their repentance may be preferred, that avenue seems closed (v.10), and thus deliverance for the pious requires defeat for the attacker. The specific kind of defeat is left up to God.

13 Rise up, O Lord, confront them, overthrow them!  
By your sword deliver my life from the wicked,  
14 from mortals—by your hand, O Lord—  
from mortals whose portion in life is in this world.  
May their bellies be filled with what you have stored up for them;  
may their children have more than enough;  
may they leave something over to their little ones.

### Psalm 17:13-14

Rise up, O Lord, confront them, overthrow them! David declared his dependence on God to protect him. It was not because David was afraid of such lion-like enemies; as a young boy David had fought with and defeated both the bear and the lion: <<*Saul said to David, 'You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are just a boy, and he has been a warrior from his youth.'* But David said to Saul, 'Your servant used to keep sheep for his

*father; and whenever a lion or a bear came, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after it and struck it down, rescuing the lamb from its mouth; and if it turned against me, I would catch it by the jaw, strike it down, and kill it. Your servant has killed both lions and bears; and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, since he has defied the armies of the living God.’ David said, ‘The Lord, who saved me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, will save me from the hand of this Philistine.’ So Saul said to David, ‘Go, and may the Lord be with you!’>> (1 Samuel 17:33-37). It was because David needed to see his enemy defeated by the hand of God, not the hand of David. This Psalm has no firm connection to any particular recorded event in David’s life, but it is not hard to see it belonging to the long period when Saul hunted David. During that time David refused to strike out against Saul when he had the opportunity, because he knew that God must strike against Saul, and not David himself.*

By your sword deliver my life from the wicked, from mortals – by your hand, O Lord – from mortals whose portion in life is in this world. David recognised that one characteristic of his enemies was that they looked much more to this life than they did to eternity.

The Hebrew presents some challenges; the text describes these attackers as people whose only reward is in this life (their treasure, i.e. what you have stored up for them, and their children); they leave all their wealth behind when they die. This contrasts with the expectation that the pious have in v.15.

#### Psalm 17:15 - Confidence for Everlasting Satisfaction.

The Psalm finishes in triumph, anticipating eternal fellowship in God’s presence.

<sup>15</sup> As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness;  
when I awake I shall be satisfied, beholding your likeness.

#### Psalm 17:15

As for me. David here set himself in contrast to his enemies, who looked only to this life and not to eternity.

I shall behold your face. David believed in this as a promise of God and a reality of the life to come: <<*For the Lord is righteous; he loves righteous deeds; the upright shall behold his face*>> (Psalm 11:7), <<*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God*>> (Matthew 5:8), and: <<*Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads*>> (Revelation 22:3-4).

**When I awake I shall be satisfied.** This is generally taken as implying ‘from the sleep of death’; thus the beholding and the satisfaction of this verse refer to the everlasting bliss that the godly look for; one may even go as far as seeing the general resurrection here. David knew that the transition from this life to the next was like waking from sleep. He knew that the world beyond was more real and less dreamlike than the current earthly life. Although David’s focus was on eternity, this verse does not ignore the present day. There is a real sense in which these realities: closer fellowship with God, his righteousness in our life, a life truly awake, a life more and more conformed to his image, can in greater and greater measure be a Christian believer’s in this life. One should remember that eternal life begins now in the reality of salvation.

**Beholding your likeness.** David did not have a sophisticated understanding of heaven; one might say that no one in the OT really did. Yet he did know that when he saw God’s face, when he received his righteousness, when he awoke in heaven’s reality, that he would be in God’s likeness. David seemed to anticipate what Paul would write some 1,000 years later: ***<<For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family>> (Romans 8:29).*** The destiny of God’s people is to be conformed into the image of God, as perfectly displayed in Jesus Christ his Son: ***<<See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure>> (1 John 3:1-3).***