



## Psalm 86 - Supplication for Help against Enemies

A Prayer of David.

### Introduction

This is an individual lament, geared (as many of these laments are) to a situation in which <<**a band of ruffians seeks my life**>> (v.14). The psalm confesses that the Lord is good and forgiving (v.5), acknowledging that the singer's own sins may have contributed to his enemies' plans.

The psalmist explicitly grounds his request in Exodus 34:6, a fundamental confessional statement of the OT as seen in Psalm 86:15; David also prays for a united heart to live faithfully to God (v.11). The middle of the psalm strikingly professes faith in one God, to whom all nations shall come (vv.8-10) – another vital OT theme.

This is the only psalm of David in Book 3 of the Psalms; the last one encountered was Psalm 70, and the next one will be Psalm 101. Charles Spurgeon comments, "There are four other psalms each called by the name Tephillah, or 'prayer,' but this deserves to be distinguished from the rest and known as 'the prayer of David,' even as the ninetieth Psalm is known as 'the prayer of Moses.' It savours of David. The man of sincerity, of ardour, of trials, of faults, and of great heart, pleads, sobs, and trusts through all the verses of this psalm."

### Psalm 86:1-7 - Save Your Servant, Who Trusts in You.

The beginning of the psalm is a general call for help: <<**preserve my life**>> and <<**save your servant**>>, without specifying the nature of the trouble – that will come in the third section (vv.14-17). The person praying offers reasons that God should answer, as indicated by the clauses introduced by for in vv.2-5: first is the

genuineness of his faith (v.2); second is the earnestness with which he prays, relying on the Lord, not other gods (vv.3-4); and third is the crucial confession of God's benevolent character, as revealed in the Pentateuch (v.5). Thus everyone who sings this prayer from the heart may be assured of God's attention.

<sup>1</sup> Incline your ear, O Lord, and answer me,  
for I am poor and needy.

### Psalm 86:1

**Incline your ear.** David used expressive language to speak of his need. The idea - figurative, of course - is that God in heaven bows his head to earth to hear David's plea for help - David's cry, "Hear me." Following this request David will give a reason to God why his prayer should be answered. David thought carefully in his prayer, and presented both requests and reasons to God. The psalm is unique in its method of urging a petition upon the ground of some known fact.

**Elsewhere David expresses his confidence that God will hear his prayer: <<I call upon you, for you will answer me, O God; incline your ear to me, hear my words>> (Psalm 17:6).**

**For I am poor and needy.** David gives the first of several reasons why God should answer. David here appealed to God's sympathy, to his compassion. A hard-hearted God would not care for a poor and needy man, or worse still, might despise him. Yet David knew that God was full of love and compassion and would be moved by the fact that David was, and knew himself to be, poor and needy. It is significant that David began his plea with this. His understanding of the love and compassion of God was foundational.

<sup>2</sup> Preserve my life, for I am devoted to you;  
save your servant who trusts in you.  
You are my God; <sup>3</sup> be gracious to me, O Lord,  
for to you do I cry all day long.

### Psalm 86:2-3

**Preserve my life.** David's problem was desperate; he felt that without God's help he could perish. Considering the many people set against him (v.14), he had reason to be this concerned. Beyond this, readers are not told the nature of David's need. They know it was severe, and he felt it to be life threatening. Yet it is not known if it was danger from Saul, or the Philistines, or from assassins, or from a dozen other things. This is good, because it allows the reader to see their need in David's need. It allows them to know that they can approach God on the same basis for whatever their need is.

For I am devoted to you or ‘for I am holy’. This was not a claim to absolute holiness. David knew he was a sinner; that he had and would sin. Yet he also knew that as a man among other men - and especially next to those who were against him - he was a holy man.

Save your servant who trusts in you. David declares his trust in God alone: <<**O my God, in you I trust; do not let me be put to shame; do not let my enemies exult over me**>> (Psalm 25:2). David based this plea on three similar ideas, all rooted in the fact that he was connected to God:

- I am devoted to you; “I am connected to you morally God; I embrace your holiness in my own life.”
- You are my God; “I am connected to you with worship and honour.”
- Save your servant who trusts in you; “I am connected to you in trust and faith.”

In all this it can be seen just how intelligent and thought-out David’s prayer was. When he came to the throne of God, he came with careful thought.

Be gracious to me, O Lord, for to you do I cry all day long. David asked for mercy because he was completely dependent upon God. He cried to God all day long because he could not or would not rely on anyone else for help. David did not just come before God for a few minutes each day or even leave it until he was in trouble. He sought God through every aspect of his life. The sons of Korah made a similar plea: <<**Every day I call on you, O Lord; I spread out my hands to you**>> (Psalm 88:9).

<sup>4</sup> Gladden the soul of your servant,  
for to you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.

#### Psalm 86:4

Gladden the soul of your servant, for to you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. The reason is much the same as in the previous verse; an expression of reliance and trust in God (to you I lift up my soul). But the request is beautifully stated: gladden the soul of your servant. David felt that he could only find joy in his soul as God met his need: <<**Let me hear of your steadfast love in the morning, for in you I put my trust. Teach me the way I should go, for to you I lift up my soul**>> (Psalm 143:8).

<sup>5</sup> For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving,  
abounding in steadfast love to all who call on you.

## Psalm 86:5

For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving. David based this plea on the graciousness of God; knowing that he is good and ready to forgive. Far too many people who should know better doubt both the goodness of God and his readiness to forgive. Many wait to repent and ask forgiveness because they think that time might make God more forgiving. That is not possible. He is ready to forgive now.

Abounding in steadfast love to all who call on you. As David called upon God for help, he expected abundant mercy from God, known as one of his key characteristics: <<*But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and you did not forsake them*>> (Nehemiah 9:17b), <<*Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing*>> (Joel 2:13b), and: <<*He prayed to the Lord and said, ‘O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing’*>> (Jonah 4:2). This expectation of faith would be answered.

<sup>6</sup> Give ear, O Lord, to my prayer;  
listen to my cry of supplication.

<sup>7</sup> In the day of my trouble I call on you,  
for you will answer me.

## Psalm 86:6-7

Give ear, O Lord, to my prayer; listen to my cry of supplication. Again, David simply asked for God to hear him. He was confident that if the loving, merciful God heard his plea, then he would answer favourably. David here repeated the idea from v.1, but the repetition had a purpose. He repeats and multiplies his requests, both to ease his own troubled mind and to prevail with God, who is well-pleased with his people’s importunity in prayer. Habakkuk was a man who cried out to God in this way: <<*O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you ‘Violence!’ and you will not save? Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous – therefore judgement comes forth perverted*>> (Habakkuk 1:2-4).

In the day of my trouble I call on you, for you will answer me. This was David’s wonderful confidence in God. He knew that God was not a fair-weather friend; that instead God could be counted on even in the day of trouble. Charles Spurgeon commented, “Our experience confirms us in the belief that Jehovah the living God

really does aid those who call upon him, and therefore we pray and mean to pray, not because we are so fascinated by prayer that for its own sake we would continue in it if it proved to be mere folly and superstition, as vain philosophers assert; but because we really, indeed, and of a truth, find it to be a practical and effectual means of obtaining help from God in the hour of need.”

### Psalm 86:8-13 - Praise to the Faithful and Majestic God.

In the second section, the singer offers up praise to the magnificent God he has petitioned for help and forgiveness. The praise comes in two parts; first, he praises the Lord, who alone is God (vv.8-10); second, he praises the Lord who has shown his covenant kindness, his steadfast love (v.13). In between is a prayer for his own moral growth (v.11).

- <sup>8</sup> There is none like you among the gods, O Lord,  
nor are there any works like yours.
- <sup>9</sup> All the nations you have made shall come  
and bow down before you, O Lord,  
and shall glorify your name.
- <sup>10</sup> For you are great and do wondrous things;  
you alone are God.

### Psalm 86:8-10

These verses demonstrate David’s understanding of who God is - listening, holy, worthy of trust, merciful, good, ready to forgive - and stands in contrast to the contemporary understanding of many of the pagan gods, such as Baal, Ashtoreth, or Dagon. Many of these gods were understood to be bitter, vengeful, cunning, and sexually depraved. David knew that the Lord God was different. These verses move from there is none like you who is worthy of worship among the gods, i.e. the angels and other heavenly beings rather than an acknowledgement of pagan gods, to you alone are God. This is why all the nations you have made shall come and bow down before the Lord: all human beings were made to know and love the one true God. God called Abraham so that his family would be the vehicle of bringing this knowledge to the rest of mankind; the OT looks forward to an era in which this will actually happen, and the NT authors claim that this era has begun with the resurrection of Jesus. The words of v.9 are incorporated into a song in Revelation 15:4.

Nor are there any works like yours. David knew that when God did something it was glorious. It had the imprint of his glorious character upon it and could not be compared to the works of man or anything else in all creation.

All the nations you have made shall come and bow down before you, O Lord.

David recognised that God was creator and master over all nations, not merely Israel. In a day when most gods were considered to be only national or regional deities, David knew that his God - the living God, the true God - was different: <<*All the earth worships you; they sing praises to you, sing praises to your name*>> (Psalm 66:4), <<*Thus says the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers, 'Kings shall see and stand up, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves, because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you'*>> (Isaiah 49:7), and: <<*Thus says the Lord of hosts: Peoples shall yet come, the inhabitants of many cities; the inhabitants of one city shall go to another, saying, 'Come, let us go to entreat the favour of the Lord, and to seek the Lord of hosts; I myself am going.'* Many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek the Lord of hosts in Jerusalem, and to entreat the favour of the Lord>> (Zechariah 8:20-22).

For you are great and do wondrous things; you alone are God. David understood that the Lord was not one God among many gods, or even the best God among many gods. He alone is God, and none other: <<*Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone*>> (Deuteronomy 6:4), <<*You are my witnesses, says the Lord, and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me*>> (Isaiah 43:10), <<*Jesus answered, 'The first is, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength"'*>> (Mark 12:29-30), and: <<*Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that 'no idol in the world really exists', and that 'there is no God but one'*>> (1 Corinthians 8:4). Spurgeon notes that the verb is in the present tense. David and his successors today should reflect not so much on what God has done but on what he is still doing and will continue to do.

- 11 Teach me your way, O Lord,  
that I may walk in your truth;  
give me an undivided heart to revere your name.
- 12 I give thanks to you, O Lord my God, with my whole heart,  
and I will glorify your name for ever.

Psalm 86:11-12

Teach me your way. Because David knew who God was - not perfectly, of course, but with great understanding - his natural reaction was to submit himself to this great, gracious God and to ask him to teach him, as did Moses before him: <<**If you**

*are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favour with you. Remember that this nation is your people*>> (Exodus 33:13 NIV). The Bible regularly pictures the moral course of one's life as a 'way' or path, and one's conduct as a 'walk' or journey. A faithful person seeks instruction in the ways that please God in order to learn how better to walk in God's truth.

Again, this shows that David understood that this amazing God cared for him. This same majestic God, whom all nations will worship and glorify, will hear the plea from one poor and needy man (v.1) who asks, "Teach me your way, O Lord." It also shows a subtle shift in the psalm. In the first section (vv.1-7) David desperately cried out for help; in doing so, he thought deeply about who God is and what he does. Those thoughts did not make David retract his plea for help, but it did make him say, "I need to learn from this great God. Teach me your way, O Lord." The reader could even say that David's great need showed him his need to be taught. It brought him to say, "Do not give me my way, Lord; teach me your way."

That I may walk in your truth. This determination gave integrity to David's request. He wanted to be taught so that he could live; so that he could walk in God's truth. This was not merely to satisfy intellectual curiosity or to win arguments; it was to live.

Give me an undivided heart to revere your name, i.e. make it one: <<*I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me for all time, for their own good and the good of their children after them*>> (Jeremiah 32:39), undivided in its loyalty, so that all of it can give thanks (v.12). David knew he could only walk in God's truth with a united heart. A divided heart - divided among different loyalties and different deities - could never walk in God's truth.

Again, Spurgeon commented, "Our minds are apt to be divided between a variety of objects, like trickling streamlets which waste their force in a hundred runnels; our great desire should be to have all our life-floods poured into one channel and to have that channel directed towards the Lord alone."

Jesus prayed to his Father for such unity in those that follow him: <<*And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one*>> (John 17:11).

It could be said that the united heart is the goal; the way to the goal is "teach me your way, O Lord" and "I will walk in your truth." David therefore indicates that this could not happen by David's self-effort. Instead, he asked God to unite his heart as he was taught and walked in the truth. At the same time, the promise of a unified heart is part of some of the OT promises of the New Covenant: <<*I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them; I*

*will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, so that they may follow my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them. Then they shall be my people, and I will be their God>> (Ezekiel 11:19-20). As part of this New Covenant, Christians have special reason to pray expecting God to work a unified heart in them.*

Way, truth and unite are all fundamental themes found in Jesus: <<*Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me>> (John 14:6). He is the way; Christians should say, "Teach me your way." He is the truth; they should ask, "that I may walk in your truth." He is the only true life; they should plead, "give me an undivided heart to revere your name."*

I give thanks to you, O Lord my God, with my whole heart. This is what David wanted to do with his united heart - he wanted to praise God with it. From his understanding of God previously in the psalm he knew God was worthy of such praise; but he knew he could only praise God as he should with God uniting his heart. David wanted to do this with his united heart; but perhaps he also understood that praise is one way to unite the heart. When God's people consciously focus the attention of their minds, emotions and affections upon who God is and what he has done for them, their heart is marvellously united and this leads to praise through sharing the Gospel of truth: <<*I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart; I will tell of all your wonderful deeds>> (Psalm 9:1).*

This is the second time that David calls the Lord 'my God.' The first time he was in an agony of prayer (v.2), and now he is in an ecstasy of praise:

- He is God in times of trouble - Christians must rely upon him.
- He is God in times of rejoicing - Christians should continually praise him.

<sup>13</sup> For great is your steadfast love towards me;  
you have delivered my soul from the depths of Sheol.

### Psalm 86:13

For great is your steadfast love towards me; you have delivered my soul from the depths of Sheol. David thought about God's past deliverance in his life. The merciful God who rescued him before would rescue him again.

Steadfast love or mercy is again the Hebrew word *hesed*, the great word for covenant love, love that is promised in a covenant relationship.

Sheol is a proper name in Hebrew; sometimes it serves as a poetic name for the grave, to which all go, for example: <<*Like a rock that one breaks apart and shatters on the land, so shall their bones be strewn at the mouth of Sheol>> (Psalm 141:7), and other times it names the dim destination to which the wicked*

go but not the faithful: <<*Like sheep they are appointed for Sheol; Death shall be their shepherd; straight to the grave they descend, and their form shall waste away; Sheol shall be their home. But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me*>> (Psalm 49:14-15). If it refers to the grave here, the idea is that the dead do not have the privilege of recounting God's praise in public worship. The verse expresses the fear that the psalmist's sins, if not forgiven, would separate him from God's presence. David knew that God had delivered him and he rejoiced.

### Psalm 86:14-17 - Save Me from the Insolent.

The third section of the psalm explains the source of the trouble: insolent men and a band of ruthless men. These people have no respect for God; therefore it is not surprising that they seek the life of the faithful; refer to the comment made on vv.1-7 for the 'I' singing this psalm. However, the faithful need not despair, since they have no grounds for worry that God will abandon them to enemies because of their sins: God is merciful and gracious, and therefore his faithful ones can trust him to forgive and to guard; refer to the comment made on Psalm 32:6-11. Therefore the singer is bold and finishes by repeating his request.

David asks <<*that those who hate me may see it and be put to shame*>> (v.17b). When the enemies realise that the true God actually cares for the pious, they will also realise that they have relied on a false basis of hope; this may actually lead to their conversion. This lament does not, unlike most others, end with a certainty of being heard, but that certainty has been implicit throughout.

<sup>14</sup> O God, the insolent rise up against me;  
a band of ruffians seeks my life,  
and they do not set you before them.

<sup>15</sup> But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious,  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

### Psalm 86:14-15

O God, the insolent rise up against me; a band of ruffians seeks my life. David lived such a long life of danger and adventure that this event in his life cannot be precisely placed. It could have come at several points. Nevertheless, the danger was clear and real.

And they do not set you before them. For David it was clear. Proud men, violent mobs, are not surrendered to God. If these proud and violent men had set God before them, they would share some of his compassion, graciousness, longsuffering, and great mercy and truth.

But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious. David knew that the evil of man did not negate the goodness of God. God is full of compassion, and is gracious, longsuffering and abundant in mercy and truth despite the pride and violence of men.

It seems that twice in this psalm David quoted the words and ideas from Moses' encounter with God recorded in Exodus 34:6-7. This is seen in v.5: <<*For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call on you*>>. Also, it is seen here in v.15: <<*But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness*>>. Compare this with the phrasing in the great revelation of God to Moses: <<*The Lord passed before him, and proclaimed, 'The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation'*>> (Exodus 34:6-7). Spurgeon said, "David seems to have stood in the cleft of the rock with Moses, and to have heard the name of the Lord proclaimed even as the great lawgiver did, for in two places in this psalm he almost quotes verbatim the passage in Exodus 34:6." It could be said that David read his Bible, and learned who God is. Then he took that knowledge to prayer, and asked God to answer his prayer because of who he revealed himself to be in the Bible.

16 Turn to me and be gracious to me;  
give your strength to your servant;  
save the child of your serving-maid.

17 Show me a sign of your favour,  
so that those who hate me may see it and be put to shame,  
because you, Lord, have helped me and comforted me.

### Psalm 86:16-17

Turn to me and be gracious to me. Through it all, David never approached God on the basis of what he deserved. Anything he received from God, he would receive on the basis of mercy.

Give your strength to your servant. This plea of David is answered by the later exhortation by Paul: <<*Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power*>> (Ephesians 6:10). God does give his strength to his servant!

The claim to be a servant would not sit well for many people especially with its more modern connotations to slavery, yet Paul was also content to refer to

**himself a servant:** <<Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God>> (Romans 1:1), <<What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each>> (1 Corinthians 3:5), <<Am I now seeking human approval, or God's approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ>> (Galatians 1:10), <<Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons>> (Philippians 1:1), and: <<Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God's elect and the knowledge of the truth that is in accordance with godliness, in the hope of eternal life that God, who never lies, promised before the ages began – in due time he revealed his word through the proclamation with which I have been entrusted by the command of God our Saviour>> (Titus 1:1-3). The Roman institution of being a bondservant or slave, Greek *doulos*, was different from the institution of slavery in North America and Europe during the 17<sup>th</sup> through the 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries. Slaves, bondservants and servants generally were permitted to work for pay and to save enough to buy their freedom. See the Parable of the Talents in Matthew 25:14-30, where the servants, again Greek *doulos*, were entrusted with immense amounts of money and responsibility by their owner. However, those not familiar with the OT and themselves free would struggle with the idea of willingly being a slave to anyone, including a god, as the thought was alien in Roman culture, where the hope for all slaves was their freedom. This designation indicates that Paul is a slave of Jesus Christ, placing him as his Lord, and thus giving him the same status as the God of Israel. At the same time the title recalls the honoured servants of God in the OT, such as Moses, Joshua, David, and the prophets; refer to Joshua 14:7, Joshua 24:29, 2 Kings 17:23 and Psalm 89:3 respectively. Paul does not put himself in honour with these men by perhaps announcing himself as a Roman citizen or as a Pharisaic Jew, but it is more of an identification of his dedication to God. His pattern of argument in his servant-hood is clearly Isaiahic. Here, David too would share in that identification.

Save the child of your serving-maid. Nitzvet was an Israelite woman who was the mother of David according to the Talmud, but she is not named in the Bible. She was an ancestor of the Kings of Judah. The Books of Samuel reveal little about David's mother, but this brief mention suggests that she was a godly woman who served God, who could be called your serving-maid. In a few places, for example: <<When Abram heard that his nephew had been taken captive, he led forth his trained men, born in his house, three hundred and eighteen of them, and went in pursuit as far as Dan>> (Genesis 14:14), and: <<Is Israel a slave? Is he a home-born servant? Why then has he become plunder?>> (Jeremiah 2:14), the Bible gives the idea of a home-born slave - someone who is a slave because their mother was a slave, and they were born into their servitude. That may be David's

idea here; to express how completely he belongs to God, he pleads as the child of your serving-maid.

Show me a sign of your favour. David seems to say, “Lord, I do not expect all the answer right now. Yet, Show me a sign of your favour - give me some indication of your help and power - so that those who hate me may see it and be ashamed.” Here David is wonderful for his humility - not demanding the entire answer from God immediately. He is also wonderful for his humanity - asking for a sign of God’s favour at that moment. In some cases, it is wrong to ask God, “Show me a sign of your favour.” It is wrong when the attitude is, “God, prove to me that you love me” or “I will believe if you show me a sign, but if you do not I will not believe you.” Yet there are some good ways legitimate circumstances in which Christians can cry out to God, Show me a sign of your favour:

- Answers to prayer are a sign of God’s favour: <<*Incline your ear, O Lord, and answer me*>> (v.1a).
- Preservation of character is a sign of God’s favour: <<*for I am devoted to you*>> (v.2a).
- Deliverance from trouble is a sign of God’s favour: <<*save your servant who trusts in you*>> (v.2b).
- Joy in a surrendered life is a sign of God’s favour: <<*Gladden the soul of your servant, for to you, O Lord, I lift up my soul*>> (v.4).
- A sense of forgiveness is a sign of God’s favour: <<For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving>> (v.5a).
- Confidence in God is a sign of God’s favour: <<*for you will answer me*>> (v.7b).
- Knowing and declaring the greatness of God is a sign of God’s favour: <<*For you are great and do wondrous things*>> (v.10a).
- When the proud and violent are enemies, it is a sign of God’s favour: <<*the insolent rise up against me; a band of ruffians seeks my life*>> (v.14a).

Because you, Lord, have helped me and comforted me. Once again David bases his current expectation on God’s prior help. Every past experience of God’s goodness to his people is a promise of his continued blessing.