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A Heart for Prayer; Psalm 17
GPBC
9.23.18

Introduction - Psalm 17 is not just a psalm; it is a prayer. There is something about singing that stirs our faith. Singing God-centered songs provides an outlet for us to express our faith in such a way that involves our minds, our affections, our emotions, our whole selves to God.

Poetry also provides a meaningful expression of our faith. Poetry demands careful attention to language. It requires crafting. It requires searching for the best wording to best convey thoughts about God and life and salvation. The weightier the truth, the weightier the word required to convey it.

Now when you combine singing and poetry as a prayer, you are engaging with God in the most profound way that we as believers are enabled to do. Psalms teach us to pray, teach us how to pray, and here in Psalm 17, we do pray.

Remember a main theme of the psalms is contrasting the wicked and the righteous. David, the righteous, is praying about his enemies, the wicked. The psalms are not only giving us a theology of humanity (wicked and righteous), but they give us real life application of that theology. This is real life for David. He has real enemies. David has not prepared a lesson for us here, he has simply gone to prayer, He has gone to God. That, my friends, may be the best life lesson we ever glean from the psalms. The place to go when there seems to be no other place to go, the only place to go even when there seems to be other places to go, is to go to God in prayer.

I. Preparing the Heart for Prayer (vv1-5)

- A) First, we see that David's opening lines of his prayer are really a preparing of his heart for deeper prayer. He's not interested in simply going through the motions here. He's not interested in simply checking off his duty of prayer for the day. He means to connect with God and that takes preparation.
- B) We don't truly approach God casually. Our hearts must be primed. They don't stand ready at a moment's notice to encounter God. They drift. They wane. They grow cold. Our hearts must be awakened to pray.

C) That's why Jesus taught us to pray in the Model Prayer this way - to begin with "Our Father, who is in heaven, hallowed be Your name." That gets our hearts right. It sets the nearness of God and the glory of God before our eyes. It sets the goodness of God and the holiness of God before our hearts. When we see God as our loving Father and as the Almighty Sovereign One; then we can pray. Our hearts are awakened.

D) In keeping with the poetic structure of the psalms, David prays in 3 groups of 3 in these verses.

1. The first group of 3 in v 1 is David's plea to be heard. "Hear" "attend to" "Give ear to" - Now he's not crying for God to hear him 3 different ways for the sake of poetry, but for the sake of emphatic expression. Crying for God's ear 3 xs points to David's sense of urgency and sincerity. It's not that God won't hear if he doesn't ask him 3 xs, it's that he knows his only hope is for God to hear.
2. The second group of 3 in v3 is David's knowledge of God's work in his life through this trial. "You have tried my heart" "You have visited me" "You have tested me" - David knows and trusts that through this life-endangering struggle, where his enemies have pursued him, where he has taken flight, where it seems his enemies have gained the high ground, he knows God has been at work in his heart. God has been testing and stretching and strengthening his faith. God has removed every other source of rescue from him until only God remains. David is left with only one thing to do - trust in God.
3. The third group of 3 in vv3b-5 is David's awareness of God's sustaining grace in his life "I have purposed" "by the word of Your lips, I have avoided" "My steps have held fast to Your paths" - David knows well the truth of Psalm 66:18 "If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened." In order to approach God's throne in prayer, one of the first activities of our prayer should be confession and repentance. Only a clean heart and a clean life, clean hands and pure heart, truly commune with a holy God. David is not arrogantly boasting of his own absolute perfection here. He is simply acknowledging that by God's grace, he has been sustained in this particular trial. And so he knows that now he is ready to pray.

II. Pouring Out the Heart in Prayer (vv6-9)

A) Once again we see a group of three at the heart of David's prayer in vv6-9. I want us to make special note of how David prays. Each request he makes to God is buttressed by a truth about God. That is a tremendous, massive lesson for us as we learn and grow in prayer.

1. V6. The request: “incline Your ear to me; hear my words”. The truth that undergirds that request: “for You will answer me, O God.” What gives rise to faith in our prayers is when our prayers are grounded in what we know to be true about God and what God has promised to us in Christ. God hears the prayers of His people!
 2. V7. The request: “Wondrously show Your steadfast love” Even in his request, he has said something about God, namely, that His love is constant and unchanging and never decreases toward His children; God’s love is steadfast. His request is that God would glorify Himself by going big, leaving no doubt, displaying His faithfulness to His own. The truth that undergirds that request: “O Savior of those who seek refuge from their adversaries at Your right hand.” God will never disappoint, disregard, deny, or disown one of His own children. He will save every single one and be glorified for doing so!
 3. vv8-9, the foundational truth is embedded within the request itself. “Keep me (request) as the apple of your eye (truth). Hide me (request) in the shadow of your wings (truth). v9 read. David is saying here, my enemies have made plans for me but so has my God, and His plans for me overshadow the plans of my enemies. God gives special attention and special protection to His people.
- B) Application. When we pray, we must not stop at the request but invigorate and enliven our faith by attaching truth and promise to our prayers. When we make a request, don’t stop there, but rather put a comma there and say “for” and then ground that petition in a promise.
1. That’s not “Name It-Claim It” theology by the way. We don’t believe God is obligated to answer. But we do believe He has promised to answer prayers in accordance with His will.
 2. The application - let us ground our petitions to God in promises from God. “God enable me to stand firm in this trial, for You will never leave me or forsake me.” “God help me not lose faith because of this trial, for Your grace is sufficient, when I am weak, You are strong.”

III. Faith at the Heart of Prayer (vv10-15)

- A) What David believes about God is what drives him to pray to God and to keep believing in God, and that comes in the last two verses.
- B) First, note v10 describes the wicked which is contrasted with vv1-5 which described the righteous.
- C) vv11-12, David describes how his enemies have strategically tracked him, surrounded him, and are now ready to close in for the kill. That is

the situation that gives rise to his prayer and we hear David plea again for God's deliverance in v13.

- D) He describes himself and his situation from God's perspective and then prays. Then he describes his enemies and his situation from the human perspective and then prays.
- E) Then in vv14-15, he puts aside his temporary life-threatening circumstances and he places his enemies and himself as they truly are before God.
- F) His enemies - v14 - They have and enjoy an abundance of everything this life can offer. They seem to have it all. Life couldn't be better.
- G) David - v15 - Now we understand clearly the contrast is set up "As for me" to indicate that what God has in store for David outweighs what his enemies have now to the degree that the light of the sun outshines the light of a candle.
 - 1. The biblical writers knew that the inexpressible, ineffable, eternal glories and joys of waking in the presence of God are so infinitely weighty and full and overflowing that nothing here can compare.
 - 2. The contrast is this: If all you have in this life is everything that can be had in this life, you will end up horribly lacking and empty. However, if all you have in this life is the promise of God in the hereafter, you will end up in overflowing fullness and joy.
 - 3. One last point - note that David feels quite comfortable ending his prayer here, with a view to eternity. He doesn't retreat back to his temporary circumstances. When he comes to v15, he's in heaven before God, and that has brought him to the end of his praying. You see he knows, by faith, God is going to answer his prayer back in vv6-9, and one day God is going to finally and fully wondrously show His steadfast love to His people because He's going to show His people Himself, and you simply can't get more wonderful than that!
 - 4. Last point of application for our prayers would be this: Pray with a view to the eternal riches of God in Christ and that would put our present situation in its proper place!