

## A PSALM OF THE INNOCENT

### Psalm 17

**Dr. George O. Wood**

“A Psalm of the Innocent or the Innocent One.”

“Hear, O LORD, my righteous plea; listen to my cry. Give ear to my prayer—it does not rise from deceitful lips. May my vindication come from you; may your eyes see what is right.

Though you probe my heart and examine me at night, though you test me, you will find nothing;

I have resolved that my mouth will not sin. As for the deeds of men—by the word of your lips I have kept myself from the ways of the violent. My steps have held to your paths; my feet have not slipped. I call on you, O God, for you will answer me; give ear to me and hear my prayer.

Show the wonder of your great love, you who save by your right hand those who take refuge in you from their foes. Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings

from the wicked who assail me, from my mortal enemies who surround me. They close up their callous hearts, and their mouths speak with arrogance. They have tracked me down, they now

surround me, with eyes alert, to throw me to the ground. They are like a lion hungry for prey, like a great lion crouching in cover. Rise up, O LORD, confront them, bring them down; rescue

me from the wicked by your sword. O LORD, by your hand save me from such men, from men of this world whose reward is in this life. You still the hunger of those you cherish; their sons have plenty, and they store up wealth for their children. And I—in righteousness I will see your face; when I awake, I will be satisfied with seeing your likeness” (Psalm 17:1–15, NIV).

This psalm is a psalm of a category called “Psalms of Lament.” A picture of woe and a cry for help is being raised by the psalmist. This is the fourth such psalm already we have encountered, when David is in a very extreme situation and he is crying out for God to do something about the

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situation he is facing. These lament psalms have three characteristics in common. Each one of them finds the psalmist in difficulty. That's one. The difficulty may vary in degree.

The second thing that is in each of these lament psalms is that the psalmist asserts his innocence. That is, the difficulty was not inspired by his own sin or his own carelessness or by getting out of God's will. But each of those psalms carry an idea of "God, what's happening to me is in no way based on some failure in my life or conduct."

The third thing that unites these psalms is that it asks God to do something about the wicked. And to grant deliverance in that situation. "To grant deliverance" means the destruction of someone so David is calling for destruction of those who have caused this external problem to him.

We do not know what specific instance in David's life this psalm may tie into. My feeling is in reading this psalm that it occurs very early in David's life. The protestation of innocence that he makes in this psalm would not be characteristic of his life very long as he gets into his adult years. By the time he gets to Psalm 51 after wiping out Uriah and having committed adultery with Bathsheba who was his fifth or sixth wife by that time he is saying, "God, night and day my sin is ever before You and I can't get rid of it." Here he's saying, "God, You search me at night and You find nothing wrong with me." The David we know, the majority of his life in Scripture, is a person who you can locate something very, very wrong. Very easily.

So I would identify this psalm as coming out of a period early in his life. Either that or he got, as he grew older, a very clean bill of health through a New Testament concept which I'm not sure David had his hands on from the Old Testament vantage point. But it's that thing that happens to us when we have truly been justified by God's grace. Even though we have done wrong we

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know we have a clean bill of health from God's grace. We look at our life and even though there is a checkered past in it he sees that the slate is now clean.

To me it's either got to be at the very beginning of his life or it's got to be after he's worked himself through and understood that he's really in a position of grace and God has truly forgotten and forgiven the past. The psalm itself does not locate what it is, what particular time it is in his life.

We do know by looking at the psalm that it reflects the struggle of an innocent person who is under a great deal of pressure. One of the things that is helpful to us as we study the psalms is always to take the external pressures that are being faced by the psalmist. He had enemies. I doubt many of us have the kind of enemies that David had. Most of our enemies are internal. We internalize them or spiritualize them. When we read the psalms we must translate external into internal.

Another thing we must always do with the psalms is we must differentiate between how an Old Testament person looks at how God acts and how we understand God in light of what Jesus taught us in the further revelation of the New Testament. There's a great deal of difference between David and David's Son Jesus in how you respond to enemies. Therefore you can't take what is in the psalms and put it on a 50/50 basis of what Jesus said and say sometimes it's ok to knock your enemies in the teeth and other times you try to forgive them. Sometimes you go David's way and sometimes you go Jesus' way. The fact is Jesus gave us a new commandment and a new way to respond to people. Therefore whenever we read the psalms we have to filter those elements which call for retaliation or vengeance through how Christ himself would handle that. Otherwise we're going to wind up with a very bloodletting sense of how to treat people which would be foreign to the Spirit of Christ.

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In the Old Testament they did not have as much revelation as we have in Christ. We must operate in the fuller light and understand they were doing the best they could with the light that they had.

This particular psalm is divided into three parts. Three prayers. Three divisions of praying.

The first division is a prayer that is based upon David's innocence. Verses 1–5. He asks God to act because he's innocent. The second reason he will ask God to act is because of the array of enemies that are aligned against him. The third thing that he prays is that God will judge his enemies and deliver him. Those are the three divisions of the psalm.

#### **I. Prayer based on his innocence.**

The plea begins in the first 2 verses, the prayer itself. "Hear O LORD my righteous plea. Listen to my cry. Give ear to my prayer. It does not arise from deceitful lips. May my vindication come from You. May your eyes see what is right." The tone of this prayer is urgent. It is insistent. It is confident. It comes from David's assurance that God is hearing him. If you note the repetition you'd see the strength right away of his prayer. Hear. Listen. Give ear to me. Through this threefold repetition of involving God's attention to his situation, he is coming to the throne of God with a great sense of strength and power and thrust.

If you take the fact that David is a bedouin, living in tents, and think what his imagery may be of what God would be, I think he might see Him as living in the chief tent as the bedouin chieftain. We all work through imagery which we have.

Access to important people is limited. Here's David striding into God's tent, unannounced, but he says, "I've got a right to be here." He's immediately into God's presence. To me, David connotes a tremendous boldness of coming to God. He has the spirit of the writer of Hebrews who says, "Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence" (4:16, NIV).

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When you read the Book of Esther—the contrast! Esther is scared of going into the king’s presence because he has power of life and death if he chooses. If you come into the king’s presence and he hasn’t invited you he could terminate you, or he could give you favor. The decision was his.

David has this sense of coming into God’s presence even though he was uninvited and he is confident to be there. I think that is very New Testament kind of spirit. He knows that on the throne sits the impeccable Judge of all the earth who not only does justly but is able to discern as a judge the truth of a case. To judge the quality of the person who commits his case to God. All of us, when we pray, probably have imagery of where God is. I think sometimes we lose focus of who we’re talking to. But David has a focus in praying.

I think we need both the cozy coming to God in prayer as well as the sanctity, the sense of God’s otherness and God’s nearness. The Scriptures bring both.

David comes and he has some specific things on his mind. What’s interesting is when he begins talking to God about what his problem is that initially he doesn’t ask God for deliverance. That will be at the close of the psalm, asking God to deliver him from his problem. Initially he asks God to vindicate him. It matters to him what God thinks of him. It matters far more than what other people think of him.

That’s a wonderful truth to let penetrate in our own life that our chief concern would be “Lord, what is it that You’re regarding me? Vindicate me, Lord.” That’s the opening of his prayer. He’s wanting vindication.

Then his plea for vindication is based on the fact that charges have been made against him and he’s innocent. What the charges were he doesn’t specify. But the Old Testament people had the sense that if you were being hunted, having reverses, if there were losses in your life it was in

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some way because you failed God. David is a person on the lam at this point. He is being hunted, hunted down. He says, “This is in no way a reflection of my integrity and character. There is absolutely nothing against me. With You, God, I’m clean.” So he says, “My prayer does not arise from deceitful lips. And when You’ve got your heart probe going, even at night You test me and You find nothing” (see Psalm 17:1,3).

The night is typically in the psalms a time for introspection. That’s why some people don’t sleep well at night. I think some of the greatest affirmations I’ve had in my life were through dreams. I’ve wakened and had an overpowering sense of God’s love and acceptance of me. David is saying, “Lord, You search me at night in my meditative self when there’s just me and You. There are no thoughts that accuse me.” What a testimony!

He does have things happen during the night—Psalm 16:7: “I will praise the LORD, who counsels me; even at night my heart instructs me” (NIV). There again there is that reference to the night as a time of contemplation and introspection. He’s exonerated even in his thought life.

He goes on to say in Psalm 17:3–5, “My mouth has not sinned, there’s no violence in my ways, I have kept true to You. My steps have held to your paths.” If I were speaking topically it’d be great to explore some of the paths we walk in life. Four kind of paths where your feet could slip: A steep path, it’s easy to slip. A rough path, a lot of rocks, it’s easy to slip or fall. A dark path, can’t see, it’s easy to stray. A slippery path, whether ice or whatever, easy to fall. Life is full of those kind of paths. Sometimes we’re walking through dark paths, there’s no lights on. How do we stay on God’s paths?

What a contrast to Psalm 51. You talk about variation in testimony. When you come to Psalm 51 after David’s sin with Bathsheba you see what sin does in the inner life. “I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned...Cleanse

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me with hyssop, and I will be clean...Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice. Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity” (51:3–4,7–9, NIV).

What a contrast with Psalm 17, a life that is pure.

Probably if we think honestly about Psalm 17:3–5 we might ourselves be somewhat uncomfortable praying this prayer. How many of us can say truly from our heart, “Lord, if You test me You will find nothing. Nothing unacceptable.” You look in Jesus’ teaching, Luke 18:9–14, the story of two men who went to pray. One man, the Pharisee, said in essence, “O God, I thank You that I am not a sinner like other men. I fast. I give of my tithes. I’m a pretty good guy. There’s nothing wrong with me.” The publican beats himself on the chest and said, “God, be merciful to me a sinner.” Jesus said the guy who prayed, “I’m not like the others” went down to his house condemned and the guy who was honest and said “Be merciful to me a sinner” went back to his home justified. Jesus almost turns Psalm 17 on its head. That was a guy who’s saying, “I’m innocent!” What’s going on? Where is honesty in prayer?

My feeling is there’s a lot of difference between David in Psalm 17 and the Pharisee in Luke 18. One of the problems of the Pharisee is he’s comparing his righteousness with somebody else. Although in Psalm 17 maybe a little bit of that is going on too. David keeps talking about the wicked.

But there was evidently in David’s life at this point just a frank recognition that he had not failed God. Isn’t this the point that ultimately Jesus wants us to arrive at because of grace? Doesn’t He also say in Luke 6, “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord’ and do not do what I say? I will show you what he is like who comes to me and hears my words and puts them into practice” (46–47, NIV). In other words, Jesus condemns the spirit of pride that says “There’s nothing wrong in me.” On

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the other hand he turns around and says, “I want a lifestyle to be developed in you that will obey My words and keep them.”

The word “balance” comes to me. There is what Bonhoeffer calls “cheap grace” in the land where we just go out and keep sinning and we come back to the grace of God and say “God, You know what a wretched sinner I am and always making wrong choices. But I know You love me and You’ll forgive me and everything is well with You. You always pick me up when I’m down.” Which is true. God does pick us up when we’re down. But there comes a point when that kind of spirit simply settles back and says, “I’ve made a wrong moral choice or an unethical choice again. But it’s ok because I keep coming back to You for forgiveness.” That sort of cuts the nerve of the kind of righteousness that God wants to produce in our life where we get serious about dealing with sin in our life. Part of the whole emphasis of the Scripture is that we become holy. Jesus says to us, “Be therefore perfect. Be complete” (Matthew 5:48). Not settle back cozy. It’s the spirit of a person that says, “God’s grace covers everything so let’s go out and sin. Show what a great God of grace we serve.” Romans 6:1 picks up that theme. “Shall we sin all the more that grace may abound? God forbid!”

This psalm is an antidote to that kind of a spirit. It’s saying “Lord, I know You cover me by Your righteousness. But beyond that covering I know that by faith I am righteous but I want to be as righteous in fact as I am in faith. I want to grow into that quality of perfect You already see me as.” The great thing is God declares us perfect and then allows us to grow to get there. Rather than working ourselves up to a position of perfection He just simply says it’s true. We take God’s grace and God’s righteousness seriously enough so we make it our goal to live before God with a clear conscience.

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It really helps when you're going through stress to have a clear conscience. If you don't, get forgiveness so you can have a clear conscience. But I noticed in Paul's imprisonment time, it's a phrase that's absent from his life until he begins hitting the imprisonment years. It begins to enter in verses like Acts 23:1; 24:16; 1 Timothy 1:5,19; 3:9; 4:2; 2 Timothy 1:3. All these places he is saying, "I have lived before God with a clear conscience unto this day." How is he able to stand up before that tremendous assault? He's saying, "I've emptied out my life before the Lord and I've really given it to Him and I'm living in a way that is morally and spiritually and ethically right.

I think what's involved is a new understanding and what's being said in Psalm 17, "Lord, I really want my life to be holy. I want everything to be burnt out of my life that's not of You." If we come to the Lord in prayer and say "When You examine me tonight is there anything in me which is not of You?" If we immediately realize what it is that the Lord's wanting to do. "Take that from us. Make that change in our life." That's what the Holy Spirit is all about, to give us the power to do that.

The first part of the prayer is "Lord, I'm innocent." If you're not there, that's something to shoot for. That our prayers arise out of a deep desire for integrity and God's holiness to be in our life.

#### **II. The second part of the psalm is based on the enemy's attack, verses 6–12.**

These verses are subdivided.

**A.** There's the prayer itself, verses 6–8, which picks up the theme of calling on God. Here we have the prayer as it progresses, renewed in intensity and faith growing bolder as prayer advances. He's asking now more of God in verses 6-8 than he asked in verses 1 and 2. He is confident that the Lord is going to answer him. By the way, David is confident that the Lord is going to answer in a particular way. I'm not always sure by reading the New Testament that we

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can just deliver a blank check to God and say, “You’ve got to fill it out this way.” But David says, “Answer me in this particular way.” That God will treat him, David, as others who are faithful. “Show me the wonder of Your great love that You give to those You have saved by Your right hand who take refuge in You from their foes” (Psalm 17:7). And what David is saying is “Lord, You’ve shown wonderful kindness in Your dealings with those who love You.”

Then the second thing he’s asking is that God will give him a very protected space. That space is seen in two metaphors. “You’ll keep me as the apple of Your eye and hide me in the shadow of Your wings” (verse 8). Each of those metaphors signify a very protected space in God. When we speak of the apple of the eye today we talk about the pupil. That’s a very sensitive part of the eye and you’re protective of it. You can’t lose the pupil of your eye. That’s typically how we’ve interpreted this verse. That we’re so very special to God that we’re sensitive to Him and He protects us. That may well be what’s involved in the verse. But the Hebrews had an interesting view of what the apple of the eye meant. If you get close to a person, in the pupil of the eye one can see his reflection.

That’s what the Hebrew meant by the apple of your eye. “God, when I look at You my reflection is cast into Your eye. Therefore I am in Your vision. I’m the little son, the little daughter in Your vision. You’re going to keep me. I am forever reflected in You.” That’s kind of a neat thought that we can be on such a relationship with God, that we’re so firmly in focus in God, that He has us as the little man, the little woman in His eye. “Keep me, Lord, as the apple of Your eye.”

And “Keep me under Your wings.” By the way, these are metaphors that originated before Psalm 17 that go all the way back to the Exodus; Deuteronomy 32:10–12. If you get down and discouraged it helps to read some of these great promises from the Lord’s Word. “In a desert land he found him, in a barren and howling waste. He shielded him and cared for him; he

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guarded him as the apple of his eye, like an eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young, that spreads its wings to catch them and carries them on its pinions. The LORD alone led him; no foreign god was with him” (NIV); speaking of the deliverance of Israel, but I think speaking of us as well. And Boaz says to Ruth, “May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge” (Ruth 2:12, NIV). Jesus talks about gathering His children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings. David is saying, “Lord, give me a very protected space. I’m in Your eye. My life cast a reflection in You. And You’ve got Your wings over me. Therefore I’m safe.”

**B.** Then from this prayer he launches then into a description of his enemies, verses 9–12. Even in the protected space his adversaries are seeking him. Hot on his trail. He is assailed, surrounded, callused hearts have closed against him. The literal in the Hebrew is two words, which would read something like “They closed their fat.” That’s the literal meaning of verse 10. It was the Hebrew way of saying someone has gotten very corpulent through their own excesses.

Sometimes in Scripture, the person who was corpulent stands for the person who was sated on themselves and did nothing for other people. The more they get filled up with their own pursuit of ego gratification the more closed they become to other people and insensitive. This psalm is saying they were into themselves and into gorging in life and totally unconcerned about somebody else. That’s the kind of people David says he’s facing.

They have arrogant mouths and they’re hunting him down. Like an animal tracks his prey. He’s that prey. Like lions waiting to spring on them, crouching in cover.

Psalm 22 picks up this same idea of being encircled. An ugly scene of encirclement with wild animals. Psalm 22 leads us right to the cross of Calvary where the encirclement of Christ occurs at Calvary. This is the kind of psalm Jesus himself could pray because He knew what it was to be

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wholly innocent. He's really the only qualified person to ever pray this psalm. He's certainly the apple of God's eye, kept under His wing.

### **III. The third movement of the psalm is a prayer for his enemy's destruction and his own deliverance, verses 13–15.**

He's talking here about people who are just living for this life alone.

When we look at David's phrases—"God slay the wicked"—there is a real difference sometimes between the way David prays and the way he actually reacts. He's praying, "God, kill my enemies." Who sought his life? Saul. When Saul dies what's David's reaction? Not a reaction of rejoicing. Not a reaction of triumph. It's a lament. There can be a great difference at times between what we mutter in private and what we actually go out and do. In private I speak and flip my lid and say irresponsible things. But when I go out and act as a public person and have the chance for the grace of God to edify and straighten out some of my thinking I find that I often say things differently to people than what I intended to. I wonder if the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit who would have us be redemptive and forgiving doesn't get a hold of David in his prayers asking for God to mow everybody down. The psalms allow David to express his emotions without all the time saying that's a valid true emotion from God. It's the true emotion we had but it doesn't mean that God approves.

David closes this psalm on a high note. If God doesn't do all these things then David just says, "I will see Your face when I awake" (verse 15). That's probably a reference to resurrection life.

"When I awake I'll be satisfied with seeing Your likeness."

God, on earth, may not straighten out everything to our satisfaction. But the real delight is

"When I awake I will be satisfied in seeing Your likeness." John puts it this way. First John 3:2–3: "Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made

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known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure” (NIV). Not a thing has changed with him, not a single thing has changed in his external world but in prayer God has communicated to him an internal strength now. He’s got his bearings again which prayer always does to us, bring us back to where we need to be in God.