

## **Series FolkSongs of Faith**

### **This Message**

#### **Scripture Psalm 17**

Several of the Psalms we have studied were written by David in the form of prayers. David had many occasions to plead with Yahweh for personal safety and protection, for evildoers to be frustrated and destroyed, and for the glory of God to be revealed.

Psalm 17 is another such prayer. The emphasis is on the theme of righteousness. In the first verse David described his plea to God as “righteous.” In the first part of the Psalm David declared the sincerity of his trust in the LORD. He presented himself as a person who was willing to be tested by God and he wanted God to vindicate him and to save him from his enemies. In the middle of the Psalm, David appealed to the LORD to do the right thing, that is, to act righteously, in regard to the evildoers who were seeking his downfall. The Psalm then concludes with David’s expectation of seeing God “in righteousness.” The Psalm has been identified by some commentators as “the prayer of a righteous man for the righteous protection of God.”

#### **Read Psalm 17**

We don’t know the specific context in which this Psalm was written. The general problem facing David is explained in verses 9 through 12: wicked enemies had tracked him down, surrounded him, and were assailing him. David compared them to a hungry lion ready to pounce on prey. David found himself in this kind of situation on numerous occasions, and since specific details are not given, we don’t know when during his life this particular Psalm was written.

The general objective of the Psalm is easily recognized: David wanted to contrast his lifestyle with that of his enemies. In the first verses David boldly proclaimed that his words were not “deceitful,” and that his behaviors were acceptable to the LORD. He declared that he was walking in the ways of the LORD. David was even so bold as to invite the LORD to test him because he was confident that he was not like evildoers and was innocent of their wrongdoing. In contrast, the wicked were those who had “callous hearts” and spoke “arrogant words,” and were intent on David’s destruction.

In verse 1 David used three verbs in his appeal to the LORD: “Hear,” “listen,” and “give ear.” The repetition of this appeal was not to suggest that the LORD was reluctant to respond. This is poetry, and the threefold repetition indicates the straightforwardness and intensity of the appeal. Notice that David also used three nouns to describe his writing: the Psalm represented his “plea,” his “cry,” and his “prayer” to the LORD.

Verse 2 clearly states the purpose of David’s prayer. There are two main requests: He wanted the LORD to “vindicate” him and he wanted the LORD to investigate his life and validate his innocence. These two thoughts are developed in the following verses.

These first two verses suggest to us the style of this Psalm. David wrote it in the style of a court proceeding. David visualized Yahweh as the heavenly Judge. David wanted the LORD to render an opinion about the differences between his character and lifestyle and that of evildoers. We know from our reading of Scripture that Yahweh is holy and concerned about the righteousness of human attitudes and behaviors. David’s words were his “righteous plea” for justice. This is why David was willing for the LORD to examine his words and behavior. He did not want to be identified with wicked people. He wanted the LORD to confront those who were wicked, to condemn them, but to vindicate and save his life.

In verses 3 through 5 David invited the LORD to investigate his life. He used three verbs in his invitation: “probe,” “examine,” and “test.” He asked the LORD to look into his “heart,” to consider the words of his “mouth,” and to evaluate his “deeds.” He wanted the LORD to give his life a thorough investigation. David was not professing sinless perfection. Rather, he was claiming that in his circumstances, in which evil people were opposing him, he had done nothing worthy of their antagonism, and that he was being singled out because he sought to please God.

David pointed out that he was following the ways of the LORD. He knew the “words of the LORD” and, in obedience to those words, had “kept himself from the ways of violence,” was “holding to the ways of the LORD,” and had not “slipped” or departed from those ways.

Some commentators suggest that David was alluding to the imagery of the smelting of precious metals in his appeal to the LORD. Just as silver and gold undergo a refining process and are tested until the metalworker is satisfied with their purity, so the psalmist asked for an examination of the purity and integrity of his devotion to God. Other commentators call attention to the Hebrew word used to indicate the “paths of the LORD.” The word “path” denotes a safe secure route over which animals and wagons travel without difficulty. That was the pathway that David was on.

Verse 6 is the beginning of the “vindication” section of the Psalm. In his poetic style of writing, David once again resorted to the use of three verbs to emphasize his confidence that the LORD would respond in a righteous way to his prayer. The verbs are “you will answer,” “give ear,” and “hear.” What David wanted from the LORD was expressed in another set of three phrases: “show me the wonder of your great love,” “keep me as the apple of your eye,” and “hide me in the shadow of your wings.”

The latter two of these expressions were used in other Psalms. Their original use was in the poetry of Moses which is quoted in Deuteronomy chapter 32. In referring to the Israelites who were preparing to enter the promised land, Moses said, “The LORD shielded you and cared for you; he guarded you as the apple of his eye, and 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” (*Deuteronomy 32:10-11*). Several centuries later, David was once again calling on the God of Israel, the covenant God, the One who protected and guided His chosen people, to “show the wonder of His great love” and save him from his enemies.

“The right hand” of the LORD is a reference to the strength of the LORD to sustain and redeem those who are His followers. When David wrote this Psalm, he was surrounded by mortal enemies. It was a frightening dangerous situation, but his confidence was in the LORD. He acknowledged the LORD as his refuge. He knew that the LORD watched over those who placed their trust in Him, and he looked to God to once again demonstrate an act of lovingkindness by protecting him.

In verses 10 and 11 David elaborated on the character of his enemies, and once again he used three words in his description. They were “callous,” a word which also means “rebellious,” they were “arrogant,” and they were “vicious,” seeking to “throw him to the ground.” These terms were linked to their attitudes and actions: what began as an attitude of the “heart” was articulated with their “mouths” and then became actions visible to the eyes. Their outward actions were linked to their inner attitudes. They had no respect for God and hence had no concern for God’s chosen leader. These wicked individuals were without mercy in their pursuit of their own objectives.

We can clearly distinguish the differences between the character traits of David and his enemies. David wanted his behavior to be pleasing to the LORD; he did not want to be associated with wicked people. Verses 13 and 14 explain what David wanted to happen. He called on the LORD to “rise up,” “confront” the wicked, and “bring them down.” David knew that when this happened, he would not be judged with the wicked; he would be “rescued” from their influence. He would not experience their fate.

As a follower of Yahweh, and as Yahweh’s anointed king, David placed himself under the authority and protection of the LORD. He knew that he did not have the ability to do battle with his evil enemies and therefore He took refuge in the LORD and called on the LORD to judge and deal with the situation. “The sword of the LORD” mentioned in verse 13 is the symbol of judgment and destruction. David was confident that the LORD’s judgment would not fall on him.

From verses 14 and 15 we can determine one more significant difference between David and his wicked enemies. Notice in verse 14 they are described as “men of this world whose reward is in this life.” In other words, they lived only for the present time. Verse 14 is one of the most difficult verses in the Psalms to interpret. However, the meaning which best fits the context is this: people who are exclusively focused on this present life may have their bellies filled, or have their inner desires satisfied, and they may have lots of possessions to leave to their children, but this is the extent of their reward. Wicked people can be prosperous people, but what they possess of this world is all that ever they can hope for. They do not follow the words of the LORD nor walk in His pathways and hence they do not experience the spiritual blessings of the LORD. They are “men of this world.”

In contrast to wicked worldly people, David's greatest delight was in God. In verse 15, David emphasized what was most important in his thinking. "But as for me, in righteousness I will see your face." Some commentators have assumed that David is referring to his hope of seeing God after his death. However, this Psalm is focused on existing conditions in David's lifetime. The first part of verse 15 has the meaning, "But as for me, by following your ways, O LORD, I will be satisfied in this life." The awaking is not a reference to resurrection, but to waking up from sleep each day envisioning the face of God and being satisfied with His presence. Of course, David would one day really see the LORD, but this verse is not describing that event. This verse speaks rather of David's awareness of and desire for God's presence in this life, which was a completely different mindset than the godless people whose lives revolved around material matters.

The phrase, "in righteousness" has the sense of victory over circumstances and of the joy which comes from a relationship with the LORD. The phrase is also an indication of David's determination to do what the LORD wanted him to do. It would be through his righteous attitude and behavior that he would "see the face of the LORD."

I want to point out that this Psalm begins and ends with references to the word "righteousness." English language Bibles frequently translate the word in two ways so it is easy to miss this important theme of the Psalm. In verse 1 David's plea was based on his righteousness and in verse 15 he expected to see the face of the LORD because of his righteousness. The point is that the LORD will hear the prayers of those who follow His ways, who show by their attitudes and behaviors that God is the priority of their lives, and, because of their righteous orientation, they will experience the presence and protection of the LORD day by day throughout their earthly lives.