

Sermon Given by

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At the Evening Service on 22nd August 2010

Psalm 17 - "Appeal to the Supreme Court"

Throughout the centuries Christians have from time to time and some more often than others doubted their salvation. Various things may cause us to doubt. It seems to me though that these days people quite often doubt their salvation because the gospel they heard or liked to hear was essentially: "trust in Jesus and it'll make your life better" – that's not the gospel but it's an attractive, easy to preach, easy to hear substitute gospel and as a result lots of people when they face trials or difficulties in this life, they begin to doubt, "am I really saved? Why is the Lord putting me through this? And those doubts if not addressed can lead in time to hardened unbelief.

Psalm 17 helps us to know how to deal with our doubts and depression in times of real hardship – when our world is falling apart. It's a prayer to God by David. We're not told the context but it seems likely that it was during one of the outlaw periods of David's life - and most likely it was early on in his life when he was running from king Saul who was trying to kill him. But whichever situation it was Psalm 17 is the heart cry of a downtrodden soul, a man after God's own heart who nevertheless faced life-threatening difficulties. And it reminds us that even the best of saints suffers the worst of sorrows. It's a psalm of utmost relevance for all of us here tonight. It'll be of direct relevance for any here who are feeling downtrodden by life's circumstances at the moment; you suffer from grief, loneliness, physical affliction, despair, discouragement, hurts and disappointments, depression and heartache – troubles of all kinds. Then you get depressed because you are depressed and it's easy to get locked into a downward spiral from which you can see no escape, no light at the end of the tunnel – darkness engulfs you. If that's you then Psalm 17 is of direct and immediate relevance because it shows us how to deal with our despair, it shows us the way out of our depression. And if like me, you're not going through a tough time at the moment, we can store up what we see in this psalm for when those tough times do come as they inevitably will. As I say, we're not told the exact circumstances of David's situation but the way he describes it in v10-12 shows how terrible and scary it was for him. Can you see that; I'll read from v10 – this is how he describes his enemies who are out to get him –

v10: ***"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 lion crouching for cover."*** David feels like one of those Zebras or gazelles we've probably all seen on wildlife documentaries that's being stalked by vicious lions that want to rip it to shreds. He feels encircled and trapped – danger is all around him. There seems no way out. The temptation for us in tough times, when darkness engulfs us and we feel overwhelmed by our testing circumstances is to brood and sulk and not speak to God. We speak to any number of others about our problems (and there's nothing wrong with that – it's good for us to share our burdens) but that's not the first remedy we should seek and all too often we don't speak to the one person who truly knows and understands what we're going through – God himself.

David in his despair and bleakness didn't brood and pout - he turned to God in prayer. This psalm is the result and actually it's one of many prayers that David recorded when he was struggling with fear and depression and resentment. And it's a great blessing to us that they are recorded because they show us the way through our miseries, through the darkness. David was a man after God's own heart and his prayers above all else are the best barometer of what that means for us to be a man or woman after God's own heart because in this and other psalms he lays his heart bare before God. There's no pretence, no covering up - he's entirely open and honest as he prays and his prayer lifts his focus, his heart from his troubling circumstances to his Great and Loving and Powerful God. So if we want to know what it is to be a man or woman after God's own heart, which I take it every believer here does, then we should study the heart of David as it's revealed in this and his other prayers. We're going to look at the psalm under headings from the text - 3 things that David asks for and the first is his plea, his cry for God to...

Hear me!

In v1 alone he asks 3 times that God would hear him. V1: **"Hear, O Lord, my righteous plea; listen to my cry. Give ear to my prayer."** Then again end of v6 **"give ear to me and hear my prayer."** **"Hear me!"** he cries out and this was his heartfelt plea - so he adds end of v1 **"- it does not arise from deceitful lips."** Unlike the prayers of the Pharisees and no doubt some of ours this one was sincere. And what's he looking for? Well he says what he's looking for in v2: **"May my vindication come from you; may your eyes see what is right."** Others and most likely king Saul were accusing him of serious crimes - they accused him of rebellion and treason, of working to overthrow him, of rumour-mongering and gossip to undermine Saul's rule and so he cries out **"Hear me Lord, may my vindication come from you; may your eyes see what is right."** - Others accuse me and condemn me but Lord you know I'm innocent of this crime. That's why he continues v3: **"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."** This isn't arrogant self-righteousness - he's merely appealing to God who knows his heart and he's saying "Lord, others accuse me off this and that but you know I'm innocent of these things." David is convinced that his cause is just. He had a clear conscience before God in this matter. He was confident that whatever the reason for his dire situation it wasn't on this occasion anyway because of some hidden sin in his heart. And actually if you look closely at v4 and 5, he puts his innocence in this matter not down to his own efforts and strength but down to God and his help through his word. V4 **"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."** It's your word Lord that has protected me and kept me from sinning.

False accusation is a horrible thing and the temptation for David and for us in a similar situation is first to lash out at our accusers and secondly to murmur and grumble against God, and complain to Him and to others about our circumstances and thus commit sin but David had not done that. He says end of v3 **"I have resolved that my mouth will not sin."** He had purposed not to let this trial cause him to sin with his mouth. And so he can say: **"Hear me Lord, vindicate me, for in this matter I'm innocent and you know that Lord."** Before we move, it's worth us asking ourselves if we can pray like that or if we should pray like that. And the basic answer is, yes, we can! But there will be other tough times when we're under immense pressure but as we step back to see what's going on we'll need to be

honest and admit: “actually I’ve created some of this – my mistakes have been a part of creating this terrible situation.” Perhaps our unnecessary stubbornness at work where we’ve dug our heels in, or perhaps a falling out we’ve had with friends at church or I don’t know, the badminton club or wherever we spend our time, has come about because we’ve been thoughtless or we’ve said something we shouldn’t have.

And in those difficult times we pray but not a prayer like this. We pray a prayer of confession of sin, like David does for example in psalm 32 and 51. We repent before God of our sin and then we go and do all we can to repair the damage we’ve created. We go to those people and say sorry and make amends. But at other times we’ll face tough times when we’ve done nothing wrong. It’s not to say we’ve been perfect but we have strived to be godly. We reflect on our conversations and we can honestly say that yes, I was humble and gracious in that situation. Often we will face difficulties precisely because we have been godly. Perhaps the Christian at school who has gone out of his or her way to spend time with and befriend that person who no-one else likes and so they’ve been teased. Perhaps the person in the office who’s refused to lie for the company or who’s refused to join in the gossip and so faces being shunned. If you’ve read the recent newsletter article you’ll know I’ve recently read a biography of Lt-Gen William Dobbie, a fine soldier and a keen Christian who fought with distinction in the Boer War, WW1 and WW2. For a while between the 2 World Wars he was stationed out in Cairo as a Brigadier but he had a tough time there because his General, for much of his time there, was I quote: “utterly unsympathetic and indeed actively antagonistic to Evangelical principles...and lost no opportunity to make life difficult for his Brigadier. There was nothing in his work to which the General could possibly object. The Cairo Brigade was most efficiently run. There was in fact no reason for the antagonism except that William lacked the flashy, hard-drinking clap-trap smartness that was linked to military life in Egypt at that period. He and his wife had offered loads of hospitality but not the hard-drinking hospitality that that particular General considered the norm. It’s a bit like the Christian in the sports team who limits him or herself to 1 or 2 drinks after the game or the Christian who resists the peer pressure to get drunk at the office party and they cop some flack as a result. In those sort of situations we can pray as David does in psalm 17, “Hear me Lord, vindicate me for you know I have done no wrong in this matter. I have sought to honour you Lord, so please hear my prayer and help me.” It’s a prayer we can and should in certain situations pray but it’s not just help me that he prays but...

Show me and keep me!

That’s our next heading, show me and keep me. V7: ***“Show the wonder of your great love, you who save by your right hand those who take refuge in you from their foes.”*** David is asking that God who is a saving, rescuing God – a God who provides shelter for those who seek refuge in Him - show his love again in his specific circumstances by coming to his rescue. It’s ok to cry out to God and to ask Him to act in the details of life. He might not change our circumstances for a while or indeed ever – He may have purposes through our difficulties and suffering but often too he will hear our detailed petitions and give us what we ask for - we could all testify to that. Show me he asks but that’s not all he asks for. V8 he continues: ***“Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings.”*** Which are two wonderful pictures of closeness and protection. That phrase “apple of your eye” is a sort of best attempt at an English translation of a slightly strange Hebrew idiom. Literally it means, “Keep me as the little man of your eye.”

Here's something you may have never noticed but try this later with your spouse or friend – if you look closely enough into someone else's eye you'll see in their black pupil a reflection of yourself in a kind of miniature mirror image. So if you look at the pupil it actually looks as if there's a little man or woman in there looking back at you! Try it later! So in Hebrew the pupil was known as the little man of the eye. In other words David is saying keep me, protect me as you would the pupil of your eye, which is one of the most tender, sensitive and delicate parts of the human body. And because of that God has built into us a series of defence mechanisms to protect that part of the eye. So your eye socket itself is set back into the head so that it is surrounded by bone – your cheek bone protects it from below and your forehead from above and it is further protected by eyelashes and eyelids and there's always a thin film of tears to lubricate it and protect it. And it's so sensitive that it can feel the tiniest particle like the tiniest speck of dust. The remarkable thing is the reflex that causes you to blink when anything comes close to your eye – it's almost an involuntary reflex – doctors can correct me if I'm wrong on this but I think it's the quickest reflex we have – the blink of an eye. We use that as an expression of speed don't we – "it happened in the blink of an eye". And our natural instinct is to protect our eyes no matter what.

David is pleading with God to protect him in the way that a person protects their eye – without delay, without hesitation, in the moment that the threat of danger appears reflexively, thoroughly, swiftly – in the blink of an eye. Then he switches metaphors second half of v8 **"...hide me in the shadow of your wings."** That speaks of the protection that a bird like an eagle or a hen might give to its young. It gives the idea of loving protection and shelter from danger. Show me and keep me he prays and then lastly David asks God to...

Rescue me!

V13 **"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."** We see here David's great faith in a seemingly hopeless situation – he's just described in vivid language how his enemy has surrounded him and was crouching like a lion waiting to pounce. But he has confidence that the Lord could, if he wanted, rescue him out of what seemed to be a hopeless situation. Did you notice too how David describes his enemies, end of v14, **"men of this world whose reward is in this life."** All they were concerned with was this earthly life and all they could get from it. They were earth-bound, all their hopes and expectations were tied to this life and this world. They had no hope of heaven and no concern for eternity. David's world view is totally different - v15 is a wonderful verse: **"And I – in righteousness I shall see your face; when I awake, I shall be satisfied with seeing your likeness."** He's looking forward to heaven. He's saying my hope is beyond this life, my full satisfaction is not met by anything in this world but by gazing upon the face of God, then I shall be truly satisfied. The centre of his hope and his deepest longing was something that could only be satisfied in heaven. That's the climax and culmination of David's prayer. This is the real and ultimate answer to his frustrations.

It's true that God was well able to rescue him from his troubles; it's true that God had the power to thwart the plans of David's murderous enemies but David is saying in v15 – even if that does happen it will still not be as satisfying as the ultimate thing that I long for and even if it didn't happen then the day would come when he would awake in glory and be satisfied with seeing God's face and that would more than compensate for all the temporal troubles of this life.

Here is an anchor for any believer who is downcast – keep the centre of your focus and hope in eternity. Cling to that glorious hope. And here’s the amazing thing about this prayer – it started as a plea, a cry for help and it ends up as an expression of sure and certain hope. You see it seems that even while David prayed, his help came. It didn’t come in the form that he might have envisioned; there’s no evidence from the text that there was a miraculous rescue from his specific earthly troubles – the crisis wasn’t swept away but something even better happened. The Lord used this prayer to refocus David’s heart and then he filled him with a supernatural hope and confidence that lifted him above those problems. It lifted his eyes to the ultimate victory – it refocused his eyes on where they needed to be – on eternal things. This was the spiritual deliverance he really needed. And the person who fixes their eyes on eternity and has that sure hope as an anchor for the soul is the person who can put up with any number of hardships and trials and disappointments in this life.

We live life knowing that this life is not all there is; knowing in fact that this is not home; knowing that all is fading away and that real life is on its way. The author Jerry Sittser says this of Christians of earlier generations: “They had a less grandiose view of what this world can offer and a more hopeful view of what life in heaven will be. While they did not disparage life on earth – they believed that it was, even at its best, a mere hint of heaven, like an appetizer at the beginning of a sumptuous meal.” We are made, we are hard-wired to live with God in his glorious presence and we don’t have that now. That is what was so dramatically shattered with Adam & Eve being thrown out of the Garden of Eden, out of God’s presence. One day though that will change – we shall as David knew, see God’s face, we shall awake and be satisfied with seeing God’s likeness. The best thing about Heaven isn’t that we’ll see Christian loved ones again, although that will be wonderful; it isn’t that we will no longer experience pain and illness, it isn’t that we’ll no longer sin – no the best thing about heaven is that we’ll see God’s face and enjoy Him perfectly forever.

Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)