

Psalm 17: Asking God for Help in Undeserved Trouble

The Book of Psalms is a prayer and praise book, and both are *relationship* matters: how we talk to God, how we speak about God to others. Each psalm comes from both a personal *relationship* with YHWH and a *relationship* with the faith community. So the Psalms, like real life, are all about *relationships*. Like the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the God of the psalmists is not an idea or abstraction, but One who is deeply involved at every point in the lives of his people.

The *concept of two ways*, those of the godly/righteous people and the ungodly/wicked people, is woven all the way through the Bible. The human beings on each of these “ways of life” are all sinners who perish apart from humbly accepting God’s gracious gift/means of forgiveness. The ungodly/wicked/unrighteous people deny God or give him only lip-service and refuse to allow God to work in their lives. In contrast, the godly, righteous people acknowledge God and cooperate with his activity in their lives. Both kinds of people were part of Israel, just like both kinds are part of Christendom. Jesus’ parable of the wheat and the weeds in Matthew 13:24-30 and his explanation of it in Matthew 13:36-43 culminates with the final destruction of the “weeds” and the vindication of the “wheat”: “Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears let him hear.” (Matthew 13:43)

1. Read **Psalms 14-17**, noticing how the *two ways of life* are presented.

How does **Psalm 17** summarize Psalms 14, 15, and 16?

2. Because the Psalms are brutally honest they do not ignore one of the hard realities of the human experience, injustice. **Psalm 17** is a type of individual lament called a psalm of innocence. Dietrich Bonhoeffer comments on psalms of innocence:

It is often particularly striking and offensive to evangelical Christians that in the Psalms the innocence of devout people is spoken of at least as often as is their guilt. (Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: the Prayerbook of the Bible*, p, 52)

It is thoroughly unbiblical and destructive to think that we can never suffer innocently as long as some error still lies hidden within us. (Bonhoeffer, p. 54)

Thus all psalms of innocence flow into the hymn:
“Jesus, thy blood and righteousness
My beauty are, my glorious dress;
Midst flaming worlds, in these arrayed,
With joy shall I lift up my head.” (Bonhoeffer, p. 55)

Psalm 17 pleads for justice in the face of accusation and concludes with trust in the God of justice.

Compare 17:1-2 with 17:15

3. What characteristic components of a lament psalm do you see in Psalm 17? (Look for address, complaint, petitions, motivations for God to act, descriptions of enemies, assurance of being heard.) The lament form enables the godly/righteous person to read situations of hurt as situations of potential transformation. This view of reality was peculiar to Israel in the ancient world.

4. How is the psalmists' cry for vengeance a cry for justice? People who live on the margins have no difficulty understanding unjust suffering and being falsely accused. Unlike Job's friends, they don't immediately assume that one's sin must have caused one's suffering.

(Pray about any experiences you have had yourself or are aware of involving false accusations leading to injustice and unjust suffering.)

5. Here's a quote from Walter Brueggemann's *Praying the Psalms*:

Our work in praying the Psalms is somehow to bring the stylized, disciplined speech of the Psalms together with the raw, ragged, mostly formless experience in our lives. We have suggested that a way to do this is by exploration and exploitation of metaphors, that is words that have concrete reference but which are open to remarkable stretching many directions in order to touch our experience. The liberation of language means, then, that these words are free to work in any direction, but always without losing contact with their initial concreteness. And as words are used with such freedom, they function evocatively to shape and power our experience in new ways. (Brueggemann, p. 30)

What poetic images in Psalm 17 impact your relationship with God and with yourself? What yearnings, longings do these images help you identify?

A favorite image of Israel for a safe place with God is to speak of being safe under the protective wings of God. Whereas pit speaks of danger and threat, wings speak of safety, tenderness, and nurture. There is no doubt that image is consciously derived from the concrete observation of how little birds are safe under the protective wing of the mother hen. (Brueggemann, p. 37)

What is the difference between using psalm reading and praying to escape from difficulties and using this discipline to acknowledge that the

resources for life are not found in “us” but will have to come, be given, from another source?

How do these metaphors open you up to a new purpose, to submitting to the will of God, to a complete reliance upon God’s protective concern?

(In other words, we don’t just want to think about that kind of opening, submitting, relying, but actually to open up to, submit to, and rely on God right in our present circumstances.)

As we freely engage ourselves with the Psalms, they can break things loose in us, disrupt old ways of thinking and feeling, and change how we relate to God, ourselves, and others.

...we need not enter the Presence of the Holy One mute and immobilized. We go there to practice our vocation of receiving the new future God is speaking to us. To risk such prayers is to repent of the old orientation to which we no longer belong. It is to refuse the pit which must first be fully experienced for the sake of the wings which may be boldly anticipated. (Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*, p. 41)