

Wake Me Up When The Danger Ends

Psalm 17 November 3, 2024

If you were arrested, who would you dial for your one phone call? Actually, it's a myth that you only get one call. But try to imagine being in that situation. You're locked up and the only way out is for you to make a call and for the other person to answer and spring into action. But what if the person you called didn't pick up? Or what if they *did* pick up, but had no money to bail you out? The call is wasted if the person on the other end isn't ready to answer, if they don't care about you, and if they don't have the resources necessary to help you.

Can God be counted on when we call out to Him? Every time we pray we do so out of a belief that God can be counted on to hear us, to care about our prayer, to answer, to respond in power and grace. But *does* He care? Can we count on Him?

Psalm 17 is a prayer of David where he calls out to the Lord for deliverance. In fact, it's the very *first* psalm to be labeled a "prayer."¹ It seems that David prayed this psalm one night before bed.

His prayer is a series of three pleas. David was in life-threatening danger. Each plea escalates in intensity.² But even though his situation was urgent, throughout this song David *assumes* God will keep up His end of the covenant. By the end of his prayer, David has reminded himself and us that God *can* be counted on to hear, to answer, to respond out of the depths of His tender love for us.

Psalm 17:1 - *A prayer of David.* ¹ Lord, hear a just cause; pay attention to my cry; listen to my prayer—from lips free of deceit.

We're pretty well trained to acknowledge our sinfulness before God, so hearing David say, "My lips are free of deceit," it's hard for us to accept, right? But David never claims to be sinless. Far from it. He's using legal terms here.³ This is a *just* cause. Sometimes David spoke as a man presenting a case to God the Judge. David is saying, "I'm the victim here, and I need judicial intervention."

He is very bold in his opening statement. He calls for an answer three times. "Hear, pay attention, listen to my prayer." How could he be so bold before such a powerful Judge? How could he - a mere mortal - have the audacity to speak to the King of kings with this kind of insistence?

The secret is found in the very first word of his prayer: *Yahweh*. The God Who has revealed Himself. The God Who we know by name. The God Who shows us His heart, His character, His nature. The God Who has made and kept a covenant with us by *His* faithfulness, not ours. He is the God Who willfully, purposefully, unfailingly attaches Himself to His people. David's call was to *Yahweh*.

Psalm 17:2 - ²Let my vindication come from you, for you see what is right.

¹ Thomas Constable *Notes On Psalms*

² Bruce Waltke *Psalms 1-41*

³ *CSB Study Bible Notes*

Our God is a God Who sees. It can be frustrating to us that we don't see Him. But, if we're willing to look, we can see His power, His goodness, His truth, His activity. But we don't yet get to see Him yet. And, when we're suffering or confused in life, it's easy for us to *feel* like He doesn't see us - that He is off on some other case, forgetting about our struggles. But it isn't true.

There's a beautiful set of verses at the end of Exodus 2. Moses sets the scene at the start of the book - how God's chosen people were brutally enslaved for hundreds of years. How their sons were being murdered, wholesale. How things kept getting worse. And then, after painting this dark picture of suffering and hardship, we read these verses:

Exodus 2:24-25 - ²⁴God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. ²⁵and God saw the Israelites, and God knew.

And what follows is one of the greatest historic epics of all time. A record of God's faithfulness, God's intervention, His *vindication* of His people.

David knew that God was a God Who sees. But in verse 3, he acknowledges that God doesn't only look at our enemies, He looks at us, too.

Psalms 17:3 - ³You have tested my heart; you have examined me at night. You have tried me and found nothing evil; I have determined that my mouth will not sin.

These terms for testing and trying refer to the melting of metals like gold or silver so that the waste, the dross separates from the ore.⁴ It's called *proving*. David didn't resist this examination process.

In his moment of deadly distress, David says, "Lord, I recognize that the *first* important thing is that I be in right standing before You." *Before* the rescue, before the defeat of his enemies, he says, "God, I want to be right in your eyes." In verse 1 he asked God to hear him three times. Here, David speaks of God proving him three times. *Tested, examined, tried me.*

No matter what situation we're facing, our heart's relationship to the Lord is the most important element. Our spiritual health is not dependent on outward circumstances.

There's an amazing moment in the Gospels where the disciples are rowing in a storm on the Sea of Galilee. They row all night but are stuck in the middle of the lake, battered by the waves. Then here comes Jesus walking on the water. But before the storm is calmed, before the guys are saved from the danger, the Lord and Peter have a personal interaction. Jesus takes the opportunity to teach Peter about *weakness* in his faith. The storm is still raging. The waves are still beating. But it was more important to the Lord that He teach the disciples about *faith* than it was to stop the storm.

⁴J.J. Stewart Perowne *Commentary On The Psalms*

So here's David, at the end of his day, evaluating whether he was in good spiritual health. It's not a bad idea for us to apply to our own lives. As we come to the end of another day, to invite God to examine us. To say, "Lord, did I honor You today? Did I serve You faithfully today? Did I surrender to the Spirit today or did I give in to my sin nature?" Remember: God's purpose in our lives is to refine us like gold. And we should invite His refining, sanctifying work in our hearts just as David did.

Psalm 17:4-5 - ⁴Concerning what people do: by the words from your lips I have avoided the ways of the violent. ⁵My steps are on your paths; my feet have not slipped.

As this stanza comes to a close, David finishes making the case that he is innocent. He says that despite what *other* people do, *he* has dedicated his life not only to belief *in* God, but to obedience to the *word* of God. He says, "I'm walking on Your paths. By Your words my feet have not slipped."

We live in a crumbling world - a world full of pitfalls, perils, and traps. The *only* way to stay stable is by the word of God. David says, "Because I obey the words from God's lips, my feet have not slipped." This is a common theme in the Psalms.⁵ Jude agrees: The Lord keeps us from stumbling.

On the night before His crucifixion, Jesus gave an extended teaching to His disciples. During that teaching, in John 16, He said, "I have told you these things to keep you from stumbling."

The Bible is not a collection of mythologies. It's not just another religious book. It is the very Word of God, Himself. And when a Christian or a church or a nation moves away from the authority of Scripture, they invariably put themselves on a slippery slope of destruction.

Sometimes people mock Christians when we talk about a slippery slope, but you know what? Life ungoverned by the authoritative Word of God *is* a slippery slope. Like David, we can't help what other people do. He says, "Here's what *I've* determined to do." Christians are called to be in the world, not of the world. And meanwhile, we're to live lives planted firmly on the Rock, walking on the high road of heaven, with our steps illuminated by God's Word, standing on solid truth.

Psalm 17:6 - ⁶I call on you, God, because you will answer me; listen closely to me; hear what I say.

David is fully confident that the Lord *will* hear and He *will* answer. This isn't naïveté - he speaks from a place of real faith and real understanding. He *knows* Who God is. He *knows* God will answer. Why? Because God *promises* to answer us!

Jeremiah 33:2-3 - ²"The Lord who made the earth, the Lord who forms it to establish it, the Lord is his name, says this: ³Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and incomprehensible things you do not know.

⁵ See Psalm 15, 16, 17, 56

David needed an answer. But in his distress, he knew that what was true *before* the danger is still true *during* the danger. If you want to know what is promised to you as a person who is loved by God, read Psalm 91. There we learn what it means to belong to God. What it means that He will be our Refuge. One of the things God says in that Psalm is: "When he calls out to me, I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble."⁶

David is no longer speaking to God as if He's a Judge. In this stanza he speaks to the Lord as a Friend - a Friend Who has pledged to protect him.⁷

Psalm 17:7 - ⁷Display the wonders of your faithful love, Savior of all who seek refuge from those who rebel against your right hand.

David's relationship with Yahweh was not based on what David earned, not based on David's performance or importance. It was based on *love*. *Hesed* love. This is an active, loyal, tender love. A love that flows from compassion. It is a love that is freely given by a stronger person to a weaker person who is in need.⁸ *Hesed* is the truest love, the truest kindness. Nothing can eclipse it.

David invites God to use *his* life circumstances to demonstrate to the world what is true about the God of the Bible.

This word *wonders* can mean something distinct or marked out.⁹ "A mighty act of God that is inexplicable according to human standards."¹⁰ He's not necessarily asking God to work a miracle, but he's asking God to visibly accomplish what He has promised to do.¹¹

What has God promised to do? Well, in the context of this psalm, David says, "Lord, You've promised to be my Protector and Provider and Refuge and Shield." If God is to demonstrate to the watching world that He is a Protector and He wants to use *your* life to show it, doesn't it follow that - at some point - you will need to be in a situation where you need protection?

What else has God promised to you? That He will sustain you. That He will call you to some unique purpose in His will. That He will build testimonies of His power and grace in your life. These promises require certain circumstances. God wants to use our lives to display that He is a Savior. That He is a Provider. That He is faithful and able.

Psalm 17:8-9 - ⁸Protect me as the pupil of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings ⁹from the wicked who treat me violently, my deadly enemies who surround me.

⁶ Psalm 91:15

⁷ Derek Kidner *Psalms 1-72*

⁸ *Theological Wordbook Of The Old Testament*

⁹ *TWOT*

¹⁰ *Lexham Theological Wordbook*

¹¹ Frank Gaebelin, Willem VanGemern, Allen Ross, J. Stafford Wright, and Dennis Kinlaw. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary Volume 5: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*

These are two wonderful images. First, the pupil or apple of the eye. It speaks of nearness and attention, but also sensitivity. Once, in high school, I went to put on my sunglasses and as I pulled the arms open, the frame cracked in half and swung into my eye. I ended up with a little scratch on the cornea for a couple weeks. If you've ever had an eye injury or even just a little grain of sand in your eye, you know just how sensitive that body part is.

God has great *sensitivity* toward you. He's not unfeeling. He's not callous. He's not checked out.

The second image is of the mother bird covering over her young with her wing. There's the little chick, nestled in close - warm against his mother's side. Jesus, of course, said this is how He loves. David wants us to look on the profound depth and personal nature of God's love for us. For *you*.

After looking on God's love, he pivots to looking at what he's up against.

Psalm 17:10-12 - ¹⁰They are uncaring; their mouths speak arrogantly. ¹¹They advance against me; now they surround me. They are determined to throw me to the ground. ¹²They are like a lion eager to tear, like a young lion lurking in ambush.

David description of his enemies' is masked in my translation. He said something like, "Their fat has covered their hearts, and with their dewlaps they speak haughty words."¹² The *dewlap*, refers to the folds of fat some people develop underneath their chins. Quite colorful imagery from David, here!

This isn't just a description, it's a diagnosis. Their problem was not physical fat but *spiritual*. You see, David uses a term that refers to the fat of animal sacrifices¹³ - fat that belonged to the Lord. Instead, they kept their fat. They kept what belonged to God. And it led to heart dysfunction. The same thing happens to the *physical* heart when there's too much fat around or in it - you get a stiffening of the heart and pump dysfunction.¹⁴ And we see that their spiritual hearts had grown hard.

We see an escalation in their behavior toward David. First they're generally uncaring. Then they start to speak words against him. Then they advance against him. Then finally they've surrounded him like a pack of lions, licking their fat chops and moving in for the kill.

And so David calls out for rescue once more.

Psalm 17:13-14 - ¹³Rise up, Lord! Confront him; bring him down. With your sword, save me from the wicked. ¹⁴With your hand, Lord, save me from men, from men of the world whose portion is in this life: You fill their bellies with what you have in store; their sons are satisfied, and they leave their surplus to their children.

¹² Robert Alter *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation With Commentary*

¹³ TWOT

¹⁴ <https://www.cnn.com/2021/06/01/health/fatty-heart-health-risk-wellness/index.html>

David wanted help *now*. That's the point of his prayer. Did he get it? We don't know the specific setting of this psalm, but we do know this: David was a fugitive from Saul for somewhere between 7 and 15 years. He was anointed to be God's chosen king when he was a teenager but he didn't start reigning until he was 30 years old. And then there were six and a half years of brutal civil war.

God is a Rescuer, but *sometimes* His timing is much less urgent than our feelings. Think of the Christians in Damascus in the book of Acts. They had been driven out of Jerusalem by violent persecution. No one was safe from this guy, Saul of Tarsus. And then they hear that Saul was coming to *their* town. Coming to imprison. Coming to kill. Coming to destroy. How long did God wait before intervening? He waited till Saul was just outside the city.

Or consider Lazarus. Or the woman with the flow of blood. Or the man born lame and waited for more than 40 years to be healed. Rescue *is* coming. But it might not come today.

Despite the pressure, David still believed that God could be counted on. And in his description of the men of this world, he highlighted the fact that their time was coming to an end. What an amazing difference there is between the people of God and those who reject God. Time is counting down. For them, it's a countdown to an end. For us, it's a countdown to a beginning.

Psalm 17:15 - ¹⁵ But I will see your face in righteousness; when I awake, I will be satisfied with your presence.

What would you do if you found a cougar in your house? Recently a family in Boulder, Colorado came home to that reality. There's video of them outside their house and, upstairs, there's a live cougar looking out the window!

You know what you *wouldn't* do? *Go to sleep!* But apparently that's what David did. "When I awake, I'll be satisfied with Your presence." What an amazing testimony to the power of faith.

Peter demonstrated this kind of faith in the book of Acts. He's taken in by Herod. The order goes out to chop Peter's head off in the morning. But there's Peter, asleep in his cell. He didn't know that God was going to save him *that* night, but he knew God was going to save him in the end.

"Satisfied with Your presence" can also be translated, "when I awake in Your likeness." God is not only *saving* us, He's also *transforming* us. He's changing us into His image - refining us like gold. He does so for our good and His glory, but also because it *has* to be done. We cannot be in the presence of righteousness unless *we* are righteous. But as we walk with God, we are made like Him and one day we will see Him face to face, dwelling with Him forever.

How is this possible? It's only possible because God comes to the rescue. To understand how that happens, we have to go back to verses 11 and 12. There the lions are surrounding David. He had killed lions and bears before, but this was too much. How would he be rescued from that scene?

The *real* rescue happens in Psalm 22. Where we see again the enemy dogs and bulls and lions surrounding David. And in that terrible scene, Jesus Christ comes and says, "I'll stay and be devoured so you can escape." I will die so you can live. The scene ends at Calvary.¹⁵ And there we see not only the depth of God's love for us, but even for these enemies. These stiff-hearted killers. What did Jesus say as He hung on the cross? "Father forgive them, they don't know what they're doing."¹⁶ The *hesed* love of God holding nothing back in His quest to save and redeem and show compassion.

This is the God we pray to. This is the God of the Bible. This is the King Who rules forever and ever. Can He be counted on? You *better* believe it!

¹⁵ Kidner

¹⁶ Luke 23:34