

10/26/25

Psalm 12 – The Prayer of the Hunted Saint

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Good morning. In Luke chapter 11, Jesus' disciples asked him to teach them to pray. Jesus gladly obliged their request, and he gave them what we have come to call the Lord's Prayer. And here, in Psalm 17, the Lord is doing something similar for us, he is teaching us how to pray. The superscript here on this Psalm calls it 'a *prayer* of David.' In the Psalms there are only three Psalms labeled as prayers. They are all good things to pray, and all of them can teach us something about prayer, but only these three are actually labeled for us as prayers. This one, Psalm 86 is also a 'prayer of David,' and then Psalm 90 is a 'prayer of Moses.'

Now, teaching us to pray is about more than just giving us some helpful words to say. It is that, sometimes we just don't know what to pray for, we feel angsty about things, but we just can't put our concerns into words. It's helpful to pray scripture even just as kind of a kick-start to prayer. But, even beyond just giving us words, these model prayers are meant to shape our entire experience of what it means to live Christianly.

What do I mean? Prayer isn't just one component of the Christian life, in a real way it is the core of the Christian life, and is something of a microcosm of the entire Christian life. Robert Murray M'Cheyne, of Bible-in-a-year fame, once said "What a man is on his knees before God, that he is, and nothing more." That he is, and nothing more. How you pray both reveals and shapes how you live your entire life before God.

So, when Jesus teaches us to pray, he isn't just giving us words to say, but he is forming and shaping our entire life before God. That then is what we need to do today. We will walk

through this Psalm, this ‘prayer of David’ not just to get a glimpse of mature, godly prayer, but to get a glimpse of comprehensive godly living. Let’s pray, then get to work.

Almighty God, please help us this morning. Help me to preach clearly, help me to make clear what is true and good and beautiful, and help the hearers to listen carefully, and receive obediently. Open our ears and hearts to hear, delight, and do. Help us to see you, to love you, and to obey you. In Jesus mighty name we ask for help. Amen.

TEXT INTRODUCTION

The first thing we need to get straight is the context of this Psalm. Now, the Psalm itself doesn’t give us any information about when exactly David wrote this prayer. But, it’s placement right before Psalm 18 at least gives us *literary* context, if not historical context. Psalm 18 opens with a superscript that says, “A Psalm of David, the servant of the Lord, who addressed the words of this song to the Lord on the day when the Lord delivered him from the hand of all his enemies, and from the hand of Saul.”

So, Psalm 18 is written on the occasion of David’s deliverance from Saul – who was trying to kill him – and Psalm 17 is all about David asking for deliverance from someone who is trying to kill him. So, we should read Psalm 17 with the murderous persecution of Saul in mind.

Psalm 17 then is a model prayer for how to pray when you are being treated unfairly when you did nothing wrong. In a fallen world this will happen from time to time just as sinners try to do life with sinners. Eventually someone at work is going to hold a grudge against you because of something you said that they took out of context. Or your neighbor is just going to not like you for some inscrutable reason.

But beyond the more day to day experiences of being treated unfairly, there will come times in your life when your obedience to God will cause people around you to not like you. David was a godly man who was anointed and blessed by God, and Saul was jealous, and hated David precisely because he was godly and blessed.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5:11, Jesus said, “blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.” The Apostle Paul said in 2 Timothy 3:12, “all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” And the Apostle Peter says in 1 Peter 4:4, “With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you.”

This Psalm is going to refer us back to the ‘Two Ways to Live’ that Psalm one told us about, and the big idea is this: if you attempt to live on God’s path, those who walk in the path of the world will despise you. Worldliness hates godliness. You need to have that in your mind. It might be the case that people are saying bad things about you because you really are being insensitive and harsh, or it might just be that people are saying bad things about you because you are trying to obey God, and they hate him. No one is neutral about God. If someone hates God, they will hate his law, and they will hate anyone who wants to live by it – to their own destruction. If a worldly person is offended by you, that doesn’t necessarily mean that you have done anything wrong.

So, this Psalm, Psalm 17, is a model prayer for the hunted saint, for the godly person who is trying to live a godly life and is being treated unfairly by the ungodly. This is an extreme example, most of the time at worst people will say mean things about you behind your back, they probably won’t come after you with swords, but still, it can be a helpful example.

Ok, let me give you my roadmap. Verses 1 and 2 are the introduction, the opening plea. Then verses 3 through 9 are the main body of the appeal – what David is asking for. Then verses 10 through 14 paint a picture of the worldly and wicked men who are hunting David. And last, the Psalm ends with verse 15 a pointer to hope even beyond death.

Ok, verse 1 – **“Hear a just cause, O Lord; attend to my cry! Give ear to my prayer from lips free of deceit!”**

The one thing I want to point out about this first verse is just the posture. Note how David is more or less giving God a reason to listen to his prayer. He’s presenting an argument for why God should hear and answer him. When is the last time that you did that? When is the last time that you gave God reasons for answering or granting your prayers?

Verse 2 – **“From your presence let my vindication come! Let your eyes behold the right!”** We’ve seen this in other Psalms before. The Christian is ultimately and primarily concerned with the judgement of God. Now, vindication isn’t just God knowing that you are innocent, David is asking here for God to actually demonstrate David’s innocence in the sight of other people.

So, if people are offended or opposed to something that you said, or do, or believe, do what you can to clear up any misunderstanding. Try to come to see eye to eye, but if they just don’t want to see, or they see and just despise godliness, then there’s only so much care you can give to that. At some point you just have to be comfortable being disliked for godliness’ sake. Let God be your judge, he will vindicate you in this life or in the next.

The Appeal - JUSTICE

Verse 3, here he turns to the appeal proper – **“You have tried my heart, you have visited me by night, you have tested me, and you will find nothing; I have purposed that my mouth will not transgress.”**

Now, it’s important to read this the right way. David is a man, a son of Adam, and a sinner. David isn’t claiming comprehensive perfect and perpetual sinless perfection. What he’s saying is that *in this case* I am innocent. In this verse he says that his heart and his mouth are innocent on this one. In the next two verses he’ll say that his feet are innocent. In other words, his inner thoughts, his words, and his actions have all been innocent, have all been on the up and up on this.

If you go back and read the account of David’s response to Saul’s persecution, it’s really quite impressive. David had plenty of opportunity to respond violently to Saul, or at least to disrespect him and drum up some treason. But he didn’t. He refused to take vengeance into his own hands, and he even respected Saul, and considered him his God-ordained king right up to the end.

So, again, this isn’t David saying, “on the basis of my sinless perfection, deliver me.” But rather, “in this case, in this scenario, I’m innocent, please deliver me.”

That being said, I want you to notice the spiritual trial that David went through to be able to say that with a clean conscience. **“You have tried my heart, you have visited me by night, you have tested me.”** He’s not just saying, ‘what do these jokers know, I’m innocent here.’ No, David is agonizing over this in his heart.

So first off, to say that God has tried and tested his heart is not some fluffy religious sentiment. This is a reference to what metalworkers do to silver and gold to purify it. They melt

it down, the impurities rise to the top, and then they scrape them off. So, this night-time testing that David is talking about is not some pleasant sipping of chamomile tea by the fireside. He is talking about the heat of God's Spirit and the blade of God's word doing their work in his heart. This is like what Eric talked about last week out of Psalm 16:5 – my guts were talking to me.

Really, I want you to notice two things about this nighttime testing from God. One, that it happened, and two, that it came to an end.

When it comes to accusations against us, really whatever they might be, we can tend to err in one of two directions. Either we just kind of ignore it. We are just so sure that there is no way that we said the wrong thing, did the wrong thing, or whatever, we are just so sure that the other person is just being too sensitive that we never really engage with God on it in the first place. We just assume that we are innocent.

Or we agonize over it without end to the point that we never write off any accusations.

So, to be a bit more concrete. When someone comes to us and in one way or another says, 'hey, you sinned in this way.' There are two ways that we might be tempted to respond that are both unrighteous. The first, is that we just flippantly disregard it. We totally discount it out the gate. But the second is that we take it as fact without any serious reflection. And the issue is that for both of these we are letting feelings be our guide and not the Word of God.

For the first, when we just ignore accusations against us, we are letting *our* own feelings dictate whether or not we sinned. But for the second we are letting other people's feelings dictate whether or not we sinned. Just because I feel good about what I did that doesn't mean I'm innocent, and just because you feel offended that doesn't mean I'm guilty.

So, what should we do? Well, we should be like David. Pray, take it seriously. Open your Bible and plead with God to help you understand. Hold up what you did or said against the

Scriptures. Hold up the other person's accusation against the Scriptures. Check your heart, check your words, check your actions. Ask God to search you, to expose any sin to you. Bring a friend in, or someone who saw the situation, or one of your pastors. David doesn't tell us how long this testing took, but probably more than five minutes.

Then, if on reflection, you find that what you did or said wasn't true, or wasn't done in love, then repent before God, and apologize to the offended party, and even, thank him for pointing it out. But, if on reflection on the Scriptures before God you are convinced that what you said or did was right and done in love, then move on and don't agonize over it anymore. You are accountable for what you do and say, not how people respond to it.

Verse 4 and 5 – **“⁴With regard to the works of man, by the word of your lips I have avoided the ways of the violent. ⁵My steps have held fast to your paths; my feet have not slipped.”**

Ok, so here we see the importance of the Word of God. And this should be underlined in this Psalm. A couple weeks back Michael mentioned that Psalms 15-24 form a block of Psalms that go together. In his intro packet, on page nine, Michael goes into a bit more detail on that block. One thing that might be helpful to know is that the climax and summit of these Psalms is Psalm 19, which is a pointed exaltation of the Word of God. So really, Psalms 15 through 18 are setting us up for Psalm 19, they are setting us up to see the importance of the Word of God in the Christian life.

This verse then, is not just some throw away or tangential comment about the Word of God. This is arguably the lynch pin of this little appeal section. So, look at your Bible for a second, or your service guide. How has God tried and tested David's heart? Verse 3. I hinted at it

already. Through his Word. How have David's steps held fast to God's paths? Verse 5. Through the Word. Where does David learn about God's covenant steadfast love? How does David learn to take refuge in God? Verse 7. In the Word.

If nothing else, you need to see this. When God teaches us to pray, he directs us to the Word. Godly prayer is Bible saturated and Bible shaped prayer. Godly living is Bible saturated and Bible shaped living.

Ok, before moving on, there's something else that needs to be said about verses 3 through 5. We should be able to read these verses in a very circumscribed sense. "In regard to that one specific thing that that one guy is accusing me of, **my feet have not slipped.**" But there is a sense in which these verses should give us first a sense of despair, then second a sense of hope.

These verses should give us a sense of despair because as we read them we should step back away from the specific situations to look at our life as a whole. God's law doesn't require of us that we be innocent in a few key areas. God's law requires of us that we be comprehensively innocent in every area.

James 2:10-11 says, **"¹⁰For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. ¹¹For he who said, 'Do not commit adultery,' also said, 'Do not murder.' If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law."** We could take the same principle further. Maybe you've never murdered either. But the same law says, 'Do not covet.' Have you ever envied someone? Have you ever been jealous about someone else's life or possessions or job or family? Then you are a transgressor of the law. Or we could internalize it like Jesus does. Have you ever lusted after someone? Then you are an adulterer. Have you ever hated someone? Then you are a murderer.

This might sound counter-intuitive, but the best way to avoid legalism is to develop a high view of what the law requires of you, and what true biblical holiness actually is. What do I mean? The Pharisees problem wasn't that they had too high a view of God's law, but too low a view. Jesus says in Matthew 5:20, **“unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”** Their problem was that they thought that God's law was a trivial thing that they could satisfy with a few external practices.

Legalism – the idea that I can be right with God by keeping his law – and *license* – the idea that I can do whatever I want – are not two ends of a spectrum, but two sides of the same coin – they both think that God's law doesn't really require all that much of them.

Jesus will never be sweet to you until you have come to despair of any and all hope of being found righteous before God on your own merits.

So long as you think you can be justified by the law, so long as you think that God is even remotely impressed with your own righteousness, so long as you think that God's Law is a small thing, Jesus will always be a somewhat unnecessary accessory to your Christianity.

But these verses should give us a sense of hope, because even in the face of our failure, even in the face of the fact that our feet slip all the time, God sent his Son to take on flesh to perfectly fulfil God's righteous law, and to suffer a sinner's death on a cross. Jesus did live a life of perfect, perpetual, personal, comprehensive obedience to the law of God. He can stand before God the Father and say, “hear me, for I have lived perfectly and blamelessly. In everything, and all the time, my feet have not slipped.”

Jesus lived for you. Jesus died for you. Jesus rose from the dead for you. You have no righteousness of your own to stand on, but if you belong to God through faith in Christ, you can

stand firmly on Jesus' righteousness. God hears you, not because of your righteousness, but because of Jesus' righteousness.

The Appeal – COVENANT LOVE

Which, leads right into verses 6 through 9. Verses 3 through 5 was more or less David's appeal on the basis of justice. "I'm innocent, so let justice prevail." But then, in verses 6 through 9 he shifts up a register into an appeal on the basis of covenant love. "Deliver me because of your steadfast covenant love." Even when we are just talking about one specific situation where we may very well be in the right, the Christian instinct is to leave behind "I deserve" and pick up the steadfast love of God in Jesus Christ. Even when he has his own legs to stand on the Christian can't help but run to Christ. In him I take refuge, in him I hope.

Verses 6 and 7 – **"I call upon you, for you will answer me, O God; incline your ear to me; hear my words. ⁷Wondrously show your steadfast love, O Savior of those who seek refuge from their adversaries at your right hand."**

He's appealing again for God to intervene. "There are guys with swords combing the mountainside looking for me, please do something about that!" He isn't just asking God to give him inner peace about it all, he's asking God to actually intervene, to act to deliver him somehow. But notice what he appeals to here. It isn't his innocence anymore, but now it's God's steadfast love, not towards those who deserve it, but towards those who seek refuge at God's right hand.

Then next, verses 8 and 9 he expands on that steadfast love a little bit. **“⁸Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings, ⁹from the wicked who do me violence, my deadly enemies who surround me.”**

So, I’ve always kind of wondered what this saying, “the apple of your eye” meant. So, I was glad this week for a chance to look it up. It’s much more prosaic than I expected. It’s just a euphemism for your pupil. The idea is that your pupil is the tenderest and most vulnerable part of a tender and vulnerable organ (your eye) in the middle of a tender and vulnerable part of your body (your face). So, if someone is the apple of your eye, that basically means that you are extra affectionate and especially extra protective of that person.

That is interesting imagery on its own, but this is also a reference to Deuteronomy 32, what’s called ‘The Song of Moses.’ Listen to verses 9 through 12:

⁹But the LORD’s portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage.

¹⁰“He found him in a desert land, and in the howling waste of the wilderness; he encircled him, he cared for him, he kept him as the apple of his eye.

¹¹Like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that flutters over its young, spreading out its wings, catching them, bearing them on its pinions,

¹²the LORD alone guided him, no foreign god was with him.”

So, this reference to Deuteronomy – with both the apple of the eye, and the shadow of the wings – should shape the way that we think about this steadfast love of God. This isn’t just kind of benevolent affection in God. This is covenant love. God didn’t just kind of like Israel. He made a covenant with Israel. Israel became his people, and God became their God. So, when David is making these references he’s appealing to God’s covenant faithfulness. “I belong to you, you have set your love on me through covenant, so please save me.” This is the cry of the

Christian. “You have become my God through faith in Jesus Christ, I have been baptized into your covenant people, I belong to you, rescue me!”

So, David begins his prayer with an appeal to justice, but eventually he rises to an appeal to God’s covenant love.

PORTRAIT OF THE WICKED

Ok, verses 10 through 12, here David gets into his portrait of the wicked – **“¹⁰They close their hearts to pity; with their mouths they speak arrogantly. ¹¹They have now surrounded our steps; they set their eyes to cast us to the ground. ¹²He is like a lion eager to tear, as a young lion lurking in ambush.”**

Notice here the comprehensive nature of malice. They close their hearts. Their mouths speak arrogantly. Their eyes aim to cast down. Hearts, mouths, eyes. Just like David was talking about his heart, his mouth, and his feet. Godliness and wickedness are comprehensive realities.

Then verse 13 and into 14 – **“¹³Arise, O Lord! Confront him, subdue him! Deliver my soul from the wicked by your sword, ¹⁴from men by your hand, O Lord...”**

You should note this. David is completely entrusting himself to the judgement of God. He had the chance a couple times to deliver himself by his own sword, to kill Saul when he had the drop on him, but he didn’t. In the end David is relying on God to deliver him. In the end God used the Philistines as his own sword to cut down Saul.

And again, note David’s hope in a very practical deliverance.

PRACTICAL INTERLUDE

I want to pause here for a moment to pull a few things together to make a kind of general application point from the Psalm so far. I mentioned that when God teaches us to pray he is teaching us to live. Biblical praying informs and shapes biblical living. I want to note basically three dimensions of Christian living that are present in this Psalm that I think it can tend to be difficult to hold together. In other words, of these three dimensions we often tend to emphasize one, be more or less neutral towards another, and downplay, or even demonize the third. And which one is which will be different for different people.

So, in this Psalm we see what we could call experiential Christianity, moral Christianity, and practical Christianity. Experiential Christianity is primarily concerned with emotional experiences of and with God. This is a way of being that emphasizes things like experiential prayer. And this guy might be eager to tell you about a very specific encounter with God that he had the other night in prayer. We see this in this Psalm where David described how God came to him and tested him in the night. In that moment, following the Lord was not an abstract set of concepts, but a very present experience. Experiential Christianity prays Psalm 42, “as a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God.”

Then second is moral Christianity. This is the way of being that emphasizes upright, godly living. The law of God, the moral standard of living and being that God calls us to. We see this in the importance that David puts on his faithfulness to the word of God and to the fact that his feet have not slipped from the path. Moral Christianity prays Psalm 139, “see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”

Then third is practical Christianity. This is the way of being that wants to see God’s will done in the world outside of himself. He wants to know how to do marriage and childrearing in a

godly way. He wants to know God's will for vocation and work. He is thinking about how God's word addresses homelessness and the legal system. He cares about God's will in politics and culture. We see this in David with the repeated prayers to see tangible deliverance from his enemies. He is asking God not just to help him persevere emotionally, but to actually vindicate him publicly, and to practically deliver him from the guys trying to kill him. Which in his case is a very political deliverance. In his case means regime change, it means one king being taken out and another being put in power. Practical Christianity prays Matthew 6, "your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

Now, what this Psalm tells us – or shows us – is that all three of these are good and necessary to a biblical walk with the Lord.

I would guess that most of us are pretty comfortable with two of these, but then we get a little bit nervous about one of them.

What does that look like? Well for some, we get excited about personal godliness and upright living, and appreciate the value of things like mercy ministry, and are concerned about well-ordered families, churches, institutions and societies, but we can be a little nervous about more emotive and experiential expressions of Christianity. So, some are all for moral and practical Christianity, but get a little nervous about experiential Christianity. Broadly speaking this would be the ditch that the Reformed tradition tends towards.

Then again, some are all for personal experience of God, and very emotional expressions of that, and are energized to see the power of the Holy Spirit transform nations, but are very anxious about the danger of legalism, and any hint of preaching law makes them get a bit on edge. Again, broadly speaking, the Charismatic tradition tends towards this ditch. Yes, experiential Christianity, yes, practical Christianity, but maybe not so much moral Christianity.

Then last there are some who are all for an emotional worship experience, and take God's personal moral and ethical teachings seriously, but who tend to get nervous about bringing their faith into contact with the outside world. They are all about personal devotion, and personal moral piety, but tend to pull back a bit when it comes to things like childrearing, business, and politics. Once more speaking broadly, mainstream evangelicalism tends towards this ditch, strong on experiential and moral Christianity, but a bit nervous about practical Christianity.

So, what should we do with that? The point isn't that we all need to be perfectly balanced in all of these. No, we all have predispositions, and our own histories make us more excited about some things, and more nervous about others. That's all fine and unavoidable.

Really, I would just encourage self-awareness, humility, and charity for those who tend in different directions. Which of those three do you gravitate towards? What is your instinctive picture of Christian maturity? Is it emotionally expressive prayer? Is it personal morality? Is it practical engagement in some domain? All of that is good and fine. But you also need to be aware of the potential excesses you might tend towards.

Then next, and this might be even more important, which of those three are you a bit nervous about? Ask the Lord to help you think through this honestly. Why are you nervous about it? What extremes and excesses make you recoil? Then, are your reactions to those excesses Biblical? Or, in your rejection of unbiblical excesses are you throwing out what is biblical? You may have experienced some genuine legalism in the past, but that doesn't mean that the Ten Commandments are a bad thing.

Ok, experiential Christianity, moral Christianity, and practical Christianity. David exhibits all three of them in this Psalm, and we should pray and live in all three of them as well.

Ok, let's get back to the flow of it, pick back up in verse 14.

Verse 14, **“from men of the world whose portion is in this life. You fill their womb with treasure; they are satisfied with children, and they leave their abundance to their infants.”**

This is the basic contrast in the Psalms. There is the way of life and the way of death. The way of the righteous and the way of the wicked. Here David points to this key difference. In Psalm 16:5, from last week, we see that the way of life chooses to have God as his portion, but here the way of death chooses the world and the things in the world as his portion.

There’s a lot that could be said about this verse, but I’ll just point out a few things. Note first that even the wicked are given their good things from God. God fills them with treasure. Isn’t that interesting. Even those who despise and reject God he still satisfies with good things. How generous is God?

But the main point of what David is getting at is where they put their hope. What he’s saying is that for these men, their only hope is a worldly legacy. Their hope is in acquiring wealth and having kids to pass it on to to be remembered by. That’s not a bad thing, but if that’s all you can hope in that is pretty hollow. What if they don’t like you? Or if they blow the inheritance? Or their kids forget about you?

This is important because what we hope in fundamentally orients our lives. Your hope directs and shapes your heart. Your heart will only ever be as noble as your hope. If your hope is worldly your heart will be worldly.

HOPE

Which brings us to verse 15 – **“¹⁵As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake, I shall be satisfied with your likeness.”**

What does David hope in? What should we hope in? In heaven there will be unimaginable delights. You will be reunited with faithful loved ones who have gone before you. You will get to experience life in a perfect flawless body. You will get to live in perfect community with sinless people as a sinless person. The constant background anxiety about food and shelter and paying the next round of bills will be completely gone. But, beyond it all, what will be the apex? The pinnacle? Seeing the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

This hope is called the Beatific Vision. Think: beatitudes. It means ‘blessed’ vision, blessed sight. One day, you will see Jesus face to face, and not as a sinner, but like David says, *in righteousness*. Not a righteousness that you earned, not a righteousness that you deserve, but a blood bought righteousness. A righteousness won for you on the cross, given to you through faith. Your glorified heart and soul and mind and body shot through with perfect righteousness will see and delight in Jesus in ways that we couldn’t even comprehend now.

I think all those viewing platforms in national parks are little pointers to this future reality. There is something in us that is just weirdly satisfied by beholding, by seeing glory. That’s why we pull the car over and just look at mountains for minutes at a time. That’s why we spend thousands of dollars to go stare at the Grand Canyon, or the Ocean. Why do we do this? What do we get from these views?

Satisfaction. Or at least a kind of dim echo of future satisfaction. That’s why staring out over those mountains or over that canyon, or over the ocean is such a complex feeling. It’s both a small taste of satisfaction, but it is satisfaction colored by disappointment and regret. Somehow

our soul knows that we were made to be satisfied by seeing glory, and that this – however glorious it might be – isn't it yet. It's just a reminder of what we lost. We were made to be finally satisfied not by eating, not by tasting, not by feeling, not by hearing, but by *seeing*. One day, Christian, you will see Jesus and finally, fully be satisfied.