

A PSALM FOR THOSE IN TROUBLE

Psalm 5

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These early psalms are short. For those of you who have been with us on previous nights you know that the psalms—there are 150 psalms—they're broken into five different books or parts. They're sort of like the collect hymnals or chorus books today. They probably came out in five different editions. This is the first edition. Many of these 42 psalms in the first edition are psalms of David. They tend to be shorter, most of them, in nature.

The instruction of this psalm is it's for the director of music for flutes. Which tells us that this psalm was used in the worship of David's time onward and probably used by the singers, the Levites of the temple. It would be associated with worship times, sacrificial times. Unfortunately we don't know the tune because the psalm comes to us, as all the psalms do, without music. But we understand the psalms better if we know that they were all sung. That tells us too that it is helpful for us when we pray at times to pray in song. There's something special, the tonality that music expresses that just flat words don't. In the King James Version there is contemporary music to the first three verses.

Psalm 5:1–12 (NIV)

“Give ear to my words, O LORD, consider my sighing. Listen to my cry for help, my King and my God, for to you I pray. In the morning, O LORD, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait in expectation. You are not a God who takes pleasure in evil; with you the wicked cannot dwell. The arrogant cannot stand in your presence; you hate all who do wrong. You destroy those who tell lies; bloodthirsty and deceitful men the LORD abhors. But I, by your great mercy, will come into your house; in reverence will I bow down toward your holy

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temple. Lead me, O LORD, in your righteousness because of my enemies—make straight your way before me. Not a word from their mouth can be trusted; their heart is filled with destruction. Their throat is an open grave; with their tongue they speak deceit. Declare them guilty, O God! Let their intrigues be their downfall. Banish them for their many sins, for they have rebelled against you. But let all who take refuge in you be glad; let them ever sing for joy. Spread your protection over them, that those who love your name may rejoice in you. For surely, O LORD, you bless the righteous; you surround them with your favor as with a shield.”

I'd say this is a song for those in trouble. That is the name that we will give to this message this evening: “A Psalm for Those in Trouble.” The Book of Psalms is filled with what are called the “individual laments.” That is, people find themselves in trouble. That’s one of the reasons we like psalms so well—because we instantly identify with the psalms because they express the anguishes of life. There are many ways we get into trouble. That’s why there is such a variety of laments in the psalms. That’s very similar to today. We have themes that involve songs and the same theme is stated different ways. Concepts that involve shelter and hiding and solidity when everything is giving way around us. Or when we have songs of hallelujah. We’re saying essentially the same thing but there’s more than one way to express it.

If you think of the psalms that way and the lament psalms that way and as we go through the psalms you can sort of fine-tune. We get through all 150 psalms; you’ll know which note to play for any particular need that you’re going through.

I. Every emotional and spiritual need that is in your life will ultimately be addressed by one or more of the psalms.

What we try therefore to do in the psalms is identify the particular tonality or need that we have expressed in the psalm. And then do a second thing that’s very important and that is universalize

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the truth to all trouble. A particular trouble that's faced in Psalm 5 is the trouble that a person is receiving from their enemies who are speaking bad things about them. The psalmist is trying to come to grips with the viciousness of what is being said. The psalmist is dealing with that.

II. This message has eight principles out of Psalm 5 for those who are in trouble.

A. The first principle that comes out of this psalm is we are to face our troubles with prayer, not without it. When you go through trouble in life, the trouble is bad enough without forgetting to pray about it. It helps to pray. Even if things don't immediately change, prayer begins to give us a perspective on ourselves and on God. It helps give us some anchorage. That's exactly what the psalmist chooses to do. Notice the psalm is divided into five verses. Just like a hymn would have five verses. The first, third, and fifth are all direct prayers to God, where the psalmist is leaning on God. Then, in verses 2 through 4, he all of a sudden turns and talks to God about all the problems he's facing, about his troubles. But what is really instructive to note is that he begins the prayer by not focusing on his trouble but focusing on God. He ends the prayer the same way. In the middle of the prayer he's refocused on God. Which is a tremendous way of saying when we're in trouble it helps to just begin looking first of all to the Lord, letting His presence kind of saturate the problem that we're facing.

We'll see the steps the psalmist walks through and what kinds of things he remembers about God as he approaches his problems. Far better to face our troubles with prayer than without them.

B. Then a second thing that comes out of this little psalm is that we do well to begin our day with prayer. This is again a morning prayer. Verse 3: "In the morning, O LORD, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait in expectation" (NIV).

As we've been going through the psalms we found that Psalm 3 was a morning prayer. Psalm 4 was an evening prayer. And now we're back again to a morning prayer. So this suggests again

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maybe a pattern. Some have even suggested that these words in verse 3 would give rise to the idea that they were prayer used in association with the morning sacrifice in the temple. Every day in the life of Israel when they had the temple and the sacrificial system, in the morning there was always a sacrifice in general for all the people. In the afternoon the same thing was repeated. So this may have been a prayer associated with the morning sacrifice. Literally the translation of verse 3 reads, “In the morning I make preparation for You and watch.”

Starting a day, may I suggest that a tremendous way to live life is to live it with the first conscious thoughts of the day upon God. And to close it with the last conscious thoughts upon God. That’s like laying a foundation for the day. Laying a mental and spiritual foundation of wholeness and balance in our life. It’s likely then that the psalmist, as he’s getting up in the morning or at the place of sacrifice, his first duty of the morning is saying, “Give ear to my words, O Lord” (Psalm 1:1).

C. Then a third principle that emerges out of this psalm is that in a time of trouble we have a confident expectation that God hears and knows our spoken and our unspoken thoughts. Notice how it begins, “In the morning, O Lord, you hear my voice” (verse 3). Then the psalmist qualifies it. Because words have a staging process. It begins with sighing or meditation or expressions of the heart for which the feelings are so strong words do not easily come. That turns into a cry for help. Then that turns into prayer.

So the phrase, “O Lord, you hear my voice,” is defined as a three-step process. Initiated by sighing and then because he’s in trouble, a cry for help. Then a prayer, an articulate prayer.

What this, of course, suggests to us is that God is aware when we’re not able to phrase to Him exactly what it is that we even need to ask of Him. Paul writing in Romans 8 describes times in our life when we are so overwhelmed with tragedy and sorrow that we literally do not have the

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strength to pray. Or in many cases we do not have the wisdom to know how to pray as we ought. Therefore Paul says in those moments the Spirit is praying for us with words that cannot be articulated, or one translation says, with “sighs” or with “groanings.” Same idea that’s used here in Psalm 5:1. Groanings, sighings, meditation.

Who has been exempt from a time when you were overwhelmed, stunned? You wanted to say something to God but you didn’t know what to say. The psalmist is saying that’s part of prayer. God knows that and reads that.

But he had a confidence that God was reading him when he was just sighing or meditating. He has confidence that as he begins to sigh God is going to hear him. There is a great deal of difference of praying with or without confidence. Because he has a confident expectation that God will hear, he is able to cry to God, “Listen to my cry for help” (5:2, NIV). Then end his first refrain, “In the morning I lay my requests before you and wait in expectation” (verse 3, NIV).

Our prayer is not just going to lie there unattended. God is going to do something to bring help. There is no substitute for experience. Experience is the kind of thing you have to have to get it. I find as I continue to serve the Lord I’m at the point now there are some things I used to say as a theory and hope they were true, I’m now saying with experience and know they’re true. Praying, when we first begin to do it, we almost throw it up like “Will it stick?” We hope God is listening. “Sure hope there’s a God up there! I need help.” We’re not exactly sure but that’s ok. We throw that prayer up and we come to find from our experience that indeed God does hear and God does know. Over a period of time as we continue to pray we have gained the confidence that is reflected in this psalm. “I wait in expectation.” The psalmist doesn’t go out and be a take-charge guy and force an answer but he knows he’s laid it in God’s hands and God will work on His end to bring a resolution to his problem.

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Part of David's ability to call in confident expectation upon God is that he calls Him "my King and my God" (verse 2). David himself was a king and he knew it was the right of a subject to bring a petition to the king and to be heard. So he treats himself now as a subject coming to God, his King, whose sovereignty he accepts completely.

Three principles so far: we're to face our troubles with prayer and not without it. We do well to begin our day with prayer. In a time of trouble we have the confident expectation that God knows and hears our spoken and unspoken thoughts.

D. Then a fourth principle. Prayer in trouble is to be seen as a sustaining prayer. Not just a one shot prayer. I mean the psalmist's problem does not go away. His enemy does not go away the first time he prays. He finds himself needing to come back. He says "Morning by morning O Lord You hear my voice. Morning by morning I lay my request before You" (verse 3). David is finding that when the Lord does not immediately spring us out of our trouble we need the sustaining habit of waiting upon God and the accompanying strength that comes to our spirit because we are waiting upon God.

I'm always amazed at the Book of Acts and their prison experiences. There are times when God springs people immediately out of their prison cell, such as Peter's miraculous release when the church is praying for him and then doesn't believe God's going to answer the prayer. They were shocked that God answered the prayer. Other times when the apostle Paul had an extended prison experience. In the times when God is not changing our circumstances the psalmist says, "I...wait in expectation" (verse 3, NIV). So the prayer is meant to be the prayer in trouble, a sustaining prayer, not just once.

E. Then a fifth thing that comes in this prayer is that in prayer we are led to affirm the true character and nature of God. The psalmist is saying God is against the evil, the wicked, the

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arrogant, the wrongdoer, the liar, the violent, the deceitful. That's the focus of verses 4–6. David is reminding himself as he prays, “You are not a God who takes pleasure in evil; with you the wicked cannot dwell. The arrogant cannot stand in your presence; you hate all who do wrong. You destroy those who tell lies; bloodthirsty and deceitful men the Lord abhors” (NIV). Then David does not go on to suggest that therefore he is better than someone else and has *carte blanche* to come into God's presence. Even he recognizes that he has to be included in the people that cannot stand in God's presence. He says in verse 7, “I, by your great mercy, will come into your house; in reverence will I bow down toward your holy temple” (NIV). Our only ground of hope is by God's great mercy we may be heard by Him.

I have nothing to justify myself being able to come into God's presence. I'm not better than anybody else. There are people because I'm a pastor, they consider me a holy man, God hears my prayer. But I'm on the same ground as everyone. Everyone in the world, if we get into His presence at all it is through His grace and His mercy. None of us are better as we stand at the Cross.

But we need to remember in prayer what God stands for and what He is against. God wants our lives to be in conformity with His law. And with His moral character. That's not only what God requires but that's what is best for us also. God is concerned about justice. We're all concerned about justice when it involves somebody else straightening up.

David is crying out against all who live life unfairly and with injustice. He's crying out against it. Sometimes we get a little uncomfortable with the psalms when we come to phrases like this. The psalmist seems to be such a self-righteous person. But what David is doing in prayer, I think if we understand it correctly, is not simply being down on somebody, but in prayer he is reminded what God really stands for. There is nothing that will awaken a sense of righteousness in you or

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me than spending time in prayer with God. The more we stay away from prayer the more difficult we will find it to live a life that is pleasing to God and holy. The more we'll be confronted with making wrong moral choices. We'll be slipping away from God and hardly knowing what's happening because we have not spent the time with God that prayer brings us to sort of tune our hearts.

Prayer really helps us to affirm the true nature of God. Yet when the psalmist comes to pray he knows it's God's grace that he gets to even come to God so he winds up saying, "Lord, it's grace because I'm here now. Lead me Lord in Your righteousness because of my enemies." One of the concerns of David is that God will not only keep him from his enemies but help him to remain unlike his enemies. Those are two different things. It's one thing to pray, "Lord spare me from my enemies." It's another thing to be praying also, "Lord, help me not to be like them."

That's why the example of Jesus on the cross is so very important. His faith does not mirror the hatred being expressed against Him. He's saying instead, "Forgive them."

F. Then another principle that comes out of this psalm, a sixth: In prayer we're really falling back on the reality of who is in control. Verses 9–10 find David reciting again the terrible word blasts from his enemies. But his confidence abides in the Lord who has power over his enemies. "Not a word from their mouth can be trusted; their heart is filled with destruction. Their throat is an open grave" (5:9, NIV). Burial could occur in a cave-like environment or sort of a cleft, an open hole in the ground over which something is placed. If the covering was removed then out of the grave came a stench. David is saying, "When my enemies speak against me their throat is an open grave."

I look at devastating words that are spoken to people that in counseling we have to come to grips with in people's lives. Words that people have heard as a young child maybe. Grave words that

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have a death-like sentence to them. When they fall upon our soul they can render us absolutely helpless.

David is praying in this moment saying, “Is that the verdict on my life? What my enemies are saying of me? Is that the way I really am?” He comes back through prayer to the realization of who God is saying he is and what God has for him. It’s important in prayer that we get the realization that God never says those kinds of things to us. Jesus says “I will never leave you or forsake you. Though all are against you I will remain with you. I will blot out your sins as far the east is from the west so far will your transgressions be removed from you.”

G. A seventh principle that emerges out of this psalm is that praying is going to tune our heart to the justice of God and make us white hot against injustice. David cries out “Declare them guilty, O God! Let their intrigues be their downfall. Banish them for their many sins, for they have rebelled against You” (Psalm 5:10, NIV). David is crying that God would do the work of an umpire.

Probably the only person who has ever lived that is really qualified to pray verse 10 is Jesus. In the hands of anyone else there is so much of our own selfishness that can get wrapped up in our praying where we want God to do vengeance on somebody. Maybe our own hands aren’t innocent. Only a really truly innocent person can pray that prayer. It’s interesting that Jesus in His earthly life evidently never prayed that prayer. That is the kind of prayer that would have been appropriate from the cross because that’s exactly what happened, as He faced the greatest miscarriage of justice ever done to a human being. But instead of praying verse 10, “Declare them guilty...Banish them for their many sins,” Jesus in that moment is refusing to pray a prayer that was legitimately His and was instead saying, “Forgive them.”

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But a prayer like this makes us realize there are some things that we need to give ourselves to as the people of God. Cry out against injustice and wrong.

H. Then a final principle out of this prayer is that through the course of our praying when we're in trouble we arrive at a conclusion that brings peace. "Let all who take refuge in You be glad; let them ever sing for joy. Spread Your protection over them, that those who love Your name may rejoice in You. For surely, O Lord, You bless the righteous; you surround them with Your favor as with a shield" (5:11–12).

As you walk through this psalm, if you take time to meditate on it you'll see the gradual changes that take place. But the psalm begins with groaning and it ends in joy. It begins with a person confused and wondering how to even articulate their concerns to God. After they spent time kneeling before God and forming words, they have worked through the experience. They have come out with confidence and the word "joy" has replaced the word "mourning." Instead of being openly exposed to the taunts of their enemies, which is the focus earlier in the psalm, they are instead knowing that God is surrounding them like a shield. The idea of the Lord surrounding them like a shield is like the secret service who walk in a complete circle around a president. The psalmist is saying, "God, that's how You're going to walk around me. You're going to keep me from the things that would destroy my life."

III. Therefore the psalm which begins with a clouded dawn ends with bright morning. We work through the dilemma as we are in God's presence.

Seeing the psalmist work through this, beginning with his inability to say things in words, is a reminder that one of the things perhaps we can do in prayer to help us pray more confidently is to write down what we are experiencing. Write down our prayers. Because the psalms are really a collection of prayers that have been written down. You can tell as you go through this psalm

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that when the psalmist started he did not know what to say. So he just simply tells God “O Lord, in the morning give ear to my words. Consider my sighing.” Then that triggers it and he’s able to begin to articulate. As he spends time in God’s presence there comes the quietness.

I have found that after a time of prayer where we really come into the presence of the Lord we can walk out of that time of prayer and handle it. This therefore is a psalm that we sing when we’re in trouble, and it especially has the application of when God is not changing our external circumstances; He is giving us a calm in it.