

Psalm 15, 16, and 17 form a collection of psalms focused on the believer's faithfulness under attack. Unshakeable confidence belongs to the true worshiper whose tongue is pure, who does not wrong his neighbor nor slander others, who keeps his word and protects the innocent (Ps 15). Of the three psalms Psalm 16 reaches the zenith of confidence – resurrection hope. David delights in his single-hearted devotion to Yahweh and refuses to be influenced by those who run after other gods. "I keep my eyes always on the Lord. With him at my right hand, I will not be shaken" (Ps 16:8). Psalm 16 concludes with exuberant praise and complete confidence in "eternal pleasures at your right hand" (16:11). Psalm 17 brings us down to earth again and situates us in the throes of the tension between the righteous and those who intentionally counter the will of God with their callous hearts and arrogant speech.

Although it may be impossible to pin down the back story to this psalm, we know that this psalm has near universal application to all Christians facing opposition. David had multiple experiences with individuals who wanted to destroy him, enemies who plotted against him, and many who dreamed of his demise. Psalm 17 fits with 1 Samuel 24, when David spared Saul's life even though king Saul was hunting him down to take his life (1 Sam 24:11). The psalm also recalls the story of Nabal, when David spared his life because of Abigail's courageous intervention. Her reasoning corresponds well to Psalm 17 when she said,

"The Lord your God will certainly make a lasting dynasty for my lord, because you fight the Lord's battles, and no wrongdoing will be found in you as long as you live. Even though someone is pursuing you to take your life, the life of my lord will be bound securely in the bundle of the living by the Lord your God, but the lives of your enemies he will hurl away, as from the pocket of a sling" (1 Sam 25:28-29).

*Hear My Prayer*

*Hear me, Lord, my plea is just;  
listen to my cry.  
Hear my prayer –  
it does not rise from deceitful lips.  
Let my vindication come from you;  
may your eyes see what is right.  
Though you probe my heart,  
though you examine me at night and test me,  
you will find that I have planned no evil;  
my mouth has not transgressed.  
Though people try to bribe me,  
I have kept myself from the ways of the violent  
through what your lips have commanded.  
My steps have held to your paths;  
my feet have not stumbled.*

## Psalm 17:1-5

David pleads with the covenant-keeping God, Yahweh, to hear his righteous plea, to listen to his cry, to hear his prayer. The threefold plea “strikes a note of urgency and the urgency of his vindication in the face of severe opposition.”<sup>1</sup> David’s prayer reflects the confidence promised to believers in Hebrews: “Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (Heb 4:16). The boldness of his prayer “is primarily a testimony to the faith of the covenant community” and anticipates the free access we have into God’s presence secured for all believers through our great High Priest Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup> David believed in the steadfast love of the Lord and depended upon the covenant God. “Though the psalm is written in the language of individuality, it does not contain the words of a lonely and bold pioneer of crisis; it contains rather the words of one sharing in the past and present experience of a community that had known God as deliverer.”<sup>3</sup>

David’s plea to be heard does not rest on a faulty premise of self-righteousness. It rests on the bedrock conviction that the righteousness formed and shaped in him is by the grace of Yahweh. Like Job before him, David had a true understanding of righteousness. His righteousness grew out of loving the Lord with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his strength (Deut 6:5). He was not righteous in exchange for favors from God. In David’s mind there was no quid-pro-quo arrangement. In the tradition of Job, David expressed a radical confidence in his understanding of integrity. God is God, and true righteousness is unchanging. He refused to let go of his God-centered conviction about righteousness. Psalm 17 is in the spirit of Job’s defense of righteousness: “I will never admit you are in the right; till I die, I will not deny my integrity. I will maintain my righteousness and never let go of it; my conscience will not reproach me as long as I live” (Job 27:5-6).

David’s profile of righteousness is worth emulating. He began by claiming that his prayer does not rise from deceitful lips and he validated that claim by turning to Yahweh, the only person who could know its validity: “Let my vindication come from you; may your eyes see what is right” (Ps 17:2). Self-righteousness makes “me” the judge and jury, but the psalmist will have none of that. Only the Lord can vindicate him. The Lord probes his heart. Only the Lord knows his motives. Alone with his thoughts at night, the psalmist examines himself to see if there is any wicked way in him and as he does this night after night, he knows the Lord is right there with him testing him. Sincerity welcomes scrutiny. Honesty is its own defense. Deception, not truth, requires a bodyguard of lies.

His righteousness has been tested by people who have tried to bribe him. Undoubtedly they have used a variety of strategies to win him over. They have appealed to his pride, questioned his loyalty, and enticed him with benefits. They have sought to intimidate and seduce. Yet at every turn he resisted and remained faithful to God’s word. The psalmist is not confident in himself, but in God. As one translation reads, “I’m not trying to get my way in the world’s way. I’m trying

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<sup>1</sup> Ross, Psalms, 420.

<sup>2</sup> Craigie, Psalms, 165.

<sup>3</sup> Craigie, Psalms, 165.

to get your way, your Word's way" (Ps 17:4 MSG).

The redemptive trajectory of David's plea points forward to 1 John where the apostle lays out the believer's Christ-centered righteousness. We are able to "to set our hearts at rest in his presence" knowing "that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything." Even as David believed in the steadfast love of Yahweh, the covenant God, we believe in Jesus Christ and "keep his commands and do what pleases him." John writes, "The one who keeps God's commands lives in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us" (1 John 3:20-24). David prays, "My steps have held to your paths; my feet have not stumbled" (Ps 17:5). He "walks in the tracks that have been made by Yhwh's feet and thus avoids wavering in this walk and wondering into other ways."<sup>4</sup>

### *An Urgent Plea for Action*

*I call on you, my God, for you will answer me;  
turn your ear to me and hear my prayer.  
Show me the wonders of your great love,  
you who save by your right hand those who  
take refuge in you from their foes.  
Keep me as the apple of your eye;  
hide me in the shadow of your wings  
from the wicked who are out to destroy me,  
from my mortal enemies who surround me.  
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 fierce lion crouching in cover.*

Psalm 17:6-12

David's earnest desire to be heard is followed by a plea for action. His well-chosen words come out of the history of redemption. David applies "four highly charged Hebrew words" to his situation: "wondrously show," "steadfast love," "savior," and "seek refuge."<sup>5</sup> The words are reminiscent of the Exodus and the song of Moses. David appeals to the God of Moses, "majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders," who "stretches out his right hand" and shows his "unfailing love," to "the people you have redeemed," and guides them to "your holy dwelling" (Exod 15:11-12). David identifies with the Israelites fleeing Egypt and he prays for an Exodus-like deliverance from his foes.

David used two metaphors to picture his relationship with Yahweh: "Keep me as the apple of your eye" (Deut 32:10; Zech 2:8), and "Hide me in the shadow of your wings" (Deut 32:22; Ps

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<sup>4</sup> Goldingay, Psalms, 240.

<sup>5</sup> Kidner, Psalms, 87.

36:7, 57:1, 61:4; Matt 23:37). “Apple” was an Old English idiom for the eye’s pupil and referred metaphorically to a person cherished above all others in the eye of the beholder. Our English word, “pupil” comes from the Latin “pūpilla,” meaning a little girl or a little doll. There are two meanings for “pupil,” a contractile aperture of the iris of the eye, and a young child in school. The literal meaning in Hebrew is “the little man” of the eye.<sup>6</sup> The metaphor implies two things about the relationship, intimacy and youth. To see our own tiny image in another’s eye requires us to peer into their eyes. It is the gaze of a child looking into the eyes of a parent. The psalmist plea is for the Lord to never let him – a child of God – out of his protective, loving sight.

Although the second metaphor, “hide me under the shadow of your wings,” may seem out of place it “rhymes” perfectly with the “apple of your eye” image because it conveys the same two relational elements: intimacy and youth. At the end of his ministry when the religious leaders were conspiring to bring him down, Jesus used this “under the shadow of your wings” metaphor. He railed against the teachers of the law and Pharisees for their hard-hearted hypocrisy in his final Temple sermon. His conclusion was a lament: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing” (Matt 23:37). The image of a mother hen gathering her chicks under her wings captures the plea of the psalmist for Yahweh’s loving and protective care.

David’s plea for God’s protective care is captured in two images and is immediately set in contrast with the wicked who are out to destroy him. The idiom he used to describe his foes is difficult to translate. It literally reads, “they have closed their fat.”<sup>7</sup> This has led some to speculate that the midriff (“fat”) suggests the location of the heart,<sup>8</sup> meaning that David’s enemies have “closed up their callous hearts” (NIV), or “they close their hearts to pity” (ESV). Peter Craigie suggests that Deuteronomy 32 may hold the key to interpretation because all three images, “the apple of the eye” (Deut 32:10), “protective wings” (Deut 32:11), and growing “fat” (Deut 32:15) are from the Song of Moses. The Deuteronomy text reads, “Jeshurun (another name for Israel) grew fat and kicked; filled with food, they became heavy and sleek. They abandoned the God who made them and rejected the Rock their Savior” (Deut 32:15). It appears that after the people of God had become fat and happy they rebelled against God and became indifferent to the real needs of others and content in their self-indulgent state. Echoes of the psalmist’s description of his foes may be found in the apostle Paul’s description of the enemies of the cross of Christ: “Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things” (Phil 3:18-19).

Like a coalition of hungry lions the wicked have tracked him down and “with eyes alert” they are crouched and ready to kill. This immediate and pressing danger leads to a third and final plea.

### *The Final Plea*

*Rise up, Lord, confront them, bring them down;*

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<sup>6</sup> Ross, Psalms, 425.

<sup>7</sup> Craigie, Psalms, 160.

<sup>8</sup> Goldingay, Psalms, 242.

*with your sword rescue me from the wicked.  
By your hand save me from such people, Lord,  
from those of this world whose reward is in this life.  
May what you have stored up for the wicked fill their bellies;  
may their children gorge themselves on it,  
and may there be leftovers for their little ones.  
As for me, I will be vindicated and will see your face;  
when I awake, I will be satisfied with seeing your likeness.*

Psalm 17:13-15

If there is a place for venting our outrage and anger against oppressors and evil doers, it is in prayer. “Hate needs to be prayed, not suppressed,” writes Eugene Peterson. “Hate is our emotional link with the spirituality of evil. . . .if it is not prayed we have lost an essential insight and energy in doing battle with evil.”<sup>9</sup> Note that the psalmist does not threaten the wicked on Yahweh’s behalf, as if he could speak for God. Instead, he prays. Nor does he lash out against Yahweh and threaten to turn from God if he does not act. Implicit in the psalmist’s appeal is his powerlessness to judge the wicked, vindicate the righteous, and put an end to evil. He does not say what he will do if God does not respond, because he is confident that the Lord will respond and execute righteous judgment and vindication. What he does not say may be nearly as important as what he does say.

The only way the wicked will be brought down is if the Lord rises up. The only way the righteous will be rescued is if the Lord acts. The psalmist uses three metaphors to describe the Lord’s action: rising up, wielding his sword, and raising his hand. Here at the end of the psalm the wicked are described in two simple ways. They live for this world alone and they only want what this world provides. The wicked and their children are driven by worldly appetites and they fill their bellies with everything the world has to offer. The wicked participate in their own destruction by indulging exclusively in worldly things. They “have fallen into the pit they have dug” (Ps 9:15). “Their feet are caught in the net they have hidden” (Ps 9:15). And God gives them up to their sinful desires (Rom 1:24). What Jesus said was true in David’s day and remains true in our day: “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt 6:21).

The sense of doom and gloom is broken with the psalmist’s “But as for me.” The final statement shifts from judgment to vindication, from face to face confrontation to face to face communion, and from death to resurrection. The psalm pivots sharply to a resounding note of hope, ending in harmony with the conclusion of Psalm 16, “You make known to me the path of life; and fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand” (Ps 16:11).

We are impressed by the psalmist’s resounding confidence in Yahweh’s salvation: “I will be vindicated; I will see your face; I will awake; I will be satisfied with seeing your likeness.” The psalmist’s focus at the end is not on his short-term rescue and relief, but on his resurrection. His expectation is everlasting life in the presence of God (Isa 26:19; Dan 12:2). The psalmist has used anthropomorphic imagery for God throughout Psalm 17: “may your eyes see what is right”

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<sup>9</sup>Peterson, Answering God, 99.

(v1); “what your *lips* have commanded” (v4); “turn your *ear* to me” (v6); “save by your right *hand*” (v7, 14); and “I will see your *face*” (v15). “If Yhwh has all these, it is logical enough to envisage Yhwh’s having a form,” and thus, writes Goldingay, “it is logical enough finally to ask for the involvement of Yhwh’s whole person . . .”<sup>10</sup> The language imagines what the heart longs for and what the intuitive grasp of salvation history anticipates. We are being led to expect God incarnate in Jesus Christ.

*“Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. All who have this hope purify themselves, just as he is pure.”* 1 John 3:2-3

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<sup>10</sup> Goldingay, Psalms, 245.