

*Listen to my words, Lord,
consider my lament.
Hear my cry for help,
my King and my God,
for to you I pray.
In the morning, Lord, hear my voice;
in the morning I lay my requests before you
and wait expectantly.*

Psalm 5:1-3

David is passionate about being heard by Yahweh. One can almost hear the tone of desperation in his voice. “Listen, God!” ought to be set off in bold letters. He needs God to pay attention to not only his well-chosen words, but his inarticulate groans and sighs. The psalmist is not like a corporate lawyer pleading a case for a business client. He’s more like a swimmer caught in rip current crying for help. He’s more like a mother with a critically ill child seeking answers from a doctor.

Episcopalians are familiar with the liturgical term Morning Prayer. It is used to describe an orderly and reverent worship service. But are we familiar with the psalmist’s passion to be heard by God? Religion as a rule is unfamiliar with this passion. For the most part we seem to have little to say to God. We are not very concerned about being heard by God. Prayer is observed as a ritual to be performed out of duty. But in Psalm 5 the need for prayer is entirely different. The psalmist means to impress upon us that everything is on the line. “The piling up of appeals strengthens the urgency of the petition.”¹

King David directs his cry for help to the Lord, my King and my God. This gives the prayer a firm foundation and puts his own kingship in its right perspective. “He accepts that he is a man under authority, not one who must struggle for his own ends by his own means.”² The king’s personal involvement is underscored by the repetition of “my” seven times: “my words,” “my sighs,” “my cry,” “my King,” “my God,” “my voice,” and the seventh one is implied, “my requests.” There is no confusion here. David is all in. We hear him pray and we know that he means business. My Dr. Robert Smith utters the expression, “My, my, my,” as a kind of exclamation mark in response to a meaningful truth or a moving story. As I hear David pray the first few verses of Psalm 5 I can hear Robert Smith saying, “My, My, My.”

In the Morning

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the well-known German pastor and martyr, was a strong advocate for morning meditation and prayer. He reasoned that since Jesus rose “very early in the morning” and “went off to a solitary place” to pray, so should we (Mark 1:35). Bonhoeffer insisted that our

¹ Ross, *The Psalms*, 246.

² Kidner, *The Psalms*, 58.

first thoughts should not be “our own plans and worries, not even for our zeal to accomplish our own work, but for God’s liberating grace, God’s sanctifying presence.”³ “Before our daily bread should be the daily Word. Only thus will the bread be received with thanksgiving. Before our daily work should be the morning prayer. Only thus will the work be done as the fulfillment of God’s command. The morning must yield an hour of quiet time for prayer and common devotion. That is certainly not wasted time. How else could we prepare ourselves to face the tasks, cares, and temptations of the day?”⁴ Bonhoeffer makes his case with Psalm 5: “Morning by morning, O Lord, you hear my voice; morning by morning I lay my requests before you and wait in expectation.” His almost lyrical description of the value of meeting with God in the morning deserves to be heard by all who seek to pray to the Lord.

“Each morning is a new beginning of our life. Each day is a finished whole. The present day marks the boundary of our cares and concerns (Mt 6:34; James 4:14). It is long enough to find God or to lose him, to keep faith or fall into disgrace. God created day and night for us so we need not wander without boundaries, but may be able to see every morning the goal of the evening ahead. Just as the ancient sun rises anew every day, so the eternal mercy of God is new every morning (Lam 3:23). Every morning God gives us the gift of comprehending anew his faithfulness of old; thus, in the midst of our life with God, we may daily begin a new life with him. . . . Before the heart unlocks itself for the world, God wants to open it for himself; before the ear takes in the countless voices of the day, it should hear in the early hours the voice of the Creator and Redeemer. God prepared the stillness of the first morning for himself. It should remain his.”⁵

Scholars have wondered how to interpret, “in the morning I lay *my requests* before you. . .” because the verb *to prepare* or *to lay* or *to present* has no direct object stated in the verse. The verb is used customarily in reference to offering sacrifices, specifically to laying wood on the altar for a sacrifice.⁶ The psalmist appears to be associating sacrificial offerings with prayer requests.

This relationship between sacrifice and prayer recalls the ancient example of Job. Following family gatherings, it was Job’s regular custom to offer sacrifices and presumably prayers on behalf of his family. “Early in the morning he would sacrifice a burnt offering for each of them, thinking, ‘Perhaps my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts’” (Job 1:5). Perhaps the apostle Paul drew a similar association between sacrifice and prayer. Immediately following his doxological prayer (11:33-36) he urges brothers and sisters, in Christ in view of God’s mercy, to offer their bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God (Rom 12:1). The psalmist links the material tangibility of sacrifices with his concrete and specific prayer requests. Prayer was just as real as the wood and the sacrifices laid on the altar. And just as they went up in fire and smoke he expected answers to his prayers. He has placed himself in the presence of God and he will wait expectantly. But not everyone has access to Yahweh, the one and only Holy God.

³ Bonhoeffer, *Meditating on the Word*, Ballantine Books, 1986 32.

⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Meditation on the Word*, 33.

⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Meditation on the Word*, 31-33.

⁶ Ross, *The Psalms*, 247. (See Lev 6:5; Num 28:4).

The Arrogant

*For you are not a God who is pleased with wickedness;
with you, evil people are not welcome.
The arrogant cannot stand in your presence.*

*You hate all who do wrong;
you destroy those who tell lies.
The bloodthirsty and deceitful
you, Lord, detest. Psalm 5:4-7*

We begin to see more clearly the danger that lies behind David's cry for help. He feels the pressing need for God's deliverance from the evil people who are out to destroy him. David makes his appeal on the basis of God's holiness and righteousness. Every facet of evil is described in relationship to God's judgment. God rejects the arrogant, hates the wrong-doer, destroys the liar, condemns the violent and detests the deceitful. It is these evil people that God hates who threaten David. They share a common enemy – an identifiable, definable, and definite enemy. Since Yahweh rules a moral universe it is imperative that David discern the difference between good and evil.

The ethos of our day challenges the notion of right and wrong. Truth or falsehood is relative to the individual. Everyone does what is right in their own eyes. We are free to do as we please as with the caveat that we not harm anyone. Modernity rejects the notion of exclusive truth and refuses to distinguish between good and evil. In the eyes of the world, good becomes evil and evil becomes good. Arrogance, it is claimed, belongs to those who distinguish between right and wrong and confess that God has revealed the way, the truth and the life. Even modern Christendom has taken Jesus' warning against judging others, "Do not judge, or you too will be judged," and turns it against the truth, by rejecting God's law. "What we suffer from today," G. K. Chesterton wrote, "is humility in the wrong place."

A man was meant to be doubtful about himself, but undoubting about the truth; this has been exactly reversed. Nowadays the part of a man that a man does assert is exactly the part he ought not to assert – himself. The part he doubts is exactly the part he ought not to doubt – the Divine Reason.⁷

Jesus concluded the Sermon on the Mount with an admonition to enter the narrow gate, "for wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it" (Mt 7:13). This narrow gate does not imply that the way of life designed by God is narrow-minded. The followers of Jesus have chosen to follow the path of revelation instead of the highway of relativism. On the road that leads to destruction there is room for every kind of ideology, system, loyalty, and belief, but there is only room for truth on the way that leads to life.

The Gospel

⁷ G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: Image, 1959), 31.

*But I, by your great love, can come into your house;
in reverence I bow down toward your holy temple.
Lead me, Lord in your righteousness because of my enemies –
make your way straight for me. Psalm 5:7-8*

David's boldness in naming evil and identifying the enemy is not based on his own righteousness. He makes no attempt here to prove his moral superiority, but depends completely on the steadfast love of the Lord for acceptance. "But as for me" forms a striking contrast. "He has by faith entered into covenant with the Lord, and because of the Lord's loyal love for his people, he has access into the sanctuary ('your house' // 'your temple,' where evil-doers cannot stand)."⁸

The apostle Paul may have had Psalm 5 in mind when he wrote to the church at Ephesus. Having described the human condition – "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of the world . . . gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts" – he quickly turns to the powerful, positive message of the gospel. His emphasis on God's love is emphatic: "But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions" (Eph 2:4-5). The intervention of God's grace is "set in contrast to the bankruptcy and doom of a humanity left to itself, left to what it is 'by nature.'"⁹

This bold transition from being dead in our transgressions to being alive in Christ is not based on anything we have done. Neither Psalm 5 nor Ephesians 2 offers any method or formula for obtaining God's great love. There is no step-by-step process for acquiring this relationship. Our action is implied, and even then it is passive. Repentance for sin is assumed. Belief in the power of God's redemption is understood and accepted. Only God's action is stated. All attention is given "to the special nature of God's saving action as one of gratuitous generosity to an undeserving sinful humanity."¹⁰ Our role is passive. We are receptive to the gift. Grace and mercy are not something we can earn or engineer. No matter what the story of our acceptance of God's grace may be it was never meant to eclipse the wonder of God's grace. All grounds for boasting are removed. We hear echoes in Ephesians 2 of Jeremiah 9:23-24: "Let not the wise boast of their wisdom or the strong boast of their strength or the rich boast of their riches, but let those who boast boast about this: that they understand and know me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth and in these I delight." In contrast to the vocabulary of death and depravity (*transgressions, sins, ruler of the kingdom of the air, disobedience, the cravings of our sinful nature, and wrath*), Paul stacks up the words of the gospel: *mercy, love, grace, kindness, and gift*. Each word underscores the undeserved nature of this gift.

God's gracious acceptance of David frees him up to worship. He can come into God's presence and be led in the Lord's righteousness. Some scholars have questioned David's authorship of

⁸ Ross, *The Psalms*, 250

⁹ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 104.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 103.

Psalm 5 because the author refers to the Lord's "house" and "holy temple," even though the temple was not built until the time of Solomon. But this overly literal implication is overdrawn because "house" and "temple" were used to describe the tabernacle at Shiloh (Josh 6:24; 1 Sam 1:9; 3:3; 2 Sam 12:20). David describes his experience of the real presence of Yahweh analogically by referring to concrete physical structures.

Once again, the apostle Paul seems to draw on Psalm 5 as he elaborates on the significance of the household of faith. Although not a single word about church facilities can be found in the New Testament, the apostles enjoyed elaborating on the images and metaphors that describe the community of God's people. Early Christians had a sense of place, a feeling of being at home, not in a facility but in a family of shared faithfulness to the Word of God. There was no outward temple or tall steeple to symbolize their place, but as they met together there was a powerful presence of the risen Lord Jesus. The early Christians knew that "the Most High does not live in houses made by men" (Acts 7:48).

All the metaphors in Ephesians 2 describe the real presence of Christ in the household of faith. The foundation is made up of people—the apostles and the prophets. The chief cornerstone is Christ Jesus. The "holy temple in the Lord" is the dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. Paul used this same language with the believers at Corinth, when he said, "Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?" (1 Corinthians 6:19). With the literary care of a poet, Paul orchestrated a word play on the Greek word for "house" (**οἶκος**). In Christ we are no longer *aliens* (**ἄρροικοι**), but members of God's *household* (**οἰκεῖοι**), *built on* (**ἐποικοδομηθέντες**) a sure foundation, and the *building* (**οἰκοδομή**) is *built together* (**συνοικοδομεῖσθε**) into a *dwelling place* (**κατοικητήριον**) of God.¹¹

Paul's intentional selection of the household of faith language underscores the relational nature of the church and the real presence of Christ. The "house" built by God *of people* is no less material, temporal, spatial, and concrete, than if it had been built with stone and steel. "The accent of Ephesians 2 lies not upon intangibility but upon the fact that the church of God is made of people, rather than of bricks."¹² The good news is proclaimed and lived through the local church, through the community, rather than through the individual. In a world of hostility the church is an alternative society, a visible sign of the kingdom.

David prays, "Lead me, Lord, in your righteousness because of my enemies – make your way straight before me" (Ps 5:8). This line, too, may have been in the apostle Paul's mind as he elaborated on the meaning of salvation to the church at Ephesus. Having insisted that all self-justifying religious effort is in vain, Paul stresses that "we are God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Eph 2:10). Salvation by grace through faith destroys boasting but produces the fruit of salvation. The gift of salvation leads to the fruit of the Spirit. It is not that faith is rooted in grace and works are rooted in effort. Both faith and works find their source in God's grace. The action of God is complete. God "made us alive in Christ," "raised us up with Christ," and "created [us] in Christ Jesus to do

¹¹ Ibid., 136.

¹² M. Barth, 320.

good works.” This is why Paul said that these good works have been prepared in advance for us to do. “So good works are not the source but the goal of the new relationship between humanity and God. Salvation is not *by works* but *for works*.”¹³

Guilty!

*Not a word from their mouth can be trusted;
their heart is filled with malice.
Their throat is an open grave;
with their tongues they tell lies.
Declare them guilty, O God!
Let their intrigues be their downfall.
Banish them for their many sins,
for they have rebelled against you. Psalm 5:9-10*

Although the occasion of Psalm 5 may be debated there can be little doubt that Absalom’s deceit, Ahithophel betrayal, and Shimei’s curses illustrate the nature and perversity of the evil described in Psalm 5. The particular aspect of evil that is emphasized focuses on speech – lying, deceptive, rebellious speech. David’s prayer for judgment is not vindictive but necessary, because their rebellion is not against him alone but against God. “He does not ask for thunderbolts from heaven; he asks only that their evil might reverberate upon themselves, that they might be tripped up in their own devious schemes, and thus become their own victims.”¹⁴ As it happened, God gave them up to their own evil schemes. Absalom was murdered and Ahithophel committed suicide. Thankfully, Shimei repented and turned to David for forgiveness (2 Sam 19:20). David appears to have entertained this hope for forgiveness and reconciliation with his son Absalom (2 Sam 18:33).

Psalm 5 may be implicit in the apostle Paul’s description of being dead in our transgressions and sins (Eph 2:1), but he quotes Psalm 5:9 explicitly when he describes the wicked in Romans 3:13, “Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit.” Paul used this text along with Psalm 14:1-3; 140:3; 10:7; Isa 59:7; and Psalm 36:1 to make the case that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23). Thus, we find ourselves included in this description of depravity. Like Absalom and Ahithophel we are on the wrong side. We are like them in their lying, deceptive, and treacherous rebellion against God. Our throats are like open graves and the stench is repulsive. Our tongues practice deceit. The apostle Paul applied Psalm 5 to humanity as a whole and to each of us personally. The enemies of the psalmist symbolize all persons without God.¹⁵ But like David we are welcomed by the steadfast love of the Lord. It is true, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” and it also true, as Paul emphasized, “all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (Rom 3:23-24).

Shielded By God

¹³ Lincoln, Ephesians, 114.

¹⁴ Craigie, The Psalms, 88.

¹⁵ Craigie, The Psalms, 89.

*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.
Surely, Lord, you bless the righteous;
you surround them with your favor as with a shield.* Psalm 5:11-12

Psalms 3-5 provide a three-day sequence of morning, evening, and morning psalms. David's descent into the Kidron Valley and his climb up the Mount Olives weeping as he went with his head covered and walking barefoot forms a picture of the experience of Jesus, the Son of David, on the night he was betrayed and tried (2 Sam 15:30). What Absalom and his fellow conspirators did to David corresponds to what the religious and political leaders did to Jesus. David's passion narrative points forward to Christ's passion and helps shape our expectations of the life of discipleship. David's example inspires our courage in the face of opposition and instructs us in how to defend God's truth. Praying the psalms helps transform the trials of life into the trials of faith for the sake of the gospel.

This sequence of psalms (Pss 3-5) begins with David acknowledging that the Lord is his *shield* (Ps 3:3) and ends on a similar strong note of confidence and praise: "Surely, Lord, you bless the righteous; you surround them with your favor as with a *shield*" (Ps 5:12).¹⁶ The Lord's *blessing* (Ps 3:8; 5:12) also serves as an *inclusio* knitting the three psalms together. These psalms mentor believers in resilience and faithfulness. Lament quickly shifts to confidence. David's conclusion comforts the followers of Christ. We are invited to take refuge in Christ to be glad, to sing for joy and to rejoice, because we are surrounded by the Lord's redemptive favor and everlasting protection.

In his hymn *Morning*, Charles Wesley calls out, "*Sun of Righteousness, arise! Triumph over the shades of night.*" He admits in the second stanza, "*Dark and cheerless is the morn unaccompanied by thee.*" Resolution comes in the third stanza in answer to his plea, "*Visit then this soul of mine! / Pierce the gloom of sin and grief! / Fill me, radiancy divine; / scatter all my unbelief; / more and more thyself display, / shining to the perfect day.*"¹⁷

¹⁶ The psalmist references two different kinds of shields. The *māgēn* is a small light weight shield that is carried by the infantry for protection in hand to hand combat (Ps 3:3). The *sinna* is a larger shield (Ps 5:12) carried by an armor barrier for greater protection (See Waltke and Houston, *The Psalms*, 201).

¹⁷ Charles Wesley (1707-1788), "Morning", in *The Hymnal* 1982. New York: The Episcopal Church. 1985.