

By placing this David psalm in the middle of the Korah psalms the editors remind us of how important Books I and II of the psalter are for spiritual formation. This psalm is a perfect contradiction to the “I can do it myself” attitude and an antidote to the self-pity that buckles under pressure. David is passionately dependent upon the Lord who is the subject of all his thoughts, pleas, prayers, and praise.¹

Every line reminds us that the Lord is the Lord. The psalmist identifies the Lord four times by the name Yahweh which stands for the unique character of the covenant keeping God who revealed himself by name to Moses (Ps 86:1, 6, 11, 17; see Exod 6:3). He uses Elohim five times (Ps 86:2, 10, 12, 14, 15). This is a more general term for God that is derived from a plural of majesty but used in the singular for the transcendent God of creation. However, the name for God that the psalmist weaves throughout is Adonai which means Master or Sovereign. It is translated “Lord” seven times in Psalm 86 (Ps.86:3,4,5,8,9,12,15) and it is used as a reminder of the supplicant’s submission and subservience to the Lord.

What is also striking about this psalm is the way it tracks the spirituality of Jesus in his humility and trust before the Father. We can picture Jesus praying Psalm 86 as a psalm that shaped his self-understanding and his devotion to the Father’s will. As we move through the psalm we can imagine hearing Jesus pray every line. It was a perfect prayer when he was alone with the Father or in the company of the disciples when he led them in prayer. Some lines, such as, “I will glorify your name forever,” were fulfilled better by Jesus than anyone else and remind us of Jesus’ prayer of consecration (John 17:1-26). Psalm 86 also takes into account the chronic opposition that Jesus faced from the religious leaders that were determined to kill him. And David’s evident lack of self-pity and his determination to remain resilient in spite of his enemies fits perfectly with Jesus’ calm confidence before his sworn enemies.

We pray this Psalm today in the light of our confession that Jesus is Lord. We declare with our mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and we believe in our hearts that God raised him from the dead (Rom 10:9). This fundamental reality, Jesus is Lord, shapes the understanding of this psalm for each and every person that follows the risen Lord Jesus today. We cannot distance ourselves from the passion of the psalmist for we have even more reason to pray this psalm than King David did.

¹ Ross, *Psalms*, 778. Ross: “A number of commentators have rated this psalm somewhat second class because of its lack of originality. It seems to use standard expressions and motifs from earlier psalms.” Wilcock, *Psalms* 73-150, 56-57. Wilcock: “Nearly the whole of this one [Ps 86] turns out to be a mosaic of fragments pierced together from others [Psalms], and from related Old Testament scriptures.” Wilcock refers to “recycled” passages and the fabric of Psalm 86 being a “patchwork,” adding, “But David himself would have found that it fitted him well enough, and what he would own, we ought not to call common.” Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol.2, 619. Goldingay: “Although practically every phrase in the psalm can be linked with some verse in the Psalms, it would be misleading to list these in such a way as to suggest that the psalmist was directly taking phrases from those sources. Its relationship with the other psalms is more like that of the Revelation of John with the Old Testament, where hardly a verse would survive without the scriptural phraseology that lies behind it, but the book comes into being because the visionary is soaked in the Scriptures rather than because he is directly sampling them at every point.”

Hear Me Out

*Hear me, Lord (Yahweh), and answer me,
for I am poor and needy.
Guard my life, for I am faithful to you;
save your servant who trusts in you.
You are my God; have mercy on me, Lord (Adonai),
for I call to you all day long.
Bring joy to your servant, Lord (Adonai),
for I put my trust in you.
You, Lord (Adonai), are forgiving and good,
abounding in love to all who call to you.
Hear my prayer, Lord (Yahweh);
listen to my cry for mercy.
When I am in distress, I call to you,
because you answer me.*

Psalm 86:1-7

The devotional passion expressed at the outset of this psalm ought to move all who follow Christ to pray in a similar way. To pray the way David prayed is to sweep aside the spiritual indifference and apathy that threatens to hinder our communion with God. We lead such busy and distracted lives that we have precious little in-person time with God. Instead of taking the circumstances and situations of our lives to the Lord for his help, we develop self-help coping strategies that are bound to prove inadequate. David's passion for God may not be popular but it is timely. Psalm 86 serves as a personal and communal guide to authentic dependence upon the Lord. First, we have to care that God hears us and then we have to pray. But we have this assurance, "the Spirit helps us in weakness" (Rom 8:26).

The psalmist begins with a character description that correlates well with Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Beatitude-based believers understand the freedom to declare, "for I am poor and needy," while at the same time humbly testifying, "I am faithful to you," and "I put my trust in you." There is no contradiction between being needy and being faithful. By the grace of God we can acknowledge our complete dependence on the Lord and our need for his revelation ("answer me"), his protection ("guard my life"), his mercy ("have mercy on me"), and his joy ("Bring joy to your servant").

The psalmist solicits God's response by building his case with solid reasons. This first section begins and ends with the psalmist entreating Yahweh to listen (Ps 86:1, 6). He offers five compelling personal reasons. God will hear him because, "I am poor and needy," "I am faithful to you," "I call to you all day long," "I put my trust in you." and "I call to you, because you answer me." However, every one of these reasons can be traced back to the character of God who is "forgiving and good" (86:5), "abounding in love" (86:5), and responsive to distress (86:7). The psalmist continues to sing God's praises. The Lord will respond because of his great and marvelous deeds (86:10), his great love toward him and his deliverance from death (86:13), and

because the Lord is “compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love and faithfulness” (86:15). The psalmist’s appeal is predicated on the prior action of God’s mercy, “for you, Lord (Yahweh), have helped me and comforted me” (Ps 86:17).

Only You Lord

*Among the gods there is none like you, Lord (Adonai);
no deeds can compare with yours.
All the nations you have made
will come and worship before you, Lord (Adonai);
they will bring glory to your name.
For you are great and do marvelous deeds;
you alone are God.
Teach me your way, Lord (Yahweh),
that I may rely on your faithfulness;
give me an undivided heart,
that I may fear your name.
I will praise you, Lord (Adonai) my God, with all my heart;
I will glorify your name forever.
For great is your love toward me;
you have delivered me from the depths,
from the realm of the dead.*

Psalm 86:8-13

The appeal of the psalmist to be heard by God leads to an eruption of praise. He takes on the false gods of pagan superstition and he prophesies that all the nations will worship the Lord. Compared to the gods, David declares emphatically there is no contest – the Lord wins. “There is none like you, no deeds compare with yours” (Ps 86:8). Calvin comments that the psalmist has gathered courage and new strength for prayer. He commends the psalmist for holding in “contempt and derision all the false gods in whom the heathen world imagined some help was to be found.”² The gods are a lost cause, but the nations are not. The psalmist credits the Lord with their existence and says that one day all the nations will recognize and worship the Lord. David’s doxology is bold on two fronts – the religious and the political. The Lord rules over all. David declares, “You alone are God” (Ps 86:10). There is no division in the psalmist’s mind between personal devotion and social engagement. There is a largeness to David’s world and the Lord is at the center. He would agree with David Wells, “The self is a canvas too narrow, too cramped, to contain the largeness of Christian truth.”³

David has yet to share with the Lord the besetting problem that lies behind his personal lament and his deep need to be heard. That will come in the final section (Ps 86:14-17), but he has prioritized his prayer in a beautiful way. Regardless of the vortex of threatening circumstances he prays for wisdom. “Teach me your way, Lord, that I may rely on your faithfulness” (Ps 86:11).

² Calvin, *Psalms*, 384.

³ Wells, *No Place For Truth*, 183.

The psalmist knows that to lead he must be led. He seeks to be mastered by the Master. When Augustine came to this verse in his sermon on this psalm he immediately exclaimed, “Your way, Your truth, Your life is Christ. Therefore the Body [of Christ] belongs to Him, and Body is of Him.” Then he quotes Jesus saying, “I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life” (John 14:6), adding, “It is one thing to lead to the way, another to guide in the way.” Believers, Augustine insists, “must be guided by Him in the way itself, lest they fall.”⁴

This desire for wisdom goes beyond cognition and schooling. He longs of the understanding and insight to remain faithful to the Lord’s way even in stressful circumstances. He wants his intuition and visceral reaction to life’s pressing problems to be governed and guided by the will of God. This wisdom is not primarily a matter of doctrine and discursive knowledge, although these play a vital role and should not be diminished. The focus of the psalmist is not so much on person-as-thinker or person-as-believer, as it is on person-as-lover.⁵ Augustine assumes that the follower of Jesus Christ is an embodied agent who needs some precious hand-holding as she makes her way. He asks, How does the Lord lead us? To which he answers, “By always admonishing, always giving you His hand.”⁶

His prayer for wisdom, “Teach me your way, Lord,” moves immediately to his plea, “Give me an undivided heart that I may fear your name” (Ps 86:11). We see how closely the apostle’s prayer echoes the psalmist’s concerns when Paul prays for the believers at Philippi: “May your love abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God” (Phil 1:9-11).

The psalmist prayed, “give me an undivided heart,” because the heart symbolizes who we are in the depth of our being, both positively and negatively. We are commanded to love the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul and with all our strength (Deuteronomy 6:5). Yet we are told by the prophet Jeremiah that “the heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure” (Jeremiah 17:9). Jesus said, “For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander” (Matthew 15:19; see Luke 6:45). Yet it is with the heart that we believe and are justified, and it is with the mouth that we confess and are saved (Romans 10:10). David had a heart after God’s own heart (Acts 13:22) and the hardhearted Israelites were said to have a “heart of stone” (Ezekiel 36:26). Real wisdom is trusting in the Lord with all your heart and leaning not on your own understanding (Proverbs 3:5). Throughout the Old Testament the people of God are exhorted to serve the Lord with all their heart and soul (Deuteronomy 10:12; Joshua 22:5). True communication means speaking the truth from the heart (Psalm 15:2), because the message has been taken to heart (Revelation 1:3), even as true counsel instructs the heart (Psalm 16:7). True repentance is “a broken and contrite heart” (Psalm 51:17; see Joel 2:13; Romans 2:29). Real maturity is characterized by having “integrity of heart” (Psalm 70:72), “an undivided heart” (Psalm 86:11), “an upright heart” (Psalm 119:7), a “singleness of heart” (Jeremiah 32:39), a humble heart (Matthew 11:29), a “heart of wisdom”

⁴ Augustine, Psalms 86, sec.14, 415.

⁵ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 62.

⁶ Augustine, Psalms 86, sec. 14, 415.

(Psalm 90:12), and a “sincere heart in full assurance of faith” (Hebrews 10:22).

Only the Lord really knows the heart. The psalmist prays, “May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer” (Psalm 19:14). “Test me, O Lord, and try me,” David prayed, “examine my heart and my mind; for your love is ever before me, and I walk continually in your truth” (Psalm 26:2-3). What we are like outwardly may be a charade. The real issue is a person’s heart, which has a way of showing its true colors under the pressure of time and circumstance. As the psalmist prayed, “Surely you desire truth in the inner self; you teach wisdom in the inmost place” (Psalm 51:6).⁷

The psalmist sees the undivided heart as a gift that naturally leads to praise. With such a gift we cannot help but praise God with all our heart and glorify his name. When we have begun to grasp the Lord’s great love for us, how can we keep from praising? “I had never noticed that all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise,” wrote C. S. Lewis. “The world rings with praise.” We praise spontaneously what we like – what we love. We do not have to be badgered or lectured in how to praise. Lewis writes, “I had not noticed how the humblest, and at the same time the most balanced and capacious minds, praised most, while the cranks, misfits and malcontents praised least.”⁸

The proof of the Lord’s great love for David is found in his deliverance from death. “You have delivered me from the depths, from the realm of the dead” (Ps 86:13). The word that David uses for death is *she’ol* (Ps 6:5) which refers “to the underworld or the realm of the dead.”⁹ The psalmist seems to imply that he is grateful for “a future deliverance from the power of death.”¹⁰ It was not just that his life had been spared physically but that he was saved “from a still deeper abyss of death.”¹¹ This kind of death is referred to in the Book of Revelation as “the second death” (Rev 2:11; 20:14) and those whose name are written in the Lamb’s Book of Life need not fear the second death. The exuberance of the psalmist is shared by the New Testament believer who can say with Paul, “For me to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Phil 1:21). I remember complaining about my critics to a fellow believer. After patiently hearing me out, he simply said, “If you have been crucified with Christ, what can anybody really do to you?” (see Galatians 2:20).

Turn to Me

*Arrogant foes are attacking me, O God;
ruthless people are trying to kill me –
they have no regard for you.
But you, Lord (Adonai), are a compassionate and gracious God,
slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.
Turn to me and have mercy on me;*

⁷ Webster, Soundtrack of the Soul, 73-74.

⁸ C. S. Lewis, Reflections on the Psalms, New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich. 1958. 93-94.

⁹ Ross, Psalms, 784.

¹⁰ Kidner, Psalms, vol.2. 313.

¹¹ Calvin, Psalms, 390.

*show your strength in behalf of your servant;
save me, because I serve you
just as my mother did.
Give me a sign of your goodness,
that my enemies may see it and be put to shame,
for you, Lord (Yahweh), have helped me and comforted me.*
Psalm 86:14-17

Finally, we get to the presenting problem, but everything that has been said is fundamental rather than preliminary to the supplicant's spiritual formation. David's description of "arrogant foes" and the "ruthless people" who are out to kill him remind us of Psalms 3-7 in Book I. These early psalms describe the Absalom conspiracy and the rebellious reaction of Saul's ancestors from the tribe of Benjamin (2 Samuel 13-20). These psalms including Psalm 86 must have resonated with Jesus who faced the scorn and ridicule of the religious leaders who conspired against him and plotted his death. The Psalms gave Jesus words to pray when confronted by "arrogant foes" and "ruthless people." And they give us words to pray when confronted by malicious enemies or simply bothersome and obnoxious competitors.

By the time we get to this point in the psalm, we sense that David has almost lost interest in his enemies. They are real enough and he is under serious threat, but having named their action he quickly turns to the Lord. We picture Jesus praying this way about his enemies. Instead of elaborating on how bad his enemies were, Jesus, like David, focused on how good God is. David quoted from the Lord's word to Moses, "But you, Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in love and faithfulness" (Ps 86:15; Exod 34:6). The issue for us is not how bad the world is, but how good God is and how good God has called and empowered us to be.

Instead of praying for the defeat of his enemies, David prays for a sign of the Lord's goodness so as to shame them into true recognition and submission to God. He wants them to come to their senses, like the prodigal son who hit bottom before acknowledging the love of his father (Luke 15:11-31). David asks the Lord for evidence of his mercy and strength. His plea is endearing, "Save me, because I serve you just as my mother did" (Ps 86:16). His poignant bottom line underscores the absolute sufficiency he has found in the Lord: "for you, Lord, have helped me and comforted me" (Ps 86:17).