

“Lessons In Prayer”

6 September 2020 - Led by Rev. Sam Mawhinney

Welcome & Call To Worship:

Hymn of Preparation: IPH 93 What A Faithful God

Prayers of Adoration & Confession: Sam Mawhinney

Reading: Psalm 5

Sermon:

I find it easier to prepare and preach than I do to pray. Prayer is not easy. We need help and the Psalms are a help. These prayers which have become songs cover the whole range of human experience and emotions. Many ministers have been preaching the Psalms in these uncertain and difficult times and, like ourselves, have found them extremely helpful as we deal with the restrictions placed upon us because of COVID-19.

Though we might not find it easy to pray, for the Christian prayer is a natural inclination and we desire to learn and be better at it. When the disciples heard Jesus pray, something about what they heard and saw attracted them and they asked him, “Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1). Psalm 5 is a model prayer and it has great lessons to teach us.

I. Prayer (v.1-3)

Firstly, we note that Psalm 5 is written by David. He is the King of Israel, God’s anointed, and therefore called a son of God. Yet he is often in trouble for various reasons, including his own sin and its consequences, and the opposition of those opposed to him as God’s king and anointed one. David’s prayer has become a song, sung by the people of God, given to the director of worship, and scored for flutes. It is worship and it is instructive.

- A. **Speaking:** “give ear to my words”, “you hear my voice”. We speak to God “for to You I pray”. None of this is difficult to understand but it is profound. We speak to God and it is wonderfully personal. David uses the possessive pronoun “my” seven times in these verses. These are his words; they are personal, and they are spoken to his God. When we close our eyes to pray, we speak to God, and for most of us I suspect, we do not fully appreciate how wonderful this is. He is the expert on every subject, the authority over every situation, your Father in Heaven who cares and has your back. Prayer is about speaking to God!

Sometimes, words don’t come easily. We struggle to speak for a whole host of reasons: hurt, grief, confusion, exasperation, disappointments. All we can do is groan, or say a jumble of words that make little sense and lead nowhere. What David says is helpful and encouraging: “consider my sighing”, make sense of it, understand it. Dale Ralph Davis calls these spoken words and broken words. The New Testament confirms this idea in Romans 8, attributing our help to the Holy Spirit. *“The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express”* (v.26). Consider my sighing.

I watched a TV interview of a young woman with special needs who spoke bravely on camera with her mother beside her. Her words were not always easy to understand for me, but her mother knew exactly what she was saying. God is a heavenly Father to David, and He understands everything he tries to communicate as he asks for help: "Listen to my cry for help".

This was the most incredible privilege for David, and through Jesus, David's greater Son, the LORD's Anointed, we have access to God through faith. And when we pray in Jesus' name we are assured our words and sighs are heard by our King and God. There is no greater privilege.

- B. **Morning:** the context here is probably the time of *preparation* of the morning sacrifice, hidden in the language of v3, but translated by the idea of preparation of requests. The direction of travel here is towards thinking and preparation. Many people say they pray, which is good, but what do you pray about? Family, safety, blessings? Are your words always the same? Does it ever change? *In the morning I lay my requests before you.* Understanding that we come to our King and God each morning means we seriously consider what we say, come prepared, taking time. Personal but ordered, thought through and thorough!

Here are some ideas to help us come with prepared and informed prayers: a book of prayers (like *The Valley of Vision*), the series *5 Things To Pray For...*, a prayer diary, prayer letters, newspapers, Operation World, etc.

- C. **Expectation:** "And wait in expectation." I recently read through my own prayer diary which could be so much better, but it was encouraging to see things I had prayed for having been answered and resolved. We are to expect an answer when you have been heard, when the person cares about you and can say yes or no. Perhaps the hardest part is then waiting, yet the waiting is not inactive or forgetful and negligent. No, we are alert around the situation, waiting to see what God will do. So, you pray about work, any aspect of it and you then approach God with an expectation that you will see Him work and when He does you rejoice. "*Be alert and always keep on praying*" (Ephesians 6:18).

II. Knowing God (v.4-6)

Dale Ralph Davis says, "we do not pray to a bland blob!" Reading this description of God is sobering for us who like our God to be meek, gentle, and inoffensive. But David does not, obviously, believe in such a God. David's God hates people who are evil and arrogant, He destroys liars and He abhors (that is an extremely strong word) violence and murder. I thought of C.S. Lewis' description of Aslan, the lion of Narnia (who is a picture of God/Jesus): "he is not a tame lion." When he roars, people cower and fear.

It is this knowledge of the character of God which fills our prayers with praise, informs prayer and gives it strength (see v.10-11). Because God hates evil, David has permission and confidence to pray that those who are evil would be removed, as it would be in line with God's will. David is telling God what He is like; he starts with God. Here the context is most likely related to his struggle with the nasty, lying nonsense being poured out against him and he knows God well enough to say, "God, You hate it and You will judge it." Doing this puts everything in perspective. Personally it hurts, it makes life difficult for David and you know he

doesn't like it. However God, my God, hates it. That changes everything for David, and you begin to see his confidence grow.

I found it helpful to do this, this week. I started to think about God as Creator in my prayers and it was fascinating to see how my mood shifted. I thought of Jesus in the boat in our opening prayer, and it lifts us to consider God in helpful ways as we face uncertainty and metaphorical storms in life.

Start your prayers with some aspect of God and His character, perhaps one of the aspects in this description from the Belgic Confession Article 1: *"We believe with the heart and confess with the mouth that there is only one God, who is a simple and spiritual being; he is eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, immutable, infinite, almighty, perfectly wise, just, good and the overflowing fountain of all good."*

III. Approach through grace in reverence and make your request (v7-8)

This is the heart of the psalm. David is aware that he is not guiltless, but requires the mercy of God to enter His presence. This holy and just God cannot bear sin, and so we approach God only by grace and having received grace, we bow in reverence. For David, he approached God in the tabernacle (a portable holy temple) and through the offering of animal sacrifice which was prepared each morning and evening. We approach through the holy temple which is Jesus and He is our mediator. There is a seriousness about our approach to God, wonder, humility, and reverence. And that is what prayer is.

The request is spoken out only now in v.8 and he asks that God would lead him, sort out a way ahead that is right. The reality of life is that we often do not know the way ahead. We are faced with overwhelming and devastating news, we cannot sort out a loved one or change their heart, we cannot make a job appear, or get married, there are enemies in the sense of people and circumstances arranged against me. And so we pray, *"lead me, LORD, in Your righteousness . . . make straight Your way before me."* In the messiness of life, this is a great prayer.

IV. Confidence and joy in prayer (v.9-12)

A. A request against God's enemies (v.9-10)

David is obviously addressing his enemies, because of the destructive, deceitful words they speak. But he is confident before God to speak of their sin and then he is confident to let God deal with them. That confidence arises not in his own righteousness but in the character of God (v.10). He is not vindictive; he prays that they would fall by their own schemes. He also knows that without the grace of God, he would also be guilty and deceived. Paul, in Romans 3, uses this verse to declare that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (v.23). He is concerned not about himself, but about God, His glory and reputation: *"for they have rebelled against You."*

Yet, there is a strong reality here that unless we deal with evil, we cannot flourish. Like the story of the escaped Burmese Python (*see sermon on Psalm 3*), we only sleep in our beds when we know the snake has been captured. Ultimately, that is fully realised when Jesus comes back again. Such prayer is necessary, and must be undertaken seriously, but it cannot be prayed unless we understand v.7. We are the recipients of God's mercy and we must long for that in people. However, when evil is

persistent and dishonours God, then we, in line with the character of God, may pray for God's vindication in salvation and judgment.

B. A request for God's people (v.11-12)

He prays for joy: David finds a safe place in God and he asks that all who do so will be glad and ever sing for joy. These folks love the name of God, His character, and they rejoice in knowing God. David equates joy with knowledge of God.

He prays for protection: *"spread Your protection"*, the idea of the wings of a mother bird protecting her chicks: *"He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart"* (Psalm 91:4).

Jesus wept over the city of Jerusalem and said, "I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing" (Luke 13:34). Could it be the blanket of protection and covenant love, demonstrated in the story Boaz and Ruth?

This protection is dependent entirely upon the favour, grace, mercy of God's covenant love for His child, the wrap-around reality of the shield of God's presence. "For surely You bless the righteous." We are only righteous in Christ.

Dale Ralph Davis observes, *"David ends his prayer with the confidence that nothing can finally hurt the righteous, for Yahweh's favour will always surround him."*

Now, we respond by committing ourselves to prayer. Andrew Murray, the son of a Scottish Presbyterian who ministered in South Africa in the late 19th century, wrote: *"Each time, before you intercede, be quiet first, and worship God in His glory. Think of what He can do, and how He delights to hear the prayers of His redeemed people. Think of your place and privilege in Christ and expect great things!"*

Hymn of Reflection: MP 914 Only By Grace

Prayers for Others: Ethan Boyd

Closing Praise: IPH 624 Restore, O Lord

Announcements

Benediction: And now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all, now, and for evermore. Amen.