

Psalm 17

Psalm 17 is a prayer for vindication. *Vindication* means that a judge declares that the cause that many other people oppose is actually the true and right cause. *Vindication* means that, whereas all the world and all the enemies were speaking against the psalmist and saying that his cause was wicked and ought to be overthrown, God would say, “No, the cause of the psalmist is the right cause. It is the true cause. It is my cause,” so that the authority, who has the right to speak with regard to different causes, would vindicate the psalmist by declaring that his cause is right in the world. That vindication is what the psalmist is praying for in Psalm 17.

You can see from the beginning of the psalm that that is his prayer. “Hear the right, O LORD” (v. 1). Those words “the right” could be translated as *justice* or *righteousness*. “Hear justice, O Lord. Hear righteousness, O Lord. Hear what is true.” “Attend unto my cry, give ear unto my prayer, that goeth not out of feigned lips” (v. 1). There the psalmist says about this prayer, “I am speaking truth. My lips are pure. My lips have not spoken lies.” A feigned lip is a lying lip, but a true lip speaks the truth. “Let my sentence come forth from thy presence; let thine eyes behold the things that are equal” (v. 2). When the psalmist refers to his “sentence,” he is referring to the judgment of God that vindicates him against all of the opposition and all of the charges of the enemy. And when he prays, “Let thine eyes behold the things that are equal,” he is saying, “Look upon my cause, and judge it to be right. Judge righteously, judge truly, with regard to my cause.”

Why did the psalmist need vindication of his cause? He needed vindication because there were many enemies who were saying to him, “Your cause is wicked. Your cause must be overthrown.” They said this by their oppression of the psalmist. We find that at the end of verse 7: “from those that rise up against them.” And then verse 9: “from the wicked that oppress me, from my deadly enemies, who compass me about.” That describes these enemies in their actions. What were they doing? They had surrounded the psalmist and were ready to devour him. They oppressed the psalmist. That word *oppressed* could be translated *waste*. They wasted the psalmist. They were out to take the psalmist and everything that was his, so that he was left with absolutely nothing, not even his life. This was oppression of the enemy, which oppression was their message to him, “Your cause is not right. Our cause is right.”

Verses 11–12 further describe the wicked in their behavior toward the psalmist. “They have now compassed us in our steps: they have set their eyes bowing down to the earth; like as a lion that is greedy of his prey, and as it were a young lion lurking in secret places.” They were ready to destroy, to tear. Think of a lion in his strength, a young lion that has grown to maturity that has sharp teeth and powerful claws that can take down any prey that he sets his eye on. That was what the wicked were like as they oppressed the psalmist. They were ready to destroy him, and that was their declaration to him that he deserved to be destroyed.

Those who oppress God’s people always claim the right to oppress them. What was the evidence that these wicked brought forth to show that they had the right to oppress? It was their own strength, their own wealth, their own fullness of the things of this world, so that it was as if they were saying, “How could we be wrong? Look at us. We have everything. We have everything we need; we have all the might; we have all the authority. How could we be wrong? And you have nothing. How could you be right?” You see in verse 10 the fullness of those who rose up against the psalmist: “They are inclosed in their own fat”—that word “fat” being a symbol of the fullness of having all the things that they wanted. They were enclosed in it. “With their mouth they speak proudly” (v. 10). They were haughty in their speech against the psalmist. Then verses 13–14: “Arise, O LORD, disappoint him, cast him down: deliver

my soul from the wicked, which is thy sword: from men which are thy hand, O LORD, from men of the world, which have their portion in this life, and whose belly thou fillest with thy hid treasure,” probably a reference to the next line: “they are full of children, and leave the rest of their substance to their babes.” Who are the mighty ones? Whose communities are growing? Whose group is increasing? Those who oppress this psalmist. They have many children; they have wealth to leave to those children for many years to come. They are full of all that they need, and they bring that forth as proof of the rightness of their cause and their right to oppress the psalmist.

As the psalmist asks for vindication from God, the psalmist has something to bring forward too as proof that his cause is right. And here we see the Lord Jesus Christ as the psalmist, the one who sings Psalm 17. Christ’s cause is the cause on trial. Christ’s cause is the one that must be vindicated. And what Christ brings forth is not this: “I am really the rich one.” He might have been able to bring that forth. He could have said, “All things are mine, for I am God’s.” The psalmist, though, doesn’t bring that forth. In fact, the psalmist even acknowledges with his people that he has nothing of all the fullness that the others have upon this earth. The psalmist in the last verse speaks of being satisfied with one thing—not being satisfied with all the fullness of the earth but being satisfied with one thing, which we will see in a moment. But the psalmist brings forth as the rightness of his cause *himself*. Jesus Christ says, “God, as thou triest my cause, try *me*.” Verse 3: “Thou hast proved mine *heart*.” That goes right into the core of the Lord Jesus Christ, what is in his center. “Thou hast proved mine heart; thou hast visited me in the night; thou hast tried me, and shalt find nothing” (v. 3). No sin, no iniquity, nothing contrary to thee. In my heart I am pure. “I am purposed that my mouth shall not transgress” (v. 3). My mouth is pure. My words have been pure. “Concerning the works of men”—that is, what men do—“by the word of thy lips I have kept me from the paths of the destroyer” (v. 4). I have not done the things that men do, the things that the destroyer does. By thy word I have kept back my hands and my feet from wicked works. So my heart, my mouth, my actions—everything that thou dost try, thou shalt find to be pure. Vindicate my cause because I *am* righteous.

The only way to understand that is to understand Psalm 17 as the psalm of Christ. There are those who try to explain this as the psalm of someone other than Christ, and then they say, “The psalmist here isn’t saying he is *perfect*. He is just saying that he is innocent in this specific instance that is being talked about. He didn’t do what the enemy said.” That is not the case. In Psalm 17 the psalmist is saying, “I am perfect. My heart, my lips, my hands, my feet—I have done nothing wrong. I am perfectly pure.” This is the Lord’s prayer and the Lord’s psalm asking for vindication.

The psalmist is confident of God’s vindication of him because God has marvelous lovingkindness and saves by his right hand them which put their trust in him (v. 7) and because these wicked who oppress the psalmist are God’s own sword and God’s own hand (vv. 13–14). That is marvelous language. Jesus is saying, “These men are thy instruments. They are only doing what thou hast appointed them to do,” which means that all of this oppression of the psalmist *must* serve the psalmist’s good, must serve his glory, must serve the glory of Jehovah God.

And that too the children of God can sing with our Lord Jesus Christ regarding all the oppression that we face. Those who oppress us are the Lord’s sword and the Lord’s hand. That doesn’t mean that God approves of what they do. God is going to cast them down. That is what the psalmist prays for here. God hates and abhors what they do; but God is sovereign over what they do, for the good of his servant and for the good of his church.

The psalmist had absolute confidence that God would vindicate him. As he prays for this vindication, he uses some very beautiful language. “Keep me as the apple of the eye, hide me under the shadow of thy wings” (v. 8). That is the language of closest possible proximity, that God takes his people right next to himself. You can think of it as God’s enfolding them in his arms. The apple of the eye is the pupil, the dark part of the eye; and literally that word *apple* is the *little man* of the eye. Why the little man? Because when you are very, very close to someone, when you are in their embrace, and you look into their eyes, you can see a little reflection of yourself there. “The little man of the eye,” so that the picture is of the closest possible embrace. Or “under the shadow of thy wings”—so close that the shadow of the wings of a mother hen, let’s say, would fall on the chicks that are below her. That is a picture of the closest possible embrace, and that is what the psalmist knew regarding Jehovah. He was very, very close to God, and God would keep him as the apple of the eye.

The psalm ends more beautiful language, “As for me, I will behold thy face in righteousness: I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness” (v. 15). Here the psalmist is saying, “I already have the vindication that I am praying for. God has already judged. This vindication is indeed mine because I will behold thy face in righteousness. I will be with thee! The wicked won’t. They will have been destroyed and taken away. But I and all the people whom thou hast given me, all mine who sing this with me, shall behold thy face in righteousness.” Though we don’t have anything on this earth, we are satisfied with that—satisfied that we shall awake with God’s likeness. The word “awake” speaks of the future forever and ever. When I awake from my death, when I awake in glory with thee, I shall be satisfied with thy likeness. Oh, we might have nothing upon this earth, but we have everything with Jehovah God and are satisfied with it.

That vindication that God gives to the psalmist, who is Jesus Christ, is our vindication in him.