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Psalm 17 "Some Hints to Effective Prayer" January 28,
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All right. Let's open our Bibles this morning to Psalm 17 as we continue our verse-to-verse kind of topical study through some of the Psalms.

We've mentioned to you a couple times, but I guess it bears repeating that this book of Psalms is in the wisdom or poetry section of your Bibles. It runs from the book of Job through the Song of Solomon. In Hebrew the words Psalms is "sefer tehillim." It literally means a book of praise. And this is indeed Israel's song book. And several of the Psalms, as we are going through them each morning on Sundays, have a lot to teach us about prayer and worship. In fact, the Psalms kind of break down into five different categories. There are lots of hymns. There are lots of them that are lament songs, which means that you're in some kind of calamity and you're asking God's help. Most of the lament songs have a confession of sin coming with them, like I realize that part of this is my problem. There are some thanksgiving Psalms. There are books on -- Psalms on wisdom, like Psalm 1 where there's the contrast between one and the other. And then there's a whole series of Psalms about the kingship of Jesus and how He's going to rule and reign.

So there are 186 mentions of the Psalms in the New Testament. It is the most quoted by far. But these books that are in these books of wisdom are intended to -- they make the presumption that you want to get close to the Lord and they are intended to help with your walks today. So everything is present tense in these books in terms of how are you doing now. They might quote the past or promise the future, but it really is interested in how you're going to walk with God today.

And certainly with the Psalms, the more that we can know about the setting for the writing, the better. Sometimes we get them in the superscription, those little words at the top before verse 1 starts. This one happens to say "A prayer of David." If you look at Psalm 18, there is a long introduction as to that Psalm. But if we know the background and the setting, it helps us. I've always appreciated being able to listen in on someone else's prayers. I mean, here's a guy that 1,000 years ago was in great danger and this is how he prayed and this is how he

approached the Lord. In fact, David comes to argue his case before the Lord. And you find that a lot in the Psalms.

I think it was Spurgeon who said to his students when he was teaching them, "There's no way you're going to persuade God to do what you want by your arguments. However, come with your arguments, because it will help you to understand where you stand with God." And here is a man after God's own heart that is a man of prayer.

So David is urgent in this Psalm. I hope as we are reading through it that you took notice of that. He says in verse 1, hear a cause, and attend to my prayer, and give ear to my prayer. I've called upon You, in verse 6, incline my ear, hear my speech. In verse 7, show me Your marvelous kindness, deliver me from my enemy. Verse 8, keep me and hide me from the wicked, from my deadly enemies, confront them, cast them off.

I mean, we assume, and I think correctly, that most of these Psalms when David is in this condition, he is in the condition because he's running from Saul, a guy that God had set aside, though he was king, and who would not give up the throne. In fact, for seven and a half years he would make David's life miserable. He would try to kill him, lay in wait for him, lie about him, you know, pay off people to betray him. He was just terrifying. And David find himself wanting to let the Lord be the Lord to establish his going. And certainly that's one of these kinds of prayers this morning.

I'd like to point out to you just in the time that we have three things that I think could give you greater confidence as you pray. And you'll find them here in David's prayer beginning with this point, point one: Your love for God can give you confidence in prayer. Jesus said in John 14, I think verse 15, "If you love me, you'll keep My commandments." And I want you to notice that even as we begin in verse 1, here's what David says: "Hear a just cause, Lord, so attend to my cry; and give ear to my prayer which does not come from deceitful lips. Give me vindication from Your presence; let your eyes look upon that which is upright. You have tested my heart; You have visited me in the night; You've tried me found nothing; I've purposed in my mouth not to transgress. And concerning the works of men, by the words of Your lips, I have kept away from the path of the destroyer. So uphold my steps in Your path, that my footsteps won't slip."

David found great confidence and comfort believing that God would answer his prayers because he had been faithfully walking with God. The first confidence you and I should have is that

there's a tremendous hopefulness that comes when you go to pray and you're doing well with the Lord. Now, David is not here nor anywhere else in the Psalms foolish enough to think that somehow God owes him or I've earned your blessing or where's my reward or you're glad to have a guy like me on board. He doesn't feel like God owes him anything.

However, in this situation David had been godly in his approach. Not perfect, not great, not deserving, not worthy, but he'd given it all that he had. And if you -- you know, Jesus said in the gospels, when you've done everything you've been asked to do, say of yourself I'm a worthless servant or unworthy servant, if you will. David had not hurt Saul, David had not provoked Saul, David had not spoken evil of Saul, David had not gone after Saul. When it came to his position as king, he waited indeed for God to establish him, and he had a pure heart in this manner. And notice when he goes to pray and now he's in trouble, and this is dangerous, he uses the word "deadly." And it's not hyperbole or some kind of poetic, you know, extreme. He uses it to say, this is a life or death situation, and Lord, You know my heart. I have not spoken deceitfully with my mouth. You have tried my heart. You've kept me up at night to have me examine myself. You've found nothing. I've determined that I'm not going to transgress with what I say, and when it comes to following the world's ways, I've decided to stay with Your ways as opposed to the world's ways. And that's why as he begins to pray he has confidence that God is going to answer him.

It is a tremendous encouragement to be able to say to the Lord as you go to pray, I know I'm weak, but I'm doing my best. I've given it all I have. You know, the difficulty when you go to pray when you're not walking with the Lord and then you need His help is that you're constantly wondering, I wonder if I'm in this for my own doing. I wonder if God's chastising me. I wonder if God's leaning into me. Maybe I caused this problem to begin with. As opposed to, I'm doing all that I can, so the Lord has put me in this situation and I can have confidence that whatever it is I'm going through He's going to take care of. It's a great lesson for us when we come to pray that we realize that your prayers can certainly be hindered through unbelief, through hidden sin, through unconfessed sin. Man, that can make a world of difference in your relationship every day with God.

About 50 Psalms or so forward, David will write in Psalm 66 verse 18, "If I regard iniquity in my heart, then the Lord won't hear me." Literally if I hide, embrace, allow to continue, establish sin in my life without trying to deal with it, then God won't hear when I pray. There's a scripture in the next book, in the book of Proverbs, where the Lord says, "If someone turns their ear away from the hearing of the law or the will of

God," if you will, "his prayers are an abomination to God." Just the attitude of I don't want to do what God says, my prayers now become an offense as opposed to a source of blessing. I think it is in Proverbs 15 that Solomon writes, "The sacrifices of the wicked are an abomination to the Lord, but the prayers of the upright, those are His delight."

So you run into a man, David the king, on the run, who is pretty confident in God's willingness and certainly his confidence that God will answer him and protect him, because in verse 1 through 5 he claims, I'm walking with God to the best of my ability. Right? I've got nothing to -- obviously I've got plenty of failures here. But look, ungodliness can limit what God wants to do. And over and over God speaks to us about how when the upright walk in faith, they're in a position to find His blessings.

When Isaiah began to speak to the people who were not doing very well in the nation, the Lord in speaking to him said in chapter 1 of Isaiah, "When you spread out your hands to pray, I will hide My face from you, and though you pray many prayers, I won't answer you."

The implication was they had cut themselves off from the place where God could work. They were still His people, but their prayers were now ineffective because their life didn't really match that heart. When the blind man, John chapter 9, was healed by Jesus, who then kind of disappeared, and the blind man wanted to know who it was that had prayed for him. And he went and spoke to the religious folks, who really had nothing but wicked things to say about Jesus, and they wanted to devalue, if you will, His testimony and His power. And the blind man made to see said something very interesting. He said to them, well, that's interesting, because we know from the Bible, if you will, that God does not hear sinners, but if anyone is a worshipper of God, He hears him and He that does His will is heard by Him. Pretty good insight for a guy that had just been sitting and suffering for so many years. He understood that God's response so oftentimes is one to the heart of man who wants to seek Him. Not that you can earn His blessings, but He can certainly keep them from you. Isaiah said in chapter 59 verse 1, "Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened that He cannot save, nor is His ear heavy that He cannot hear, but your iniquities have separated you from God. Your sins have hidden His face from you. He cannot hear you."

David didn't have that problem here. We sometimes have that problem. And if you wonder, you know, gosh, why do my prayers seem so powerless? Maybe it goes back to this first issue, am I seeking to really walk uprightly with God? There's no benefit

to you in hiding your sin and making excuses for your sin, in covering your sin, in padding your life with sin. There's no benefits in your spiritual well-being, but yet there is great fruitfulness in prayer when you walk uprightly and obediently, and then you can appeal to the Lord based on your openness and your sincerity before God. I think it was Psalm 34 verse 15, I'm pretty sure that's right, it says that "The eyes of the Lord are open to the righteous and His ears are open to their cry." That's where you want to be. And certainly David in his dangerous situation finds himself standing right there.

Look, Job wasn't a sinless guy. If you've read the book of Job, you realize that his great loss of his health, 10 of his children, the love and confidence of his wife, the comfort of his friends who turned against him fairly quickly, it drove Job almost to the point where he wanted to defend himself before God, like this isn't fair. He didn't quite cross over that line, but man, he got pretty close. When the Lord came and restored him in Job 42, I think it's verse 8, the Lord said to the enemies of Job, "Go and talk to Job, and if he'll pray for you, I'll hear his prayer, because he hasn't spoken or dealt in folly or spoken anything of Me that wasn't right." And He said of Job, He's a man that is walking with God and I'll hear his prayer." And He would say the same of you and He would say the same of David.

One important factor in seeking answers to prayer is keeping yourself in the love of God. That's what Jude says; right? Keep yourselves in the love of God. Pastor Chuck used to say to us when we were in Costa Mesa, "Keep yourselves under the spout where the blessings come out." By that he meant, live a life that God can bless. Not that you earn it. You don't earn any of that. You know that. But God has made a distinction between who walks with Him and who does not. And to the extent that He's the Lord of your life, I think your prayer life can have great confidence, because you're right where God wants you to be. You're not making excuses. You're depending upon the Lord, but you're living the life. It takes self-examination. You know, are you harboring sin? Is your heart covetous? Are you angry all the time? What is your lifestyle like? Are you living just for yourself or for those around you? Are you neglecting what you should be doing? Are you in church? Are you reading your Bible? Do you put the Lord first in all of the decisions that you make? You can do your part. Because answered prayers can elude us based on simply just, hey, I'm praying, God's supposed to answer, and I don't do a thing to draw close to Him. His priorities, are they in order? David, look what he says here in verse 3 and 4 and 5, "I've woke up in the night, I've had you go through my heart, I've made

determinations that I wouldn't sin with my mouth. When it comes to following the Lord's ways, because of your words from your lips, I've chosen the path that isn't the path of the destroyer. I've made some decisions. I've guided my course in such a way that I want to stand, Lord, where You want me to stand."

If we do our best to walk with God, even though we know we are not worthy to receive His goodness from His hands, we can be motivated to have a confidence based on a pure heart. And to be able to say before the Lord, forget what anybody else might say. Lord, You know my heart. So David rested in that fact in verse 3. He summarized it, right? He's turned from the world, he's confessed his need for the Lord. Uphold my steps. Don't let my feet slip. He's not saying at all, God, I can do this without You. But he is saying to the Lord, I love You and I show that in the way that I walk.

Secondly, God's love for you should give you great confidence when you pray. Notice in verse 6 that David said, "I have called upon You, and You will hear me, Lord; so incline Your ear, and hear my speech. And show me Your loving-kindness by Your right hand, o You who save those who trust in You from those who rise up against You. And keep me as the apple of your eye; and hide me under the shadow of Your wings." The second confidence of David in this very difficult time was that he believed God loved him; that his hope was rooted in the understanding of God's character. "You will hear me," he said in verse 6. "You will show me Your marvelous kindness. I'm the apple of Your eye." Imagine that. You're the apple of God's eye. He came to save the church, but He came to save you. You're the apple of His eye. You're all that occupies His mind. I don't know how that works with every individual where He can say to all of you, you're my favorite, but apparently you are. He treats you all as His favorite. Isn't that wonderful to know? God loves you. "Show me Your loving-kindness. Keep me as the apple of Your eye." What you know about God can provide great assurance as you pray.

The word loving-kindness, "chesed" in Hebrew, is not the normal word for God's love for man or for His creation. It is rather a word that is intimate and applied to God's relationship with those who love Him in terms of agreements or in terms of making a covenant. Right? The intimate love of God for those who have made a commitment to Him, a devoted relationship.

Now, although it's not readily apparent if you just read, as we did, quickly through the Psalm, you should know that David developed this understanding of God's love for him from the scriptures themselves. In fact, verse 7 and 8 are direct quotes

from two songs of deliverance that were written years before he ever showed up. One of them is found in Exodus chapter 15 where the children of Israel had just been delivered out of Egypt and the armies of Egypt were drowning in the Red Sea, and Moses and Miriam, they wrote a song of deliverance and they taught it to the people and it is quoted here by David. The other one is found in Deuteronomy chapter 32, where Moses at the end of his life spent 30 days teaching the book of Deuteronomy to the 2.5 million people gathered on the edge of the land of promise. Moses taught them a song about God's faithfulness over the years, and David pulls out of that Psalm and he applies it to his prayer here. And he says to the Lord, "You've done it before. You've always been a deliverer of people that You love. He delivered them all right. And they weren't even that faithful, both in Exodus 15 and Deuteronomy 32, but they celebrated the fact that God keep His covenant with the people that He loves, and it doesn't matter the size of the enemy or their strength, God was able.

So David uses the language of those from years gone by to pray his prayer and say, "Lord, I know You love me and I know you're able." I guess it would be like you going to pray tonight and pulling out a Psalm and reading it back to the Lord. Lord, I read in Your word this morning these words. That's exactly what David did. He reaches back to present to the Lord the confidences that he has in his life. He was a man of the word, who looked to it to develop his understanding of the character of God. He was convinced that God loved him, which is why he was able to say in verse 6, God, I know You're going to answer me.

Two things that should affect your confidence: Your love for God as evidenced by your obedience, the integrity of your heart, the effort that you put in; not to earn anything from God, but just to respond to His love, to depend upon His power. And then your understanding in the scriptures of God's love for you; that He won't leave you, that He's not going to forsake you, that He'll finish what He's started, that He's bigger and badder than anything you face, that He's more than able to take care of anything that comes your way.

Well, for the first time in the Psalm beginning in verse 9, David then addresses his need. He says at the end of verse 8, "Hide me under the shadow of Your wings, from the wicked who oppress me, from deadly enemies who surround me. From those who have closed up their fat hearts; and with their mouths they're speaking proudly. They've surrounded us in our steps; they have eyes that they set upon us, crouch down to the earth, as a lion eager to tear his prey, or a young lion lurking in his secret

places." That's his challenge. His needs were immediate, they were constant, and they were real.

"Hide me under the shadow of your wings. Keep me from those that oppress me, from my deadly enemy." That's pretty frightening. His enemy was self-satisfied. He was independent. He showed absolutely no mercy. He was like a wild animal, Saul was. His mouth was arrogant. He made deals with people to sell David out. He laid in wait for David. He was arrogant. He made plenty of threats against David and against his God. We're surrounded. We're exposed. There's no time to wait. The danger is ever present. And so he says, "Arise," verse 13, "O Lord, confront him and cast him down. Deliver my life from the wicked with your sword, and with your hand from men, O Lord, from the men of this world who have their portion in this life, whose bellies are filled with hidden treasure. Satisfied with children, they leave their possessions to their babes."

Let me make sure you understand that. David is making a comparison in verse 13, 14, and 15 between his future and the future of those who are oppressing him, and his description in verse 14 was, the best that the wicked can do is lay up treasures for their children. They can leave an inheritance behind. Their life stops here. But notice he says in verse 15, "But as for me," by comparison, "I will see your face in righteousness and I'll be satisfied when I wake in your likeness."

Here's a third point that can give you great, I think, confidence in prayer: The big picture allows you to rest knowing that the work in you is eternal, not temporary. I heard a man pray a couple years ago. His son had just gone to Iraq. He was worried about him, as you can suspect. But I said, "Well, let's pray for him." And he said, "Well, let me pray." And I said, "All right." And the first words out of his mouth were, "Lord, Your property is in jeopardy." I thought, what a great prayer. This is Your kid, You take care of him. Pretty solid ground to stand on.

Well, notice that David ends a pretty urgent appeal, and the middle is just to convince you of how urgent it was, with one last statement of faith: Come what may, in the end, as I leave it with You, everything's going to work out just fine. You're going to do those things that are eternal and get me to that place that You've brought me to. Great way to pray.

Three confidences you can have: One, your love for God; second, His love for you; and thirdly, you know the future. Walk with God, rest in His love, look ahead. Three points that are

wonderful.

I remember reading Harry Ironside. He was an old-time Bible teacher who wrote a lot of commentaries. And they're pretty short, they're easy to read. But one of the things that he said in his introduction to Psalms was he said, "There are three Psalms and three verses from three Psalms that control my understanding of God's word to me in the Psalms." He said in Psalm 18 verse 30, the verse begins with, "As for God, He's perfect." The second one was Psalm 103 verse 15, which said, "As for man, his days are like the grass." And then he quoted this one as the third one: Psalm 17 verse 15, "As for me, I will see His face in righteousness and be satisfied with His likeness when I awake." God is perfect. Man is short-lived. My hope is that I will stand before God.

May the Lord give you a new confidence in prayer, and may your confidence be driven by your faithfulness. We all make such excuses. We look for others that are worse than we do, and go, oh, yeah, look at me. I'm doing better than that guy. Well, you always find someone you're doing better than. If you want, I can help you find someone who you're not doing as well with. And ultimately you can just go stand next to Jesus. That will kind of mess up the whole argument. Your love for Him, His love for you, and the eternal nature of your relationship, because even if God doesn't answer the way you intend, He's doing eternal things, and that gives great confidence as you pray. And then the enemy, it doesn't matter how strong he is or the threat, how great it is. He's messing with God and I'm the apple of His eye. I know I'm not the apple of your eye, but I'm the apple of His eye. Good enough for me. How about you?