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Psalm 17: A Prayer of David

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Psalm 17
A Prayer of David.
(ESV)

- 1 Hear a just cause, O LORD; attend to my cry!**
Give ear to my prayer from lips free of deceit!
- 2 From your presence let my vindication come!**
Let your eyes behold the right!
- 3 You have tried my heart, you have visited me by night,**
you have tested me, and you will find nothing;
I have purposed (I determined) that my mouth will not transgress.
- 4 With regard to the works of man, by the word (in accord with the command) of your lips**
I have avoided the ways of the violent.
- 5 My steps have held fast to your paths;**
my feet have not slipped.
- 6 I call upon you, for you will answer me, O God;**
incline your ear to me; hear my words.
- 7 Wondrously show your steadfast love,**
O Savior of those who seek refuge
from their adversaries at your right hand.
- 8 Keep me as the apple of your eye;**
hide me in the shadow of your wings,
- 9 from the wicked who do me violence,**
my deadly enemies who surround me.
- 10 They close their hearts to pity;**
with their mouths they speak arrogantly.
- 11 They have now surrounded our steps;**
(NRSV: They track me down, now they surround me;)
they set their eyes to cast me to the ground.
- 12 He is like a lion eager to tear,**
like a young lion lurking in ambush.
- 13 Arise, O LORD! Confront him, subdue him!**
Deliver my soul from the wicked by your sword,
- 14 from men by your hand, O LORD,**
from men of the world whose portion is in this life.
You fill their womb with treasure;
they are satisfied with children,
and they leave their abundance to their infants.
- 15 As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness;**
when I awake, I shall be satisfied with your likeness.

Psalm 17 begins with a fervent plea to God (verses 1-2), followed by a strong assertion of complete innocence and full obedience to God (verses 3-5). The Psalmist again prays for protection (verses 6-9), and then describes his enemies as merciless and cruel, like a lion waiting to destroy him (verses 10-12). Once more he asks the LORD to save him (verses 13-14), and then ends this Psalm with a calm statement of his confidence in God (verse 15).

How shall Christians pray a Psalm that refers to vicious enemies? There is a clue in verse 12, where enemies are compared to a lurking lion, greedy for its prey. The Apostle Peter (1 Peter 5:18) urges us to be sober and watchful, because our adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. We need to reckon with powerful spiritual enemies who seek our demise, and whom we can defeat only with the help of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The strong claim to innocence and full obedience is one we must hesitate to make in our own name. Only Jesus can make that claim, and it is only because we are in Christ that we can have the hope, through faith, of one day becoming pure as he is pure.

The translation of verse 14 is difficult because the underlying Hebrew is obscure (English Standard Version used above). The Lutheran Book of Worship translation (verses 14, 15) is defensible.

- ¹⁴ Deliver me, O LORD, by your hand
from those whose portion in life is the world.
¹⁵ whose bellies you fill with your treasure,
who are well supplied with children
and leave their wealth to their little ones.

This offers a contrast between the Psalmist's opponents, whose blessings – wealth, children – are confined to life in this world, whereas the Psalmist has the expectation of rising to a future life in which he shall be able to behold the LORD face to face after waking from death.

Prayer to accompany Psalm 17:

Lord God, you vindicated your Son when he was unjustly condemned and surrounded by the wicked. Watch over your people as the apple of your eye, and guard our steps until we see your face; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Linger longer over verses 8, 9:

Keep me as the apple of your eye;
hide me in the shadow of your wings,
from the wicked who do me violence,
my deadly enemies who surround me.