

A Real Relationship

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Date: 02 August 2020

[0:01] Good morning, everybody. As I said at the beginning of our time together, it is so good to be back with you all, and I'm extremely glad that you have decided to join us for worship.

This summer, we've been looking primarily at the Psalms, the prayer book in the Old Testament that has served God's people for generations. And as we've been looking at these Psalms in general, I've been thinking a lot and reflecting on the kind of relationship that David had with God, because many of the Psalms were written by David.

And so as we read these Psalms and study them, they give us insight into the kind of relationship that David was able to have with God, which was an amazing relationship.

If you look at David's life, he faced all kinds of crises, some probably not too dissimilar from the kinds of things that we are anxious about right now in our society, the kinds of crises that we're facing.

I'm sure that at times David felt much the same way, that sense of powerlessness, that sense of being overwhelmed and not knowing what to do, the sense of confusion and chaos.

[1:12] And yet through all of that, God remained this tremendous source of encouragement and security for David. David knew that when he prayed to God, God would hear him and God would answer him.

And his relationship with God was filled with intimacy. He was sure that God was present with him and it was filled with assurance of God's love. And so I read this and I find myself wondering, how can I have that kind of relationship with God?

My relationship with God doesn't always feel that way. And I wonder if you may feel the same thing. And so what I'd like to do this morning is actually look at Psalm 17, which is one of the places where David is crying out to God for help.

He's most likely on the run from Saul at this point in his life, and he's fleeing in the wilderness and hiding from Saul, who's persecuting him. And it's probably during that time that he wrote this Psalm, crying out to God for help.

But what I want to do is to look at this Psalm and to try to see what we can learn about the kind of relationship that David had with God. And so we're going to look at this Psalm and we're going to see three key aspects of David's relationship with God that I think we can emulate.

[2:30] And so we're going to look at this together. First, let's pray, and then we'll get started. Lord, we thank you for your word, and we thank you for the Psalms. And we thank you that they cover the entire breadth of the human experience, every human emotion we can imagine.

And I thank you that they show us even more what it means and what it looks like to have an intimate and life-giving relationship with you. And so we pray that as we open your word and look at Psalm 17, you would use these words to draw us more deeply into your embrace.

Lord, that we would fall more in love with you even as we learn of your love for us. And we pray this in your son's holy name. Amen. So Psalm 17, it shows us three aspects of the kind of relationship I believe that every human being who belongs to God is meant to have with God.

And the first aspect that I want to focus on here is that David's relationship with God was filled with honesty. It was profoundly and sometimes ruthlessly honest.

In verse 1, it says, And part of what he's talking about there is he's not trying to deceive God.

[3:47] And part of what he's talking about there is self-deception. He goes on to say, So in other words, when David comes to God in prayer, he's able to say, Look, God, I'm being completely honest with you.

I'm being completely open with you. I'm opening my heart to you. And you know better than anybody that I'm not trying to deceive you. And I'm not trying to deceive myself. And the reason that this is possible for David is that we know from other places in the Psalms that David regularly asks God to search his heart, to illuminate anything in him that needs to be addressed.

And the word in this psalm for test or assess is the same word that would be used to refine precious metal. So it connotes the idea of separating the pure gold or the pure silver from the dross.

And so David is saying this is what God does in his heart. He separates what is pure and good and true and beautiful from that which needs to be extracted or removed or taken out of his heart.

And then the verb also implies an ongoing action. So that's very important. This is not just something that happened once or when David first gave his life to the Lord.

[5 : 19] But a key aspect of his relationship with God is that God is regularly testing and assessing his heart. Now, why would that be so important?

And why would that matter so much in our relationship with God? Well, the fact of the matter is, and I think if you're honest and you're willing to think about your own life, you'll probably realize that this is true for you.

It's certainly true for me, is that it's very easy for us to lose touch with the truth about ourselves. It's very easy for us to become disconnected with the reality of what's going on in here.

And, you know, a number of philosophers have talked about this. The French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal talks about this kind of tension that exists in the heart of every human being.

He writes about this extensively in his *Pensées*. But he says that all human beings have this kind of internal struggle. On the one hand, we have our desire to think well of ourselves.

[6 : 21] And on the other hand, we have the truth about ourselves. So we want to love ourselves and think well of ourselves, but we also have the hard truth about ourselves. So as I think about my own life, on the one hand, I want to think well of myself.

I want to think of myself as a good person. I want to think of myself as an honest person, as a generous person, right? As somebody who's genuinely concerned about my neighbors.

I want to think of myself as a good dad and as a good husband. And that's what I want to believe.

And yet, there's also the reality that maybe deep down, I'm not always quite as good as I think that I am.

And in fact, maybe there are some hard realities in there that I really don't want to face. And that's exactly the point that Pascal is trying to make. He says most people, when caught in this tension between what we want to believe about ourselves and the hard truth about ourselves, he says most people decide to reject truth.

And they see truth as an enemy. They prefer the illusion. They prefer the lie. And so he says that people tend to deny and minimize the truth about themselves.

[7 : 32] When it comes to accumulating friends, a lot of people tend to surround themselves with people who will only affirm them and encourage them and say that they're doing the right thing and tell them what they want to hear.

And we can tend to view people who question us or who confront us as enemies. And this is a huge problem. And I've seen many friendships and relationships over the years that were wrecked because someone tried to confront a friend and speak truth in love.

And they ended up being rejected. And it dissolved the relationship. And this is heartbreaking because it runs against the very fabric of what it means to be someone's friend.

And the reality is you can't have a real relationship with God or with other people or even with yourself if that relationship is built on lies.

Because real relationships are built on honesty. And they're built on truth-telling. You can't have a real relationship that's built on falsehood. And so as we think about this and as we think about what it would be like to have this kind of relationship with God, we then need to ask, well, how do we begin to move in the direction of honesty and truth-telling in our relationship with God?

[8 : 56] And the first thing I would say is that it starts with how we pray. David assumed that God knew more than he did about his own heart. And remember at the beginning of our time together, beginning of our worship, we pray to the God to whom all hearts are open and all desires known and from whom no secrets are hid.

So we're acknowledging right away, God, you know more about my heart than I do. And so make that a part of your prayer life. Ask God to search your heart. Ask God through the Holy Spirit to illuminate things for you that you need to see and that you need to address, even if they're painful to look at.

So that's the first thing. The second thing is that this approach needs to shape how we read Scripture. In other words, don't just read the Bible looking for a bit of inspiration or a bit of encouragement.

Now, there's a ton of inspiration and encouragement in the Bible, so there's nothing wrong with that. But don't just read the Bible for that. One of the main ways that God uses Scripture in the lives of his people is to spotlight and illuminate areas of sin or self-deception that need to be brought out of the darkness and into the light.

And so ask the Lord as you read Scripture to search your heart with Scripture. For instance, in this very Psalm, when we read something like verse 4, where David says, I have avoided the ways of the violent.

[10 : 19] We shouldn't just read that as a kind of poetic phrase and keep going. We should pause and think and reflect and ask, have I done that?

Have I avoided the ways of the violent? Not only in my actions, but what about my words and the language that I use with the people around me?

What about in my thoughts, especially when I get angry or upset or offended? What about when I'm on social media? The things that I'm reading, the things that I'm posting.

What about when I'm stuck in traffic? Have I avoided the ways of the violent or not? So this is how we should read all of Scripture. And then lastly, I would say, if you want to move in the direction of truth in your relationships with God and other people and yourself, we should intentionally seek out and surround ourselves with people who will tell us the truth, even when we don't want to hear it.

So if you look at David's life, David had Nathan, who was one of his closest friends, but Nathan was not afraid to confront David with some of the most egregious sin imaginable.

[11 : 30] And so that was a true friendship. And so an exercise that I might recommend to you this week would be to think about some of the people who are closest to you, some of the people that you would consider to be your closest friends.

Maybe it's your spouse. And I want you to go to one of those people and I want you to ask them this question. Say, is there anything about me? Is there anything that you've seen or heard or observed in my life that you're afraid to bring up with me because you're afraid it might threaten our relationship?

Is there anything that you have seen in my life or observed in my life that you're afraid to bring up with me because you're afraid it might threaten our relationship? And then if they say yes, I want you to give them permission to share those things with you.

And you need to realize that sometimes we have to give permission to our closest friends in our lives. We have to give them permission to share those kinds of concerns and assure them that it will not threaten the integrity of our relationship.

In fact, it will only make the relationship stronger. So the first thing that we see in this relationship that David has with God and thus himself and other people is as he grows and as he matures, he pursues honesty more and more and more.

[12 : 50] And then we go on and we say, well, what's the next characteristic that we see in this relationship with God? And the next characteristic in Psalm 17 is that David has an exclusive relationship with God.

He recognizes that the relationship that God wants with all of his people is an exclusive relationship. And I'll share more about what I mean. In verse 3, David says, I have purposed that my mouth will not transgress.

With regard to the works of man, which means daily life, with regard to the works of man, by the word of your lips, I have avoided the ways of the violent. My steps have held fast to your paths.

My feet have not slipped. So in the same way that God desires a relationship with us that is honest and built on truth, God also wants an exclusive relationship with his people.

Now, if you're married to someone, and you decide to go out one evening, and you take off your wedding ring, and you go and you spend a romantic evening and night with someone else, you cannot expect to come home the next day to an intimate, warm, loving relationship with your spouse.

[13 : 59] And the reason is obvious. It's because you have violated the exclusivity of that relationship. And thus, you have destroyed the intimacy, and you've broken down trust. Right?

So it's the same when it comes to our relationship with God. We can't go out and live however we please, and then come to God and expect immediate warmth and intimacy and connection. It simply doesn't work that way. If we go out and we live however we please, we are taking off the wedding ring. We are denying that we are in any kind of covenant relationship with God, and we're destroying the intimacy that should exist between God and his people.

Right? To use another metaphor, right, think about parents and children. Our kids, now that they're getting a little older, our boys, now that they're getting a little older and they're hanging around with their friends, they're beginning to realize that different houses and different kids and different parents have all kinds of different standards.

Right? And so a lot of times they'll look at their friends, and their friends are doing all kinds of things that they can't do. You know, maybe they're eating cookies every morning for breakfast, or maybe they're playing video games all day long, or maybe they don't have a bedtime and they're able to go to bed whenever they want, or maybe they get an iPhone at age seven, or whatever it is, our kids see these things, and then our kids come to us and they say, why can't we do those things?

[15 : 17] Why do you have to be so strict? Why can't we live like our friends live? And you know what we have to say to them? We say, well, listen to this. You are not their children.

You are our children. And like it or not, we know you better than they know that you, and we love you better than they love you. And we know better than them and better than you what you need in order to thrive.

And so you may not fully understand it, but because you're our children, you need to live by our standards because we know it's best for you. And in the same way, when it comes to God, from the beginning, God has made it clear that he calls his people to be set apart.

He calls his people to live differently from other people in the world. And he makes it clear that our lives are not going to look like other people's lives, that our standards are not going to be the same as other people's standards.

And this has been true in every society, both ancient and modern, where God's people have ever lived. It's always been true. And God says it should be true. So the way we handle things like sex or money or power are going to be radically different in some cases than the surrounding culture.

[16 : 29] And that's how God intends it. And that's because God says, I know better than you what you need. And so what we believe is that God knows better than we do how we should live our lives such that we will thrive and become more and more the kind of people that he made us to be.

And one of the most powerful phrases in this psalm comes at the very end in verse 15, where David says, As for me. That's a very powerful little phrase.

As for me. He says, Everyone else is living like this world is all there is. Everyone else is seeking all that they can get and trying to find total satisfaction in this world.

And then he says, But as for me. As for me. I know that I will only ever be fully satisfied when I'm in the presence of my God. As for me.

I have a different standard for life. I have a different standard of excellence. I have a different standard for what real hope looks like. As for me. I belong to someone else.

[17 : 37] Right? So everyone else is doing this. But as for me. I will live God's way. Everyone else thinks this way. As for me. I remain faithful to God's word.

So the Christian life is full of moments where we have to decide to say, As for me. Where we have to break from the norm. Where we have to be willing maybe to offend others.

Where we have to be willing to risk social rejection. In order to be set apart to the Lord. And we might come to the Lord and say, Why can't I do this?

Why can't I do that? Why can't I live like this? Why can't I think that? Right? But God says, You don't belong to them. You don't belong to the world. You belong to me. I know you better than they know you.

I love you more than anyone will ever love you. And I know better even than you what you need in order to flourish. So another thing that I would suggest that you might do this week is to spend some time thinking about your life.

[18 : 42] And looking at the various aspects of your life. And think about any of the ways that you've had to say, As for me. And think about when you've done that.

What it might have cost you. And think about why you did that. And how that affected your relationship with God. When you were willing to say, As for me. Another thing that you might do is if

you look at your life and you can't find anything like that.

If there's nothing in your life that you can point to. And say, This is a point where I broke from the norm. And I said, As for me. I'm set apart to the Lord. That's really something worth thinking about. And then ask yourself, What kind of intimacy and connection do I feel with God? If I've never said that. If I've never treated God as though He's exclusive in my life. He's in my life. So, So these are two qualities that we see in David's relationship with God that are profoundly important for having a real relationship with God.

Honesty and exclusivity. But the third thing is what holds all of this together. In fact, the third thing is what makes honesty and exclusivity possible and worth pursuing.

[19:51] And this is that David, at every point in his relationship with God, assumes God's steadfast love. He assumes that God loves him.

In verse 7, it says, Wondrously show your steadfast love, O Savior of those who seek refuge from their adversaries at your right hand. And listen to this language. Keep me as the apple of your eye. Hide me in the shadow of your wings. That's beautiful. And honesty and exclusivity are necessary if you want a real thriving relationship with God.

They're necessary for that. But these things are not necessary in order to earn God's love. They are not necessary to earn God's love. And the reason for that is that nothing that we do is necessary to earn God's love.

No matter who you are, no matter what you've done, no matter where you've been or where you've come from, no matter what you believe right now as you're sitting here. Even if you're sitting here thinking, I don't even believe in God.

[20:55] I reject the whole idea of God. I think all of that is a ridiculous fairy tale. The fact of the matter is that God loves you. God loves you. Even as you sit here maybe denying him, God loves you.

You're the apple of his eye. He's crazy about you. And maybe the most profound truth in all of Scripture is that before we even know or acknowledge God, God loves us.

That his love is the beginning of all of this. And so the reason that I know I can come to God and be honest with him about the darkest parts of my heart is because I know he loves me.

And I know that no matter what I say to God, no matter what I do, no matter what realities might be true about me, that they will never touch, they will never shift how much God loves me.

And when you know that, you can come to God with anything. And this is also the reason that we should desire to have an exclusive relationship with God because there's no one, nothing else in the universe who loves you like God loves you.

[22:03] And so if you give your heart to anyone or anything else, if you build your life around anyone or anything else, their love will never come close to God's love.

You will always be selling yourself short. The language that David uses, keep me as the apple of your eye, hide me in the shadow of your wings, this is what every human being wants deep down. We all deep down. This is what we're searching for in life. We all want someone to look at us and to really see us and to say, I know everything about you.

I see everything about you. And I love everything about you. I know everything about you. I know the truth about you. And yet you're the apple of my eye.

And I want more than anything to cover you with my wings and to hold you tight and to protect you. That's what we all want. We want someone to say that to us. And this is also covenant language.

[23:06] This is the kind of language that God uses when he's talking about the kind of exclusive relationship that he wants to have with the people whom he loves. And so this is why we should desire this.

And yet in spite of all of that, human beings by nature turn away from God. On our own, we reject this love because we would rather live as we please.

And so this is why the gospel is such good news. Because many years after David wrote these words, hide me in the shadow of your wings, many years, generations after David wrote these words, one of his descendants said them once more.

In Luke 13, Jesus stands looking out over the city of Jerusalem. And he says in that point in verse 34, Oh, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it. How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings and you were not willing. What's he saying?

[24:11] He's saying when David prayed that prayer so long ago and when David cried out to God and said, hide me in the shadow of your wings, Jesus Christ is saying, I have come to answer that prayer.

I am here to answer that prayer of David. That prayer that so many have cried out over the centuries. I have come to do just that. But how do you gather people together under the shadow of your wings who don't want to be gathered, who don't want to have anything to do with you? Well, the gospel says that Jesus Christ is the eternal apple of God's eye. He's the one that God is most crazy about. He's God's only begotten son. And what the gospel says is that Jesus Christ came to trade places with us.

He came to live the life that we should have lived and to die the death that we deserve to die because we didn't live that life so that we could take his place, so that we could come to God knowing that all of that has been dealt with and that we, just as Jesus is, that we are now the apple of God's eye.

And for Christians, the grace of the cross now covers us and protects us like the wings of a bird covering her brood.

[25:33] And so this is what makes it possible for us to have the kind of relationship with God that David had. We need to be honest with God and we need to be honest with others and we need to be honest with ourselves about who we really are.

We need to bring all of that to the Lord. We need to be willing to set God apart in our hearts and in our speech and in our actions and in our thoughts treat God as exclusive in our lives.

But more than either of those things, we need to live with the daily knowledge that God loves us and that that love is what makes all of this possible.

And the good news is we can know this in a way that even David couldn't know it because David says in verse 15 that his great hope and the great vindication of all of this is that one day when he awakes, he might see God's face and then be fully satisfied.

And the good news of the gospel is we have already seen God's face. We have experienced things David only could have imagined because we have seen the face of Jesus Christ.

[26:48] And it's in his name that we say all of these things. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word and for the words of this psalm in particular.

And we desire this kind of relationship with you. We desire to know that we can be fully honest with you and open our hearts to you, the good, the bad, and the ugly. And we desire that you would be set apart in our lives, that there would be no question of our loyalty and allegiance to you because there's no question of your loyalty to us.

And that's because of your steadfast love, Lord. That no matter who we are or what we've done, that there's nothing that we can do that will ever add to or take away from the love that you have for us.

And I pray that that would be our refuge, that that would be our resting place, that would be our fortress and our shield. And Lord, I pray that as we learn more about your love for us, that we would fall more and more deeply in love with you.

And it's in the name of your son, Jesus Christ, we pray all of this. Amen.