

Hate & love; banishment & protection

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[0 : 0 0] Pray. Have you, maybe some of you ever felt like you're not quite sure what to actually do when you want to pray? You know the Bible encourages God's people to pray. You've heard sermons exhorting you to prayer. You've heard other believers speaking about the power of prayer and rejoicing in their prayers being answered. But for some of us, perhaps we still feel like we're not quite sure how to pray. Maybe you're young or young in the faith and you've not yet quite got the hang of what it is to come and pray. Maybe you're older and you feel like you really should know what you're doing by now, but still somehow it feels like it hasn't quite clicked.

Some of us, I suspect, feel like we don't really know how to pray. Or maybe, maybe you're sitting here this morning thinking you do have it figured out. You're an old hand confident in what you're doing. Or maybe you just don't think about it all that much. You just get on with it because that's just what you do. Well, if you're feeling unsure about it this morning, then I hope and pray that you will find this morning's sermon both encouraging and uplifting and also practically helpful in that regard. And if you're one of those who feels like you know what you're doing, well, I guess I pray that God will grant you a teachable spirit to recognize that we all of us can be getting better at this and to realize as well that just because you've always done it doesn't necessarily make it right. So we consider this morning how to pray. Luke records in chapter 11 of his gospel, he records an occasion when Jesus was praying and having finished his prayers was asked by one of his disciples, Lord, teach us to pray. And Jesus answered and he taught them what we refer to as the Lord's Prayer. There's, of course, immense profit to us in considering those words that Jesus taught those first disciples the pattern of prayer that he laid down for them. And there's ample material in those few verses for a whole series of sermons. But I don't think that when Jesus gave that answer, this then is how you should pray. I don't think he imagined that that answer was exhaustive, that that was everything he wanted his disciples to know about prayer. Because there are loads of other prayers recorded for us in God's Word, aren't there? We've heard Moses praying in our evening services recently. Paul describes his prayers for the churches in many of his letters. We have records of the prayers of some of the prophets and so on and so on. And given that the Holy Spirit has caused these prayers to be recorded for us, it seems to me that he intends for us to learn from the example of godly men and women. So I think we can profitably learn, yes, by listening to the prayers of godly men and women today as well. But the prayers recorded in the Bible are, of course, on a different level to all others. And the greatest concentration of these prayers we find in the book of Psalms.

Sometimes there's a blurry line between kind of prayer and praise, which is no bad thing. But some of the Psalms are quite obviously prayers in that sense of being requests to God for him to intervene.

And Psalm 5 that we're looking at this morning is certainly one such. So this morning, I hope we will learn to pray from the lips of David. The structure of the poem doesn't quite match up with this, but in terms of kind of the flow of themes through the Psalm, we find in verses 1 to 3 a confident request for God to hear. Then 4 to 7 gives the description of God's character, and then the precise nature of the request comes in from verse 8 onwards, that petition for help that shifts in verse 12 into a final confident declaration. So first this morning, the confident request of verses 1 to 3. In these verses, there's two requests for God to listen, and then one confident declaration that God will indeed do so. And I think the first thing I want to point out from these verses this morning is that David knows he is actually praying to someone. I've seen some articles and books that suggest that prayer could be equated to, or perhaps we would say reduced to, mere positive affirmations.

[4 : 1 8] Now I am not denying that approaching a situation with a positive outlook can have a beneficial result, and it makes sense that repeating positive thoughts and statements can put you in

that kind of frame of mind. So positive affirmations can potentially have a practical benefit. There is, I think, sometimes some value in it. But if we treat prayer like it is on that level, then we have profoundly misunderstood the nature of prayer. There are times in the Bible when people speak to themselves, why are you downcast, O my soul? Psalm 42. But that's not prayer. That's not what we have here.

David is speaking to someone else, not just talking to himself. Specifically, David is speaking to God. He's speaking to the Almighty Creator of the universe. Friends, when we pray, we are not speaking into the void. And we're not speaking to the people sat across the room either. You do sometimes, don't you, hear prayers that are kind of crafted more to be overheard than to be heard, whether in order to make the person praying sound impressive, or in order to kind of couch into holy language, make acceptable some area that you would like your audience to be corrected about. Lord, teach us all your abhorrence of gluttony, prayed Mr. Skinny as he sat in the prayer meeting with a few obviously overweight people. It's not usually quite that obvious. But there's something offensive to other people about that kind of prayer, isn't there? And there is something offensive to God in that as well, as supposedly speaking to him without him actually being your intended audience.

Jesus condemns praying for the sake of the audience in Matthew 6 verse 5. When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites who love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.

So David here in Psalm 5, David is very clear about who he is praying to, and he piles up the titles in these short verses. First we have Lord in all capitals, Yahweh, the covenant name of God. God seen in the sense of his faithful promises. And then in verse 2, God is my king and my God. It's a recognition of God's sovereign lordship, his authority, his power, but also of his personal relationship to David.

[6 : 49] David doesn't only know him as God out there, but personally as my God. So David prays to God, not to anyone else. David depends upon his personal relationship with his creator.

Then still within these first three verses, we might next consider the way in which David prays. David asks God to listen to his words, requests that God consider his lament, that he hear his cry for help, and then he assures himself that God hears his voice when he lays his request before him. You might remember if you've been here earlier in this series in the Psalms, I've mentioned Dale Ralph Davis a few times. The title of this series comes from his book on the first 12 Psalms, and he's very helpful on this Psalm as a whole, as he usually is. And he argues that it's when you get to the laying of the requests in verse 3 that you really have the heart of the matter, that you find at the example of how you and I should be. And this verb here, for laying the requests, this is kind of focused on order, on arranging things carefully. There isn't actually a noun there for requests. That's being assumed by the translators, I think legitimately. But often we see this verb being used of when the priests go and they arrange the special bread on the altar, as God has told them to. It is a careful, ordered, arranged, planned, precise kind of verb. It is a difficult job that they are doing. I think it's an over-translation to read just into that verb that David thinks he's offering a physical sacrifice, that that's what he's preparing. I think it is his prayers that he has in mind, and most commentators seem inclined to agree, that he views his prayers as kind of taking on that sacrificial role. David maybe is in flight here, away from Jerusalem, in fear of his enemies.

[8 : 48] So he can't go and formally offer a sacrifice, but he can offer a well-ordered prayer. And maybe this is something that we should consider more for ourselves, because some prayers are the very opposite of well-ordered, aren't they? Some prayers filled more with cliches than actual content, and padded out with, Lord, every third word to give us time to think of what we want to say next, and so on, and all the justs. I guess because we don't want to admit to ourselves that what we want and need from God is a big deal. So we try and minimize it with, Lord, if you could just... I think there's a thoughtlessness to many prayers. And I'm inclined to agree with David here that it is often decidedly disrespectful and dishonoring to God. That said, I think he overstates his case a bit, because he's focused on verse 3, on this careful arrangement, the carefully ordered prayers, but they're only part of the picture.

Come back up to verse 1. Well, the NIV here renders lament, which I guess when we think of a lament, maybe we think of a kind of carefully structured outpouring of woe. But the verb here could equally be rendered as groaning or murmuring or something of that ilk. And the cry for help in verse 2, well, we're thinking here more of a desperate wail than anything else. These are the distressed

screams of a child utterly unable to resolve the situation in which it finds itself.

So not everything that David is talking about here is carefully organized. And it isn't only when he gets to verse 3 that he thinks God is going to hear an answer. He wants God to consider the inarticulate groans. He wants God to hear the cry of desperation. So Davis concludes, I do not want to advocate eloquence in prayer, but I want to reject thoughtlessness in prayer.

That's fine, but I want to expand on it just a little bit, because yes, I think God is dishonored by thoughtlessness. I think when the bright, articulate lawyer comes and he addresses Almighty God with a carelessness with which he would never dream of speaking to his senior partner, that's dishonoring to God. He would do well to consider these carefully arranged requests.

He would do well to consider the holiness of the God he approaches. But the other side of that is that when the overwrought single mother who's so exhausted that she can barely string a sentence together, when she is made to feel like she therefore cannot pray, well, I suggest that that is far more dishonoring to God that she is given such an impression. Because Psalm 5 says you can come with your inarticulate groans and your cries of anguish.

[11 : 52] She would do well to consider the fatherhood of the God she approaches. So in the depths of despair, friends, the criterion for prayer is not, can you produce a sufficiently organized prayer for God to be willing to listen to you? And therefore my conclusion is, come with the best that you have. Just as you would think it disrespectful to waste your friend's time by failing to think about what you want to say, well, don't do that with God either.

But just as your best friend will sit beside you, as you fail to hold back the tears at the latest anguish in your life, and as you gasp out some inarticulate babble between the sobs, well, so God loves it when you turn to him in those times of tragedy and turmoil, whatever the nature of it, and come to him with that cry of desperation. Come with the best that you have in the moment.

So that's David's confident request in verses 1 to 3. It is addressed directly to the one who can answer, and it is phrased in the way that he can manage from groans through to exalted poetry. And in verses 4 to 7, David turns then to consider the character of his God. And as we look at these verses, we should be really careful not to overlook the first word of verse 4.

But I'm afraid if you're using an older NIV Bible here, it's going to be tricky for you to avoid overlooking it because they left it out. But it's back in the newer NIV, so I guess they learned from their previous mistake. The first word, for. For you are not a God who is pleased with wickedness.

[13 : 43] With you evil people are not welcome. So often these little connecting words are key, aren't they, to understanding what is going on, because therefore so for. Why is David expectedly waiting in verse 3?

Why does he express confidence that God will hear his voice? Well, because as he's about to set out, he knows God's character. It's that which equips him. It's that which gives him confidence to come to God.

It's his knowledge of who God is that gives him hope. If you watch the Dragon's Den, the entrepreneurs who come looking for investment, sometimes they get in trouble because they haven't thought about who they are standing in front of. These people with millions of pounds to invest, and somebody comes and pitches a business in direct competition with something that they're already doing. Or they come and they focus on the guy with the internet experience, not the one with the distribution empire that they need, because they don't know who they're talking to. But when they've prepared well, when they know exactly who they are dealing with, they tend to be far more successful. And we tend to pray better prayers when we are more conscious of who God is and what he calls us to pray about. Knowing who God is is vital to our prayers, isn't it? Not least because it reminds us that it's worthwhile to pray at all. Knowing God is fundamental. So that's why in our Exodus series, we're asking, who is this God? That's why we're looking at the fundamentals of our faith in the Creed series on the occasional mornings. That's why when we gather together on a Thursday night in our prayer meetings, we start in God's Word. That's why we consider first God's revelation of himself, and then we pray accordingly. Why is it that David knows he can pray in the later verses of this psalm for God to deal with the wicked people who so trouble him?

Because here in verse 4, he knows God is not pleased with wickedness. He knows God's character. David knows. David knows. You and I should know that God has standards, that there are things that he will not tolerate. There are people who are not welcome. It's actually quite a stark picture of God's character that's presented here, isn't it? At least in comparison to our kind of fluffy, comfy, loosey-goosey, do-whatever sentimental mindset that wants a God who smiles benignly and

lends a helping hand from time to time. No, God looks at certain behaviors and he says, no. There actually is such a thing as wickedness. Evil cannot be permitted into God's presence. And it gets even more pointed than that. Maybe you've heard the phrase, hate the sin but love the sinner. [16:49] But then we read verses 5 and 6 of Psalm 5. The arrogant cannot stand in your presence. You hate all who do wrong. You destroy those who tell lies. The bloodthirsty and deceitful you, Lord, detest.

So there's a problem here, isn't there? David's description of God's character is not, hate the sin but love the sinner. It's not just the evil deeds that are unwelcome. It is the evil people. It is the people who do wrong whom God hates. God has a definite character. He is not a cosmic pushover. He is not an amorphous, bland blob to be shaped as you see fit. And the particular sin of these people who David's worried about, well, it seems to be focused on what they're saying, verse 9. But the application is broader. The wages of sin is death. When God says, don't do that in respect to any human activity, those who disobey that command come into this category here of those whom God detests. Folks, God isn't. He isn't sat there in a rocking chair saying, I hate that you did that, but come here and give me a hug. I think that's more or less how I viewed God as a teenager. Hate the sin but love the sinner. Doesn't matter what I do, God still loves me. Well, not according to Psalm 5. Maybe for some of you in this room right now, the reality is God hates you.

And at this point, we might imagine that in verse 7, David is going to come and contrast himself. And he does, but probably not in the way you would first expect. The contrast is here, the evil people are not welcome, verse 4. They can't come and stay in God's presence for even a brief period. But David, by contrast, verse 7, he can come into God's house. So the contrast between those who cannot come and David who can. But it is not because David is inherently worthy. [19:22] It is not because David has done nothing wrong. No, all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. David's own sin may not be in the front of his mind at this moment, but David knows it's there.

So why can David come in? Because of your great love, Lord, he says. David comes with a reverent attitude. He bows down, but that's not enough. He is wholly dependent in entirety upon God's love for his entry into the presence of the Almighty. The love here is that steadfast covenant mercy, the faithful, enduring love that God has proclaimed and revealed. So David comes into God's presence, and he knows it by grace. God's holiness is at one and the same time utterly incompatible with evil and also characterized by what Gerald Wilson calls relentless goodness, by which he means God's intent has always been, God's intent always will be his intent to bless his creation. Judgment and mercy are not incompatible, but they are both consequences of God's holiness, God's relentless goodness, God's covenant mercy, God's desire that none should perish, that means that he offers a way into his presence.

At the close of our service we'll sing, and can it be, tis mercy all, immense and free. It is by God's mercy alone that David can come with his prayers, and that same mercy and that same grace is still available to you and to me today, the grace that runs towards us when we are far off and grabs us and embraces us.

My dad always says when he pitches that his aim is to comfort the troubled and to trouble the comfortable. And it's not always easy to do both of those things in one sermon.

But I think both of them are here for us in this psalm. If you are inclined to think that God is okay with your sin, we'll hear the warning of his hatred.

[21:47] And if you are inclined to think that you are too bad for God, we'll hear the reassurance that that is exactly what you are. And unless and until you are welcomed by his great love that is able to cover over a multitude of sins, that is what you will remain.

So cast yourself upon the rock of ages. Kiss the sun, lest he be angry. Kiss the sun, lest he be angry.

And so, having reminded himself and reminded us of the character of God, David comes now to the substance of his request. From verse 8 onwards, comes to the petition for help.

We might note, by the way, that we're halfway through this prayer before the actual request comes. You know, the place where you and I often start. But David's halfway through his prayer before he starts to ask.

And I, by the way, am well over halfway through this sermon, just in case you were panicking for a moment there. I suggest there are two things that David requests here from God in these verses,

both of which we would do well to imitate in appropriate situations.

[22 : 59] And the first request comes in verse 8. Well, it's kind of the third request he makes, but the other ones are pleased for him to hear. This is what he wants God to listen to. Lead me, Lord, in your righteousness.

It's an interesting thing to pray, isn't it? Particularly interesting because of the situation that David is in. When everything's going fine, I guess that's maybe the sort of prayer that we would expect. But David here is in an obviously tricky situation. He's conscious of the presence of these wicked men. He's aware of the damage that is being done by their words, as the evocative language of verse 9 makes abundantly clear.

But David's first concern is this. Lead me, Lord, in your righteousness. And I suppose that's the sort of phrase which prayed in one way could almost be that mindless filler that we were dismissed earlier.

But prayed in another way, this is one of the most profound prayers possible, isn't it? Lord, show me the way to go. Lord, teach me how to live. Lord, lead me along moment by moment.

[24 : 09] Lord, guide my steps because I cannot do this alone. Lord, lead me not into temptation. Lord, make your way straight before me. Walking in righteousness.

Walking in God's ways. This is more precious to David. This is a more urgent concern for him, even in these dire straits, than even his reputation or his physical safety in this time of trouble.

If God will lead him by the hand, then the slander of his enemies will fall flat on its face. The malice that flows out of their inmost beings will have no power to destroy his reputation.

Because with God leading him, he will lead an exemplary life. And so he continues then naturally on into the second request that's expressed in a few different ways.

Negatively, David prays for the punishment of his enemies. Declare them guilty, O God. Verse 10. Banish them. And whether David has in mind an immediate physical banishment or a kind of future eschatological punishment at the end of time, what I think is worthy of note here is the justification for this request, that God declare them guilty and banish them.

[25 : 27] Why? For they have rebelled against you. David's concern isn't that they're threatening him. David's concern isn't first and foremost his own safety. No, the issue is their rebellion against God.

And what about you and me? Is our concern for our own safety and our comfort and convenience? Or is it for the fame, the honor, the glory of God's name?

I think in some ways this kind of governs a little bit whether we hope for present downfall for our enemies or vindication at Christ's return.

If we're concerned with our own safety, then future punishment doesn't do us much good. But God hasn't promised us an easy life in the here and now. Our hope for peace in the land lies in the new heavens and the new earth on the other side of Christ's return.

Not in that physical nation of Israel that it did, at least to some extent, for David. But still there is, positively, there is a request for protection, verse 11.

[26 : 36] And the expectation that that will naturally result in praise. And the image of this protection in verse 11 is that the protection is spread over David. You might think of this image that did the rounds online back in 2015.

As this father protects his child at cost to himself. Or the mother hen who spreads the wings of her protection over her chicks. That's the kind of picture here of how God tenderly cares for his people. And in verse 12, David returns to his knowledge of God's character. He assures himself that God does indeed treat the righteous in this kind of way.

Such that they are surrounded by an impregnable shield. The tenderness of the hen spreading her wings is paralleled by the power, the force of this encompassing shield.

When Martin Luther, when he was making his way to Augsburg to appear before one of the cardinals, who summoned him to answer for his supposedly heretical opinions.

[27 : 50] When that great reformer was traveling along, one of the cardinal's servants, he taunted Luther, asking, Where will you find shelter if your patron, the elector of Saxony, should desert you?

Where will you find protection if all around you should give up? Where will you find protection if the powerful people who have protected you in the past cease to do so?

Luther's answer? Under the shelter of heaven. Friends, the God of Psalm 5 was Luther's shelter as he went into the lion's den.

The God of this psalm was David's shelter as he wrote it. And the God of this psalm should be your shelter and mine. Let's pray. Let's pray. Lord God Almighty, thank you for your word.

Thank you that even when it is hard to hear, even when it is uncomfortable, that it is here for our good, that there is profit for us in hearing what you are saying and considering carefully how you would have us be.

[29 : 15] Thank you, Lord, for that clear contrast that these verses present us. Lord, you know the state of our hearts before you.

Make them readily apparent to us as well, we ask. Where we are uncomfortable, where we feel hard-pressed, Lord, may we know your sheltering care and protection.

May we know you as the compassionate shield, proof against all enemies that assail us. And where we are improperly comfortable.

Lord, might your Holy Spirit prompt us, prick our consciences, show us, show us where we must repent and come to you.

Show us if we need to stop being your enemies and become one of your beloved children. Show us that whether for the first time or whether it is something that we have resolved so many times over the years.

[30 : 40] show us, show us what we need from you this morning, we ask, in order that we might find rest and peace in your presence.

In the name of our only hope, our only Savior, our Lord Jesus. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.