

Hope for the unjustly accused

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[0 : 00] Psalm 7a, Shigayon of David, which he sang to the Lord concerning Cush, a Benjaminite. Lord my God, I take refuge in you.

Save and deliver me from all who pursue me, or they will tear me apart like a lion and rip me to pieces with no one to rescue me. Lord my God, if I have done this and there is guilt on my hands, if I have repaid my ally with evil, or without cause have robbed my foe, then let my enemy pursue and overtake me.

Let him trample my life to the ground and make me sleep in the dust. Arise, Lord, in your anger. Rise up against the rage of my enemies.

Awake, my God, decree justice. Let the assembled peoples gather round you while you sit enthroned over them on high. Let the Lord judge the peoples.

Vindicate me, Lord, according to my righteousness, according to my integrity, O Most High. Bring to an end the violence of the wicked and make the righteous secure, you the righteous God who probes hearts and minds.

[1 : 14] My shield is God Most High, who saves the upright in heart. God is a righteous judge, a God who displays his wrath every day. If he does not relent, he will sharpen his sword.

He will bend and string his bow. He has prepared his deadly weapons. He makes ready his flaming arrows. Whoever is pregnant with evil conceives trouble and gives birth to disillusionment.

Whoever digs a hole and scoops it out falls into the pit they have made. The trouble they cause recoils on them. Their violence comes down on their own heads. I will give thanks to the Lord because of his righteousness.

I will sing the praises of the name of the Lord Most High. Most of us, I imagine, will have had the experience of being unjustly accused.

Whether that's a malicious accusation or the result of an honest mistake, there are times when somebody says we have behaved wickedly when that is not, in fact, the case.

[2 : 21] Maybe some of us are still nursing the injustice of the time that our parents blamed us for the wrongdoing of our siblings. Sometimes parents doing their best to pursue justice.

Sometimes parents make mistakes. And that's still true for us as adults, isn't it? There are still times when somebody gets the wrong end of the stick and thinks we've done something we haven't.

And no amount of protestation will convince them otherwise. And they're telling everybody what we supposedly did and the harm to our good name can be considerable.

Perhaps even worse than that mistake, that getting the wrong end of the stick, perhaps even worse is when it is a malicious action. When they know that the accusation is false.

But out of a desire to hurt us or in an attempt to cover their own transgressions or as they lash out in their experience of pain, in these different ways they are moved to accuse you of something that they know full well you haven't done.

[3 : 26] And in these different kinds of situations, even if we might eventually be vindicated by the courts, even if there is insufficient evidence to convict, yet still the court of public opinion can often make its own judgment, can't it?

Being accused of something that you haven't done, it can be a really difficult situation, can't it? It can be in many ways actually even more difficult than being accused of something that you have done.

Because at least if the accusation is genuine, well there you have the option to repent, to seek forgiveness and to move forwards. But if the accusation is unjust and untrue, if you can't in good conscience repent of what you're being accused of, if that's the situation then how do you make any progress?

How do you clear your name when you are unjustly accused? You just end up being told that you are protesting too much. Being told that there is no smoke without fire.

Unjust accusations can be devastating. And that is the situation that David seems to be worried about as he pens this psalm. The superscription here, this isn't a huge amount of help.

[4 : 37] We don't know what a shigion is, probably a musical term. And we don't have any more information than this psalm itself about any incident with a guy called Cush from the tribe of Benjamin.

But King Saul is from the tribe of Benjamin. And the tribe of Benjamin ally themselves with Absalom when he rebels against David. So there's quite a bit of history between David and this tribe of Benjamin down through the years.

So the superscription doesn't give us much of a sense of the situation. But verses 3 and 4, they make it very clear that David is being unjustly accused. Seems it's being reported that he has mistreated an ally, verse 3, a covenantal partner.

This is stronger than just a friend. He's being accused of mistreating someone to whom he had obligations, somebody whom honor demanded that he treat well. And David is vehement in his denial of these accusations.

But perhaps it's to our advantage that we don't actually know the precise historical details. Because it makes it all the more inviting to consider how the truths of this psalm apply to our own situations when we face unjust accusations.

[5 : 52] And we find modeled for us here three steps, which are headings this morning. Step 1, be confident of your righteousness. Step 2, when you are unjustly accused, find refuge in God.

Find refuge in God. And step 3, when you are unjustly accused, sing praise to God. So step 1, be confident of your righteousness. We're looking especially here at verses 1 to 5.

This first preparatory step, if you're unjustly accused, the first step is, well the first step is be sure that the accusation really is unjust. Because I don't know about you, but when I think about my own inclinations, I know all too well that when anyone accuses me of anything, my first instinct is always denial.

The first response that runs through my brain is, it wasn't me. How dare you accuse me of doing something wrong? It must be you who is mistaken. I think in most situations, our default response is to protest our innocence.

Sometimes that stays locked inside our heads. Perhaps more often it's verbalized to the person making the accusation. Whichever, whether internal or external, I think it is often there.

[7 : 08] And we have to be wary of that default response. Because our hearts are deceitful. We lie even to ourselves. We tell ourselves we are innocent. When it is not, in fact, the case.

So we have to recognize the possibility that maybe the accusation is legitimate. But that doesn't change the fact that sometimes the accusation really is untrue.

Sometimes we are being accused of things that we have not done wrong. Sometimes we really are innocent. And it's that situation that David is concerned with here. So step one, be confident of your righteousness.

Be sure that that confidence is legitimate. And certainly for David, he's very confident. Verses one and two focus on the need for refuge. And then from verse three, he protests his innocence in the strongest possible terms.

He says, He calls down curses on himself if the accusations are true.

[8 : 22] If the complaint is well founded then, says David, his life should be trampled in the dirt. Dale Ralph Davis says, These first five verses, they show us that we should take care with our prayers.

Because what David models for us here, this is a good way to pray. But it's only a good way to pray if we truly are innocent. Think how terrible it would be for David if the accusations against him were in fact true.

And he had called down God's curses upon himself. Secondly, in David's confidence in his righteousness, it's important to notice to whom he is appealing here.

His appeal here is not to a human court. His appeal is to Almighty God. That's there in the start of verse three. Why appeal there? Well, because God is the one who knows the reality.

It may well be possible that others are deceived. People around us might believe the false accusations against us. Or for that matter, they might believe the sanitized version of ourselves that

we portray to the world when we put on our masks before we leave the house and post all the triumphs on social media.

[9 : 36] People might be deceived, thinking better or worse of us than we deserve. But God is not deceived. David appeals to God because God knows everything. God sees our every deed.

God sees whether the accusations are true or not. God knows not only what we have done, but our every thought, our true motivations, the details of our circumstances, for good or for ill.

So you must be confident in your righteousness. It's pretty foolish to call down curses protesting your innocence unless you really are righteous, unless the God who sees all will concur with that assessment.

You need to be able to pray as verse eight does. Vindicate me, Lord, according to my righteousness. However, at this point, some of you are thinking, hang on a minute.

Hang on, how can David, pray, vindicate me according to my righteousness? Has David not read Romans chapter three? Does he not know that there is no one righteous, not even one?

[10 : 41] There is no one who understands. There is no one who seeks God. All have turned away. They have together become worthless. There is no one who does good, not even one.

Now, I mean, of course, David hasn't read Romans. He's a few centuries too early for that. But it's not a new idea when Paul writes it in his letter. Paul's quoting the thinking of Psalm 14 and Psalm 53.

This is a fundamental truth. There is no one who is truly righteous, save Christ alone. When somebody asks why do bad things happen to good people, the somewhat flippant response is, well, that only ever happened once, and he volunteered.

That's true. Bad things only happen to a good person once. There's only one who is righteous. It's with good reason that, as Boyce puts it, we've been taught to believe that only fools ask for justice from God, and what we need from God is not justice, but mercy.

That's true. We need God's mercy. But what's happening here is we're kind of butting up against different aspects of judgment, different conceptions of right and righteousness.

[11 : 56] C.S. Lewis, in his Reflections on the Psalms, he says, as Christians, we tend to think of justice primarily in terms of ultimate heavenly justice, judgment on the last day.

That's our primary focus when we talk about judgment. But the Old Testament Jew thinks of justice in much more earthly terms. He wants judgment in the here and now. And these two different understandings give us different attitudes to judgment, don't they?

On the one hand, the Christian trembles at that thought of God's judgment, thinking of himself primarily as the defendant and knowing that he is not innocent.

Apart from the substitutionary atonement of Christ, the Christian knows that he stands to be condemned. And so he looks for mercy. But the Jew, thinking of earthly justice, doesn't tremble at judgment.

Instead, he seeks it. He wants it. He needs God to be judge. Because he doesn't think of himself as the defendant, but as the plaintiff.

[13 : 02] The Christian hopes for acquittal or a pardon. The Jew hopes for a resounding triumph with heavy damages. And that's closer to the idea that's in David's mind here.

When he asks that God vindicate him according to his righteousness, it's not that he's thinking of righteousness on the last day. Not righteousness in an absolute sense.

It's not that he thinks he will be able to stand and demand entry into heaven on the basis of his moral worth. David's thinking about now. He's thinking about relative righteousness.

He's thinking, in this particular matter, with respect to these accusations, I am innocent. He hasn't done what he's being accused of.

And so he shouldn't pay a penalty for it. Indeed, according to God's laws, his accusers should themselves pay the penalty that they're trying to make him pay. That's the principle of Deuteronomy 19.

[14 : 01] See, sometimes you and I, sometimes we're so focused on the idea that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Sometimes we're so conscious that any sin deserves the penalty of death.

Sometimes we're so very aware of that. And that is good and wise. We should remember these things. Lewis says that that Christian picture of God's judgment is probably far more profound and far safer for our souls than the Jewish conception.

But we have to be clear that there is still a difference between one sin and another. The shorter catechism, whilst it establishes that every sin deserves God's wrath and curse, it also asks, are all transgressions of the law equally heinous?

Answer, some sins in themselves and by reason of several aggravations are more heinous in the sight of God than others. And there's a few passages that they cite in evidence for that.

Among them, Ezekiel chapter 8, where the prophet is told several times that he's going to be shown things more detestable than what he's looking at at that moment. He will see greater abominations than what he sees each time.

[15:16] Some sins are worse than others. Some people are less righteous than others. We need both of these things in our minds.

So if honest self-reflection this morning tells you that your unrighteousness, that absolute unrighteousness, if your unrighteousness has not been covered by the blood of Jesus, then stay with that picture of justice in the sense of the last day.

Recognize the reality of that coming penalty. Grapple with the danger of that day and throw yourself on God's mercy. If that's the picture you need to hear right now, then don't listen to this next bit because that's more important.

But if you know that your sins are covered, well then, Lewis, there's profit for us in also thinking about this Jewish perspective on God's justice.

Because if we grapple with the reality of present injustices, then we're moved to share God's compassion. We're moved to consider those who need to be defended.

[16:24] We're moved to champion the widow and the orphan and the refugee. We're moved to seek to topple unjust regimes and see them replaced with good governments. We're moved to try to reform unjust systems in our own society.

We're moved to look at our politicians' manifestos and vote not on the basis of what's going to result in me being most well-off, but on the basis of what will promote justice and what will empower the powerless.

There is value for us in this Jewish conception of righteousness. Boyce asks, is it not true that preoccupation with a final heavenly judgment at which we hope to be acquitted through the work of Christ has often made us indifferent to the need for justice now?

I think it has. So what does it look like to walk the way of the righteous in the midst of the muck of life? Well, says Psalm 7, it includes crying out for justice.

It includes longing for wrongs to be righted. It means when we are unjustly accused, then we ask for justice to be done. We ask for vindication, and we seek that on behalf of others too.

[17:37] So David here is confident in his righteousness. And if we want to follow in his footsteps in this prayer, then we need that same kind of confidence. And here we've already started to move into step two, haven't we?

Step two, find refuge in God. When you are unjustly accused, that is where hope is to be found. That is where your refuge is. David's already expressed confidence in God as his refuge in verse one.

We've sung about that ourselves too. Rock of ages, let me hide myself in thee. And it was there in the Jesus strong and kind as well, though I can't remember the quote from that one.

But in verse six and onwards, the nature of that refuge in God becomes more apparent. Because what David's looking for isn't just a hiding place.

What he needs is for God to rise up. He wants God to get angry. He wants God to act. He pictures God as asleep, heedless of the present injustice.

[18:40] God, why are you just lying there? Why are you just lying there? Get up and do something. Intervene. Verse 10, God is his shield. He's certain of a defense. But more than that, verse 12, David calls for God to go on the offensive.

To sharpen his sword and to bend his bow. There's a couple of different possibilities here in verse 12 as to exactly what David's saying.

Because it's not certain who the two he's refer to. And because the verb translated here as relent is also often translated repent. The NIV here leaves kind of both possibilities open.

Either both of the he's refer to God. And relent is the helpful way of rendering the verb. And the idea is, well, at the moment, God is on a course to bend his bow and to sharpen his sword.

And if he doesn't change his mind, then that's what will happen. But it's possible he might be moved to mercy. He might relent. That's one possibility. The other is that the first he refers to a wicked person.

[19 : 43] And the second refers to God. And then probably we want to translate repent rather than relent. So the idea then is that unless the wicked man repents of his wrongdoing, in this case, unless he retracts his charge against David, unless the wicked man repents, he, God, will sharpen his sword and string his bow.

Think on balance. The latter is more what David is intending to convey. But actually the sense is kind of the same in either case, isn't it? Because it's man's repentance that would cause God to relent, isn't it?

Like when Jonah went to preach to Nineveh and pronounced judgment to come. But that doesn't mean that that's set in stone, but only that perfectly in accordance with his revealed character, that this is the course God will follow unless something changes, unless repentance comes.

And here, verse 12, this understanding of looking for repentance on the part of the wicked man.

This answers the question of why, in verse 6, David ends up frustrated with God's inaction.

This inaction, the fact that David feels like God is lying there asleep, this inaction is not a refusal to bring justice, but an opportunity for repentance.

[21 : 02] 2 Peter 3, 9, The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead, he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

There may be a delay, but it is certain that justice will be done. And the following verses here in Psalm 7 describe further the nature of that justice, that judgment on the wicked.

It is kind of pictured like a boomerang, that what these wicked people have intended for others will recoil upon them. Sort of poetic justice in the picture of the man who digs a pit, only to fall into it himself.

This is the justice that we said earlier, Deuteronomy 19 calls God's people to enact, that which the wicked man intends for others, that you do to him. So David, when he is falsely accused, needs to find his refuge in God, as the one who can act, because God is the one who reserves vengeance as his province.

God is the one with all of the power. God is the one whose anger is always righteous. God is the one who will apply perfect justice, as retribution comes to the wicked. So, knowing this God, finding refuge in him, for David, step three is to praise God.

[22 : 26] When he's falsely accused, David's response is praise. And maybe this seems like a pretty odd response to trying circumstances. And the oddity of that response isn't helped by the fact that this is expressed in a single verse at the end of the psalm.

It's only in verse 17 that he resolves to give thanks to the Lord. It kind of almost looks like an appendix, doesn't it? A case of, okay, right, I've asked for what I need, and, oh, I remember.

I should give thanks to God. I should praise God. I mustn't forget that. Okay, stick it on at the end. I think it could come across that way, but I don't think that's what's going on.

I don't think this is an afterthought. I think this is the result. Do you remember a couple of weeks ago when we looked at Psalm 6? We said, the confidence in the closing verses there is not a separate prayer, but proof the prayer has been answered.

Well, so too here in Psalm 7. This final verse is not an appendix. It's the conclusion. It's what everything is driving towards. Because David knows that he is innocent.

[23 : 28] Because he knows Yahweh to be the God of perfect justice. Because he knows that refuge is found in him. Because he knows that God's righteous anger will be expressed.

Then praise is the only proper result. It is the only logical conclusion. So David responds to these false accusations by praising God.

Now notice here what hasn't happened. There's no evidence the accusation has been withdrawn.

There's no indication that a court case has gone through and he's been publicly exonerated.

There's no indication that the accusation is no longer an issue. No, his name is still besmirched.

He's still under threat.

He's still being pursued. And yet, even without any mention of the outcome of David's distress, still, what he's received has been something better than an immediate action to free him from troubles.

[24 : 42] What he's received has been a new perspective on his problem. Why? Well, because he's taken it to God in prayer. David can rest easy now, knowing that the God of perfect justice, the

God whom he here thanks for his righteousness, this God will indeed do justly.

He will indeed vindicate him. I think David perhaps has come to see that ultimately it's of limited consequence whether he enjoys a good reputation among his peers or not.

What matters is not how others see him, but how the God of the universe sees him. When a young child performs in a school play, they're not particularly interested in the volume of the applause at the end of the play, are they?

No, they're sat on the stage before the show starts, looking for one face and one face only in that crowd out there. What do they care what anybody else thinks? Mummy, did you see me?

Well, how much more David knows that he needs the approval of one person and one alone. David needs a good reputation before God.

[25 : 59] And having assured himself that God does know his innocence in this matter, then he can rest easy. So folks, when you are wrongly accused, it may well be very painful.

You might lose the admiration of others. Even those whom you counted as your friends might believe those lies. Even your husband or your wife, whose role it's supposed to be to be especially on your side, even they might be led astray by these false accusations.

Even they might come to think ill of you. But when you are falsely accused, if you are confident before God that the accusation is indeed false, then you can take refuge in the rock of ages.

You can hide yourself behind the shield of God most high. You can be confident in the warrior God who is sharpening his sword in order to bring justice. I mean, that kind of confident security.

Well, what else would you do but cry out in praise and in worship? Let's pray. Amen. Lord God, thank you that you see and know everything.

[27 : 20] We know that sometimes that is a troubling thought to us, that you see that which we wish you did not. But thank you that it is also to us a comfort, that where we are innocent of wrongdoing, that you know, that there is no possibility of you being deceived, of you being led astray by the wicked lies of others, that even if our reputation suffers now, our reputation before you is based upon your perfect knowledge.

So, Lord, thank you that we can know you as our place of refuge, as our comforter, as our protector. Lord, grant that we may hide ourselves in you today and always.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.