

# A Prayer To Live By

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[ 0 : 00 ] Your Bible likely has a title written either before or beside this text, probably somewhere around the first verse, that is there to alert you to a potential theme for the psalm.

If you have an English standard version like me, it probably says, Great is your steadfast love. Do you see that? If you have a different version, it probably says something different than that. But if you're with me, that's what it says. Now, these titles can actually be very helpful to us, but you need to at least know that they're not actually part of the text, that specific title.

Bible Publishers supplies those to us in order to aid the reader in their study, but at the end of the day, they're really of no real import to us. But just below that title is a superscription that, even though it does not have a verse number, is actually very much a part of the scriptural text.

And these notes, supplied in the scriptures themselves, give us some necessary contextual information to help guide our understanding as we come to psalms like this.

[ 1 : 13 ] This one, no matter what translation you have, will simply read a prayer of David. A prayer of David. It's very simple and straightforward, isn't it? So simple that I'm going to take a few minutes to explore that simple phrase, just a prayer of David.

So that the first thing that we're meant to understand here in the text is that this was a prayer before it was a song. There's no musical or liturgical notes that are given in this psalm, as with many other psalms.

There's no selahs. There's no to the chief musician. There's no melody that's attached to it or a particular instrument. No musical, no liturgical notes whatsoever.

And however it may have been used ultimately in the worship of Israel, the original composition of Psalm 86 is very clearly simply of a fervent cry to the Lord in prayer.

And as you read through the psalm, you find it immediately apparent that it is a prayer of lament. A passionate plea for God to graciously intervene in the life of a worshiper who is facing severe hardship.

[ 2 : 26 ] So that right off the bat, we can discern that the purpose of this passage, the purpose of this psalm, is that we might learn how God's people are to lament in the midst of incredible difficulty and hardship and trial.

Which presents for us a very simple and practical question, and that is, are you facing some type of trial or tragedy or potential tragedy?

And you find yourself completely unsure of how you are to respond to that situation in your life in light of your faith. Have you ever been there? Where your trust is in the Lord, you are faithful to the Lord, you're doing to the best of your ability all that you can to be obedient to him, and trust him, and follow him, and be faithful to him.

And then something tragic happens in your life. A difficulty comes in your path that you did not expect, and you're tempted to abandon your hope. You're tempted to abandon your faith, and you really are uncertain.

I don't even know how to pray now. I don't know what I'm supposed to pray for. I don't know if it's even worth it to pray to God at this point in my life. We've been there. Perhaps you have been there recently.

[ 3 : 45 ] Maybe you're there now. And God is gracious to give us scriptures like this one, that teach us and train us how to pray, how to lament, and how to go through this particular realm of experience in our lives.

The next item that we're meant to understand as it relates to this superscription is that it is a lament initially belonging to King David.

This specific occasion for David's prayer is mentioned here. Verse 14 at least gives us the clue that the circumstance involved insolent, ruthless, godless men who were seeking to take David's life. A situation that was very common to his experience, if you go through the Old Testament and read the narrative about his life. This always seemed to be the case with David, didn't it? There was always somebody coming after them.

There was always a place that he needed to hide. There was always some type of enemy at his door. And verse 14 clues us in that this prayer was coming as a result of one of those circumstances.

[ 4 : 57 ] There's also some indicators in this psalm that suggest that David's sin was at least partly responsible for his circumstance.

Verses 5 and 15 both acknowledge David's need for God to be forgiving and merciful. Look at it in verse 5. For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving.

Verse 15, he quotes Exodus chapter 34. He says, But you, O Lord, are a God who is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.

There's at least a hint that part of the problem for David's life and experience is the fact that he has sinned against the Lord and he is facing consequences related to that sin.

Now that's not to say that all of our hardships and all of our trials are direct results of particular sins. But it's at least a reminder that the very presence of suffering comes from the fact and as a result of living in a fallen world.

[ 6 : 06 ] And any prayer for God is ultimately, on some level, a prayer for God's mercy. David acknowledges that here.

That even in the midst of this particular prayer, he cries out, recognizing that God must be merciful and he must be forgiving, else David's prayer would be in vain.

So we might discern that this lament reveals a particular pattern of prayer for David throughout the course of his life as he routinely faced opposition and troubling circumstances and the immediate consequences of his sin.

David knew well what it was like to plead for God's merciful and gracious intervention and driving his lament here is the recognition that he is wholly dependent on the one true and living God.

That's driving the whole thing. It's not hard to see it, is it? 14 of the 17 verses involve direct appeals to the Lord God. Just look at them with me. Verse 1, incline your ear, O Lord.

[ 7 : 19 ] Verse 2, you are my God. Verse 3, be gracious to me, O Lord. Verse 4, O Lord, to you do I lift up my soul. Verse 5, for you, O Lord, are good and forgiving.

6, give ear, O Lord, to my prayer. Verse 8, there is none like you among the gods, O Lord. Verse 9, all the nations will worship before you, O Lord.

Verse 10, you alone are God. 11, teach me your way, O Lord. I give thanks to you, O Lord my God. In verse 12. Verse 14, O God, insolent men have risen up.

15, but you, O Lord, are a God merciful. 17, because you, Lord, have helped me. Have you ever prayed a prayer like that? We're in the midst of your despair and in the midst of your heartache and trouble.

You really know nothing else to pray except, O Lord, help. Do something, Lord. There's a uniqueness even to the Christian dynamic of prayer that is uniquely different than any other religion where we recognize that our God is a father to us.

[ 8 : 34 ] And have you ever gotten before the Lord in prayer and you really didn't know what else to say except, O Father, Father, please help me.

This is the true essence of prayer. This kind of prayer only flows from the lips of one who is emptied of pride, wholly dependent on the Lord.

And David is in such a circumstance now where he's brought to the lowest of lows. And over and over and over he repeats his cry to the Lord because he knows the only hope that he actually has in this moment is for God to intervene.

But we must not let the intimacy of David's prayer distract us from the fact that God still saw fit to include it in Israel's book of worship.

It originated with David, but God intended it to be a lament useful for all of his people. In other words, we're not only to follow David's pattern for prayer, it's God's desire that we pray David's prayer.

[ 9 : 45 ] That when we do get to those moments where we're not exactly sure what to do, and we're not sure exactly how we're to respond, we pray this prayer. You may not have insolent, ruthless, and godless men who are seeking your life.

Surely you understand what it means to be in such dire circumstance that you despair of life. Surely you know what it's like to recognize that your only hope for deliverance and help demands that God graciously, maybe even supernaturally, intervenes in your life for your favor.

You know, we think about people we love like Terry and Bev, who have such a prognosis right now that really their only hope is that God would step in, even supernaturally, and show his favor in Bev's help.

You've been there. You know what that's like. Surely you know what it's like to see your despair as a direct result of your sin, so that when you do come to the Lord in a prayer like this, the only hope that you have is that he is a merciful God.

And you simply cry out, Lord, just please forgive me. Have mercy on me. So that I do not have to endure what I deserve to endure in this moment.

[ 11 : 14 ] And what is it that we must do when facing these kinds of hardships in our lives? When we come to a prayer like Psalm 86, and we lament with David, incline your ear, O Lord.

Please hear me and answer me, for I am poor and needy. I need you. I need your help. Come to my aid.

Well, there's three stanzas to the composition of this psalm. At the center is a prayer of praise.

That's verses 8 through 13. And this prayer of praise is flanked on either side by David's petition for God's help.

And there's an important distinction between these things, but there's also an importance to the fact that they're together in a single prayer. Some people live as if these two dimensions of prayer, that is, praise and petition, are mutually exclusive to one another.

They find it difficult for the two things to rightfully exist and genuinely and authentically exist in the same prayer. Their prayers generally tend toward praise when things are good, comfortable.

[ 12 : 31 ] Tend toward petition when things are burdensome and discouraging. They may even find it difficult or even near impossible to worship when facing hardship.

And then when enjoying blessing, they find it difficult and think little of their need for the grace of God. And you know what that's like too. All that we would recognize with David.

That the two realities of prayer are not competing. They're actually complementary. At least for those of us who are in Christ. It's only as a result of what is praiseworthy of God.

The things that we know to be true of Him according to His Word. That we can actually find hope in casting ourselves on Him in the hour of need. It's only once we find His nature trustworthy that we will cling to Him at each and every turn of life.

And if we are to pray like David prayed, we must learn to marry these parallel dimensions of worship and lament, of praise and petition.

[ 13 : 42 ] So that our laments are flavored by heartfelt worship. And our worship is also infused by childlike appeals to our Father.

Do you see that? They're not exclusive to one another. They're actually intertwined with one another. So that the moment we come to God seeking His divine aid, it's partnered with the fact that we are worshiping Him as the only one who can actually come to our aid.

Our trust is in Him. And we echo the trust that we have in the midst of that prayer. But then when things are good, we come and we worship the Lord with gratitude and with praise.

Also bringing in those moments childlike dependence, childlike appeals to the Lord. They work perfectly together. And this psalm is such a helpful example of that. Thus, David's prayer is grounded in nothing other than the very character of God.

Notice that none of his appeals are on the basis of who he is. He doesn't say, Lord, help me because I'm the king. He doesn't say, Lord, help me because I was your chosen shepherd.

[ 14 : 51 ] He doesn't say, help me because I'm your anointed one. None of it is on the basis of who he is. None of it is on the basis of what he feels God owes him.

All of his requests are rooted in what he trusts to be true of the God that he loves and worships.

That he is a God who is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

And herein lies the true source of David's hope in this prayer. What is it that gives him such hopefulness as he comes to the Lord? It is nothing but the character of God. He knows God to be these things. And that is where he roots his hope. And if our laments are grounded in what we feel we deserve, we'll never have genuine hope for deliverance. We'll always have worry. We'll constantly wonder, have we been good enough to earn God's favor in this situation? We'll constantly question, has God really forgiving?  
[15:57] Is he withholding forgiveness from me in this moment? Is that why he is bringing me in this? And we may pray and ask for his help. But if it's on the basis of who we are, what we deserve, we'll never have real hope.

We might also be guilty of an inflated sense of self-worth, making prideful demands of God, and then raging in anger when we believe that he has treated us unjustly. Lord, after all I have done for you, how could you do this to me? Notice David doesn't say that either. But when our prayer is rooted in the perfect character of God, our hope for reprieve and deliverance and blessing will have no end. Why? Because it isn't based on the ever-faltering condition of our fallen nature, but it's based on the steadfast love of God with whom James wrote is no variation or shadow of turning. That if he is a merciful God today, he is a merciful God tomorrow. And if he is full of steadfast love today, he will be full of steadfast love tomorrow as well.

[17:16] And when we come to him in prayer in these moments of hardship, we reflect the fact that these things are true of God and that they are always true of God. Therefore, we always have hope. So long as our hope is rooted in who God is and not what we want or who we are. There's several attributes of God that David mentions here and he reflects upon in his appeal. I want to point out just two of them to you this morning. First, I want you to note when David says that God is good. God is good. Look at verse five.

For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call upon you. Here, the goodness of God is tied directly to his forgiveness and steadfast love, showing God's willingness and desire to pour out his goodness on all who call out to him in faith.  
[18:21] Over and over, the scriptures, which are God's self-revelation to us, testify to the fact that God desires to be merciful and kind to those who call upon him.

Do you believe that's true? It's what the Bible says. Lamentations chapter three, the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. His mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness. The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him. Micah chapter seven, who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever because he delights in steadfast love.

I love that verse because it shows that not only does God possess steadfast love and mercy, but he actually delights in giving it. That a part of his nature, a part of who he is, is this desire for goodness and kindness to be poured out on his people.

[19:31] Psalm 103, For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him. As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.

As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him. For he knows our frame.

He knows that we are dust. Those of you who have read *The Hiding Place*, which is a biography of Corrie ten Boom, will be familiar with her family's experience in Nazi concentration camps during World War II.

And if you haven't read that, you should go purchase that book today and begin it immediately. You'll remember, if you've read it, that Corrie and her sister were in the Ravensbrook concentration camp, suffering in ways, means of brutality, that we will never quite be able to comprehend ourselves, probably.

But in the midst of all of that, they clung tightly to what they believe to be true of God in the Bible. Many people have directed this quote to Corrie ten Boom as if it was her, but it wasn't actually her who said this.

[ 20 : 47 ] It was her sister Betsy who said this to Corrie when Corrie was at a point in this despair where she was ready to give in and give up all hope. And Betsy looks at her sister and she says, there is no pit so deep that the love of God is not deeper still.

She knew the word. She knew that of all things that are true of God, he is good. And that even in the midst of the deepest kind of suffering that any of us could possibly experience, experience, this worshiper of God and child of Christ cries out to God and says, I know that your love is deeper even than my experience now.

Is that not what David is experiencing in this prayer? People are trying to kill me, Lord. But you're good. Good. And you're merciful.

And you're gracious. And you're kind. And even in the midst of tremendous hardship, we must trust that he is good. And we must ground our prayers in his divine goodness.

Second, I want you to note when David says that God is great. So in verse 5, David says, you are good. Verse 10, he says, for you are great and do wondrous things.

[ 22 : 10 ] You alone are God, David says. The greatness of God here refers to his power, his ability to accomplish the things that David is actually asking for him to do.

David recognizes that Yahweh is the only God. He is the true God. He's made his appeal now on the grounds that God is all-powerful and that he is actively working in ways that are even beyond our comprehension.

Look at the verse again in verse 10. Look at the nature of the verse. For you are great and do. You are doing. You are actively doing wondrous things.

Here I am, God. Insolent men are after me. But you are good and you're great and you're doing things that I can't see. That's the nature of his prayer. That's where he roots his appeal.

And how wonderful that these two attributes of God, his goodness and his greatness, belong wholly and equally to him. Think about this. If he were good, or excuse me, if he were great, but he was not good, we would have no hope for God's mercy.

[ 23 : 23 ] We have no hope for his mercy. We would be able to recognize that he has the power to deliver us, but we would not know for certain whether or not he is willing to do so.

We would have no promise of that willingness. We'd have no option then but to subscribe to some type of works or merit-based religion, struggling day by day to do just the right things that might appease this vengeful God and hopefully gain some kind of favor from him.

But if God were good and not great, his thoughts would be reduced to mere sentiment. He'd have no real power to affect the deliverance that his heart seems to so often crave for us.

But alas, God is both good and great. He is both willing and able. And this truth is revealed no clearer than in the eternal salvation that he has provided for us in Christ Jesus.

Jesus, as Hebrews chapter one says, is the exact imprint of God's nature. He himself is God. He possesses these very same attributes that David prays is possessed in God the Father.

[ 24 : 46 ] Jesus is good in that he willingly left the throne of heaven to become a man and suffer at the hands of men. Out of his desire for our salvation, God incarnate lays down his life to be slaughtered as a sacrifice for sins.

Because of his goodness, he invites us to enter this love and grace not by anything that we might do, but by simply trusting in him and who he is and what he has accomplished on our behalf.

That's his goodness. That's his willingness. No man takes my life from me, he says in John 10. I lay it down. I came to seek and to save.

It was the will of the Son because of his goodness. But Jesus is also great in that he's able to supply and provide the very salvation that he desires as the sinless Son of God.

He alone could bear God's wrath. And his greatness is revealed even further as we just celebrated in his resurrection from the dead. His ability and his power to raise up from the dead, conquering death in the grave, so that we know that God the Father has received his sacrifice for sin and that he truly does have the power to give us life that he says that he can give.

[ 26 : 13 ] Jesus is good. Jesus is great. And when we come to Christ for salvation, we do so in the same way that David prayed for deliverance.

We cannot come to him on the basis of who we are or what we've done. We come to Christ solely on the basis of who he is and what he has done.

By faith, we cast ourselves wholly on his goodness and greatness, believing that he can and that he will forgive our sins and restore peace in that ministry of reconciliation that we read about a few

moments ago, that God will adopt us into his family, that he will wipe us clean, and that he will make us new.

And now, our attitude in prayer following our conversion is to mimic it so that we pray in the same prayer day by day, that we pray at the moment we come to Christ to be saved, acknowledging that God is good, that he's great, that not only is he able, but he's also willing, and we cast ourselves wholly, unreservedly, on the nature of his character, making our appeals to him on the basis of who he is.

And finally, I want you to see that as David's prayer is grounded in God's character, it's shaped by expectancy, shaped by expectancy.

[ 27 : 49 ] Fully convinced of God's character, of his mercy and his grace and his steadfast love and his faithfulness, David prayed with the expectation that God would indeed hear an answer.

Look at verse 7. In the day of my trouble, I call upon you. Why does he say? For you answer me. There's an expectation here on David's part. He's not presuming something on God. He's just expecting that because of who God is, that God will hear and that God will answer.

And I understand that we have to tread carefully here, lest we assume that God is in some kind of bondage to us, that he must answer our prayer simply because we have made the request.

We know that's not true. We know that God answers us according to his sovereign purposes and that there will be times in our lives that the things we ask for are not according to God's will and he does not answer them simply because we ask.

[ 29 : 01 ] We understand that to be true. But my point is that we should never be afraid to pray with expectancy. We should never be afraid to do that.

There are times, I think, when it's a reaction. It's of, and sometimes maybe a right reaction to the prosperity gospel that's so prevalent in our world and particularly prevalent in the United States right now.

This word of faith movement that is a name it and claim it kind of thing there. There's a man that comes by my house every Wednesday. He's one of the trash guys that comes by. He gets the bulk trash.

He found out a couple of years ago that I'm a pastor and so every Wednesday he drives by and he honks the horn and he sits out front until one of us, me or Julie One, comes out and waves to him. His name is Jesse. And every time I'm standing outside when he comes by, he gets out of the truck and he comes and he is caught up in this type of movement.

And the one thing he always wants to emphasize to me is that whatever you ask, the Lord will give it to you. Which in one sense is true but our reaction is to that kind of theology is almost to go the complete opposite direction so that when we pray, we pray with our hearts filled with doubt.

[ 30 : 16 ] We have no expectancy that God will actually hear the prayer, that God will actually answer the prayer. Our prayers may be even in our field with skepticism so that we say all the words that we know we're supposed to say but we almost say them knowing and expecting that nothing will come from it.

Surely that's not the way that God intended for us to pray as we come to the Word. That's not the way David prayed. The Bible is still true when it says, delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart.

That's true. Jesus was not being deceitful or misleading when he said, ask and it will be given you. Seek and you will find. Knock and it will be open to you.

For everyone who asks receives and the one who seeks finds and the one who knocks it will be open. And if your prayer is rooted in the character of God and the promises of His Word, there will never be a reason to pray without expecting God to hear the prayer and pour out His kindness and His grace and His mercy on your life.

Says Spurgeon, there can be no reason for praying if there be no expectation of the Lord's answering.

[ 31 : 39 ] We pray not because we are so fascinated by prayer that for its own sake we would continue to do it even if it proved to be mere folly and superstition.

But we praise because of a truth we find it to be a practical and effectual means of obtaining help from God in the hour of need.

And that's when he says, there can be no reason for praying if there is no expectation of the Lord answering. Why would we pray if we didn't expect that the Lord would hear and that He would be

willing and that He would be able to give us the desires of our heart?

There's a balance in that to be sure. I understand that. But let's make sure we're coming down on the side of God's promise and on His character. How many of us pray day after day after day and we do not see the fruitfulness of that prayer because we do not actually pray with any kind of faith or expectation?

James says, this is a double-minded man. He's unstable. In one sense, he trusts the Lord and in a completely different sense, he has no trust in the Lord whatsoever. Now, I know that there are people in our church who are actually in dire need of God's gracious intervention.

[ 33 : 04 ] We have prayed for Terry and Bev. We would put Ashley in that position right now in terms of this pregnancy. Brandon and Jennifer, who are our friends that are with us this morning.

Jennifer's mom is in a situation where she needs the touch of God in her life and on her body. Chris and Ashley in situations where they need the touch of God in order for His will to be worked out for them to do the things that they need to do in the coming weeks and in the coming months.

All of us have those things. In one sense or another, each of us are desperate for God. We are desperate for God to do something in our lives. And I don't know that all that God has planned for you, but what I do know is that God is good.

That He is good. I know that He's great. I know that He is full of mercy if you've sinned. And that He's full of steadfast love for all who call upon Him.

I do know that He gave us David's lament so that we might pray it as our own. I know that He's given us no reason to doubt Him.

[ 34 : 17 ] No reason to pray without fully expecting that He will come to our aid. That is what I do know. And our prayer should follow that pattern. Psalm 86 is the word of the Lord.

It's the word of the Lord for us today. And I think our only response is that we would pray as if we believe that it's actually true.