

Northolt Park Baptist Church

Psalm 5 – A Song of Covenant Protection

Are you a morning person or an evening person, a lark or an owl? The difference between people can often be seen at the breakfast table. Morning people are bright, breezy, enthusiastic, ready for the day... and really, really irritating... to those who are night people, who dread having to get up, perhaps wishing they'd gone to bed earlier the night before. The difference between such people is typified in the woman who is asked, 'Did you wake up grumpy this morning?' To which she replies, 'No, I left him to sleep in.'

How did *you* feel when you woke up this morning? What was your first thought? Of course, it often depends on what we're doing that day, perhaps whether it's a weekday or the weekend. But then, from the moment we first wake up in the morning, we make choices. Turn on the radio? Drink strong coffee? Eat breakfast? Have a run? Take a shower? We all have our preferences as to how to start the day.

In our study of the opening psalms we have noticed that Psalm 3 appears to be a morning psalm and Psalm 4 appears to be an evening psalm. Here in Psalm 5, we have another example of a *morning* prayer, where David brings his needs before God in prayer, right at the start of the day (5:3).

Like Psalms 3 and 4, this one is written against the background of conflict. We don't know for sure what sort of conflict. Some have speculated that Psalms 3, 4, and 5 were all written during the incident of Absalom's uprising against David, partly because we move from morning to evening to morning again, and partly because there are a number of links between the psalms themselves. But, we don't know that for sure, and it doesn't really matter anyway.

The psalm ends confident that God surrounds those who are in true covenant relationship with him. So, we will look at the psalm under

the title of 'A Song of Covenant Protection'. And we will see that, whoever our enemies might be, and whatever our circumstances might be, the psalm teaches us a number of things about God – things which were important not just for David, but for us too.

What do we learn first of all? That he is a God who listens...

1. A God who listens (5:1-3)

We see this in the opening three verses. In fact, although this psalm is itself a prayer, these verses are packed full of insight on prayer.

We should notice, for instance, the different ways the prayer is described. In the first line, David brings his *words* to the Lord; in the second line, he is *sighing*; in the next line, he is *crying out* for help. Not only does it show us the intensity of his prayer, and that God hears our words and he hears our cries, but it also reminds us that he hears the sighs and the groans, those times when we're bewildered or in anguish, and we can't quite put things into words, and he knows exactly what we mean.

And then we should notice *who* David directs his prayer to. Prayer is coming to the Lord: 'to you I pray', he says at the end of verse 2. So, prayer is not *self-talk*, though that's sometimes important. But prayer is directed outside of ourselves – to the Lord. In fact, notice in the middle of verse 2 how David addresses the Lord – 'my King and my God'. David directs his prayer to the king. He was the king himself, and yet there was a greater king than he. He doesn't fall back on his own royal resources; he calls on the one *he* bows to as king.

And, *when* does he do this? Verse 3 tells us – 'morning by morning'. Of course, as we've said, not all of us are morning people, so this might be harder for some of us. But we might discover it's worth it. We wake up saying

'Good Morning' to the Lord, praising him, asking him to bless our day and to keep our feet from stumbling. It's not a bad idea to take a few moments when we wake up to acknowledge the Lord, to commit the day to him, to ask for his protection and blessing. Graham Scroggie said that 'the first hour is to the day what the rudder is to the ship, therefore pray in the morning'. The first hour sets the direction for the rest of the day. I wonder if it would be good, then, if we don't already do so, to foster the habit, in our waking moments, of turning to God in gratitude and commitment – thanking him for keeping us, asking him to help us in the day ahead.

What is most important, of course, is that prayer has a place in the *rhythm* of our daily lives – morning by morning, afternoon by afternoon, evening by evening, week by week, month by month, year by year. In verse 3, David speaks about laying his requests before God, which might suggest some careful arrangement and preparation. Of course, because of his grace, we can rush into God's presence unprepared; but we can also give some thought ahead of time to what we might say. That's why some people find it handy to make a prayer list, to give some structure to what they pray for, and to make sure their minds don't wander during prayer.

Of course, if we lay our requests before God in the morning, we have the privilege of looking for the answer throughout the day. That's what David seems to say at the end of verse 3: 'and wait in expectation'. Not only is prayer an earnest *engagement* of our hearts. Not only is it an *expression* of our dependence on the Lord, our king and God. It is also *expectant*, which means we have more than a vague hope that God listens; we can have assurance that he listens, and a confident expectation that he answers – for our good and for his glory.

That's the kind of God he is – a God who listens. But he is more...

2. A God who judges (5:4-6)

David here talks about evil people and how God feels about them.

I suspect these aren't easy things for many of us to think about. We are perhaps so used to thinking of God as loving, that it comes as a bit of a shock when we read passages which remind us that he takes no pleasure in evil, that the wicked cannot dwell in his presence, that he hates those who do wrong, and will destroy them. We might even decide that we like the God of verses 1-3 (the God who listens), but we're not too sure about the God of verses 4-6 (the God who judges)! But of course, he is one and the same God.

Actually, of course, we wouldn't want it to be any other way. We do not pray to some cosmic kitten, a cuddly but ineffectual ball of fluff, who overlooks all that goes on in the world – the evil, the wickedness, the arrogance, the wrong, the lies, the violence, the deceit. And if we're concerned about those things, that is a mark of God's grace in our lives. If we fear God, that is a mark of his grace in our lives.

In fact, that's what David reflects on next...

3. A God who leads (5:7-10)

This thought of 'a God who leads' is taken from verse 8. This is the first main request in the psalm. We are half-way through the psalm before we get to the petition. Everything else is preliminary to this: 'Lead me, O Lord, in your righteousness.'

But, notice how the section begins in verse 7. David has spoken about the wicked and how God will destroy them, and then says: 'But I, by your great mercy, will come into your house; in reverence will I bow down towards your holy temple.' He can only call upon God's name because of God's mercy. In fact, the word used there is the word used throughout the Old Testament to describe God's *covenant love* for his people, which we sometimes translate as his 'lovingkindness' or 'steadfast love'.

It's important we see and understand this. David is able to approach God not because he is pure, nor because he has any basis in himself to do so, but because *God* has showed him mercy, steadfast love. The fact is that, in God's sight, we are *all* evil and wicked, and our sin would keep us from God's presence, and we would be destroyed. And yet, because of his great mercy, we may come into his presence. He has shown us grace, removed our sins, brought us into covenant relationship with himself, so that we can approach him. We come boldly into God's presence in prayer, only because he himself has made that way available to us through the death of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And it's on the basis of the covenant mercy spoken about in verse 7, that David can ask God to lead him in verse 8. David wants God to lead him in God's way of righteousness. He is praying that the Lord will guide him in the way he wants him to go: 'make straight your way before me', he says (see also Proverbs 3:5-6). What a wise prayer to pray! What a merciful God to pray it to! And, like David, we pray this way because of the sorts of things we are up against, the things David refers to in verses 9-10.

We know that David had his enemies – Saul, Philistines, some of his own advisors, even his own son. And we know that God's people throughout Scripture have faced enemies: Moses, Joshua, Elijah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Stephen, Paul, even Jesus himself.

Even so, it's not always easy to know how to pray these words as Christians. If we are not careful, we could get the idea that we are to hate evil people rather than love them, as Jesus called us to love our enemies and pray for them (Matthew 5:43-48). In our relatively easygoing, so-called tolerant society, this might seem a bit severe; but if we were to live in an oppressive regime, where we were denied basic elements of justice precisely because we were Christians, we might think differently.

Even so, we should note that David asks that they will fall by their own plans, and that he doesn't personally take vengeance, but asks

God to step in and sort things out. He wants them to bear their own guilt; they won't be unfairly punished. In all this, the final part of verse 10 is crucial – 'for they have rebelled against you'. The real crime is committed not against David, but against *God*. So, the centre of his prayer is not himself but the glory of God's name.

Once again, we have all rebelled, and we would all be crushed by God in judgment but for his mercy, and so David ends by reflecting on the God who protects...

4. A God who protects (5:11-12)

David closes the psalm with a prayer that all who take refuge in God would rejoice and sing for joy (5:11-12). He pictures the righteous, those who are part of God's covenant, fleeing to God for shelter. They can have confidence that God will treat them this way because he offers protection to those who trust in him.

The end of Psalm 1 reminds us that God 'watches over the way of the righteous' (1:6); the end of Psalm 2 says that 'blessed are all who take refuge in him' (2:12); Psalm 3 tells us that God is a 'shield' around us (3:3); Psalm 4 finishes by saying that the Lord makes 'me dwell in safety' (4:8). And now, in case we haven't got the message, Psalm 5 says that God will protect us with his 'favour as with a shield' (5:12). He is a God who sets a shield over his people so that they are protected. Safety and protection – because of our faith in him and his favour towards us.

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Here, then, are important principles for living in a hostile society: know that God listens, know that he judges, know that he leads, and know that he protects. If we are to live in a hostile society, we need to know the enemies of our soul, but know even more our Lord, and trust and depend on him. Amen.

Notes from a sermon preached by Antony Billington at Northolt Park Baptist Church on 24 August 2008.