

# Northolt Park Baptist Church

## Psalm 7 – A Song of Protested Innocence

‘Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me.’ Of course, for most of us, that’s complete twaddle! Names do hurt us. The reason we say that names will never hurt us is not because names don’t hurt us, but to cover up the fact that they do! It’s a little bit like whistling in the dark: the reason why we whistle in the dark is not because we’re not frightened of the dark, but to cover up the fact that we *are* frightened of the dark!

What others say about us matters, particularly when what is said is completely wrong. Some people’s lives have been destroyed by false accusation. Even if it’s just a whiff of sexual scandal or financial scandal, a person’s life can be ruined, because even those of us who hope for the best in people end up thinking that ‘there’s no smoke without fire’.

Maybe you’ve been on the receiving end of that. Maybe you’ve been falsely accused; things have been reported about you which are completely wrong, or you’ve been on the end of what feels like a smear campaign designed to ruin your reputation and position. It might be colleagues at work or neighbours in the street or even something that went through the courts. You know what it feels like to be on the receiving end of someone else’s bitterness, or to be excluded from a social group, or to have your character shattered into a thousand pieces. It doesn’t even have to have happened recently. We might have things from the distant past that niggle at us, perhaps because they were never really resolved. And everything in you cries, ‘But that’s not fair! That’s not how it was!’

If you’ve ever felt like that, then you’re in good company with King David, the author of Psalm 7.

The previous psalm, Psalm 6, is one of seven psalms where David confesses that he has done wrong. He knows that, like any wise and loving parent, the Lord disciplines his people,

and he asks that God will be merciful to him. In Psalm 6, he is saying that he knows he’s done wrong and knows he deserves what’s happening, but asks the Lord for mercy.

Psalm 7, however, is different. In this psalm, David believes he is in the right, and has done no wrong. In fact, *he* has been wronged, and he longs for God to step in and vindicate him.

That’s why we need *all* the psalms. We can’t have Psalm 7 without Psalm 6. There will be moments in our lives when we find that Psalm 6 fits where we’re at, and there will be times when we find that Psalm 7 is more appropriate. When you are in no doubt that you have done wrong, and you know that you can’t survive without the mercy and forgiveness of God, then pray and meditate on Psalm 6. But when you fully believe you are in the right; when you come to God and lay bare yourself before him and can honestly say that you have done no wrong, then meditate and pray on Psalm 7.

Both go together. We cannot hope for God’s judgment to come on others until we have confessed our own wrongdoing.

Let’s look first at the title of the Psalm. *Shiggaion* might mean ‘lament’, but we can’t be entirely sure. Nor do we know who Cush is either, other than that he was a Benjamite. But that may give us a clue. King Saul belonged to the tribe of Benjamin. And when we read the story of David, we discover that Saul hated David and wanted him dead. As it happens, on two occasions, David had Saul completely in his power and could easily have killed him, but did not do so. David remained innocent of that, and always honoured King Saul.

It may well be that Psalm 7 was written by David during the time he was a fugitive, on the run from Saul and his supporters – like Cush, maybe.

Of course, we can't be certain about that, and it doesn't matter. What's important for us is the mindset we see in the psalm, the feelings that are expressed, and the way David prays through the situation in which he finds himself. If we ever find ourselves in a situation in which we really, *really* believe that we are in the right, and yet we are experiencing trouble, then Psalm 7 could be very useful.

So, this is a 'Song of Protested Innocence', and we will look at it in five movements.

### 1. A prayer for deliverance (7:1-2)

What is the first thing we do in situations like this? We bring our fears to God; we seek refuge in him.

David uses the language of a hunt. Have you ever seen a lion capture and kill its prey? I've only seen it on TV, but David, a shepherd, would certainly have seen it happen with his own eyes. 'Unless you save me', says David, 'I will be torn to pieces by this.'

In those moments when we feel so overwhelmed, whether by false accusation or anything else, we place ourselves in the Lord's hands. We seek refuge and deliverance in him.

### 2. A protest of innocence (7:3-5)

After bringing his fears to God, and praying for deliverance, David lays bare his soul to God. That's important. By all means, let's pray Psalm 7, but let's recognise that we will be exposed in the process as well. In fact, it might be a good challenge to use these verses as a starting point whenever we face a situation in which we think we have been wronged.

I need to ask the Lord: What wrong things have I done in this situation? Where have I fallen short in my responsibilities to those around me? Have I been gracious and loving to others in this situation? Have my words been unkind or hurtful? Have I been fair to those I know dislike me, or those I am prone to think about negatively? Reading Psalm 7 might drive us back to Psalm 6 – Lord, be merciful to me!

In fact, in this case, David was willing to put his life on the line if he was found to be in the

wrong. He was willing to have his reputation, which was already good for nothing, ground into the dust. He protests his innocence.

### 3. A plea for vindication (7:6-10)

What does David do? He brings it to God, he submits himself to God's scrutiny, and then he asks God to do something about it. In verse 6, he appeals to the Lord to intervene. It's as if he says, 'Awake, Lord and see what is happening! Arise, Lord and do something about it.' He goes on in verses 7 to 10 to ask that he will be vindicated and that those who have wronged him will be judged.

It's important to note that we come to verses 6-10 only after we go through verses 1-5. Only after we have sought refuge in the Lord, only after we have fully reflected on the possibility of being in the wrong, only after we have submitted ourselves to God's word, only after we have asked him to shine his light into the dark places of our own hearts can we pray the words of verses 6-10 with integrity.

David's prayer may come across as very strange to us. What does he pray for? Mercy? Grace? Forgiveness? Not in this case. He prays for justice. If that sounds strange, it might be because we tend to pit mercy against justice. But the God of mercy is also a God of justice.

So, if it seems odd to us, maybe that's all the more reason for us to think about it carefully. Maybe what's at stake here is the need to develop a greater longing for God's will to be exercised in the world. Jesus taught us to pray 'Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven' – and we need to think through what the implications of that will be, if God's rule truly extends to earth as it does to heaven.

Verse 8, in particular, we might find difficult. We can understand the sentence itself; it just smacks of presumptuous and *self-righteousness* to pray 'according to my righteousness' and 'according to my integrity'.

It might help us to understand that David is probably not talking about the whole of his life, and he's certainly not saying he's reached some perfect state. We already know from

Psalm 6 that there were occasions when he cried out to the Lord for forgiveness for things he knew he'd done wrong.

It's more likely he has a particular situation in mind in which he is certain that he stands in the right and has full integrity in saying so. With respect to this particular thing he is innocent, and he stands before God who knows his heart.

Perhaps the key phrase in this section is the first line of verse 8 – 'Let the Lord judge the peoples.' It's crucial in all of this to note that David doesn't do anything himself, he doesn't take vengeance himself. When we try to deal with things we often make a mess of it. Let the Lord judge the peoples. Have they said something nasty? Let the Lord judge the peoples. We have a natural tendency to want to win the battle. Let the Lord judge the peoples. Even if we don't see vindication in our life time, God will win on that final day. Let the Lord judge the peoples. And God will do so, as the psalm says next.

#### **4. A proclamation of judgment (7:11-16)**

It is a proclamation in the sense of declaration, and it continues the thought of the previous section. David proclaims that God will judge wrongdoing. In verses 11-13, he conjures up a picture of God as a soldier with a sword and as an archer who is poised for war.

Again, these are serious things for us to reflect on. We can so emphasise God's love that we can forget he is a God who judges. This has already been made clear in the earlier psalms (e.g., 5:4-6). God is a just God who is angry with the wicked every day. Nor – if we take the teaching of Jesus seriously – is this just an Old Testament thing. Jesus had much to say about judgment. And Paul reminds us in Galatians 6:7 that what we sow we will reap, whether for eternal life or destruction.

So, here is another result of reflecting on this Psalm: we begin to see life the way God sees it with respect to the evil in the world. What does David observe? Verses 14-15 tell us, using some fascinating images. David pictures the wicked pregnant with evil, conceiving trouble, but giving birth to something that doesn't

satisfy or bring joy. Coming back to the hunting images from the start of the psalm, he says they've prepared a booby trap, but have been caught in it themselves. It's like digging a hole and then falling into it.

And then, crucially, David reminds us, as he did in Psalm 5, that people bring this on themselves (7:16). God judges, but not unfairly. God judges, but the trouble they cause recoils back and smacks them between the eyes. God judges, but their violence comes down on their own head. God judges, but the wicked become their own victims. We may well not see God intervene directly, but sometimes there is a natural outworking of events through which God exercises his judgment as the evildoer is destroyed by their own wickedness.

How does David conclude?

#### **5. A praise for righteousness (7:17)**

This psalm closes, as many Psalms do, with an expression of praise. It's important to note where the final emphasis falls. Whose righteousness is really at stake? The final praise is focused on *God's* righteousness. He's had things to say about his own righteousness, but he gives thanks because of *God's* righteousness. David knows, having prayed, that God will act for the well-being of his people.

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How much there is to learn from this psalm! We learn that God's people will be slandered. We learn that false accusation is painful to bear. We learn that God cares about injustice. We learn that it is best to go to God about it, to take our cries to the righteous judge. We learn the importance of examining our own heart. We learn that, whether sooner or later, whether directly or indirectly, God will set things straight by judging the wicked and vindicating the righteous. We learn that in spite of trouble we can carry on praising and giving thanks to God for his righteousness.

But this is more than just head knowledge. Most of all, Psalm 7 gives us a way of praying through these things, of bringing ourselves

and our circumstances to God, knowing that if we have come to know Christ in a personal way then we have been declared right with God, set free from the declaration of guilt and judgment that hangs over us, confident that our shield is God most high, and that we can give thanks to the Lord because of his righteousness and praise the name of the Lord most high. Amen.

*Notes from a sermon preached by Antony Billington at Northolt Park Baptist Church on 2 November 2008.*