

PSALM 5—KNOWING GOD IN HARD TIMES

INTRO: The whole Bible raises the most important and fundamental issues and problems of life. But the Psalms do this in a very personal—often very emotional—way. For example, who has problems, worries, fears, or grief? Everybody. Don't our worries tend to seem worse at night? We're all alone; we're afraid of what tomorrow may bring.

I remember when I was practicing law. I was in the middle of a major medical malpractice case. I was representing a hospital and there was some very important testimony that I had to get in. But I was terribly afraid that the other lawyer was going to object to it and the judge would keep it out. I remember worrying about this and getting up in the middle of the night, going into the bathroom, and lying down on the floor in the fetal position, kind of crying out to God and wracked with fear.

This kind of thing can and will happen to us all in one way or another. You might not get on the bathroom floor, but sometimes our fears and worries or grief can overwhelm us: when you are facing a major medical problem, when your child leaves home or dies or goes bad, when your marriage is collapsing, when you lose your job. The list is endless. What can we do? What can we do?

Psalm 5 deals with this issue. It is a psalm of David. What does he say? [READ]

O/S: I'm going to look at this psalm slightly out of order. We'll begin with the first 3 verses, which set forth David's situation. Then we will look at **vv. 4-6** and **9-10** as a group, since they all deal with those who are far from God. Finally, **vv. 7-8** and **11-12** deal with those who are close to God.

vv.1-3

Look at vv.1 and 2 to begin with. They speak of David's "groaning" and "crying" and "praying" to God. The word for "groaning" is sometimes translated "sighing." This is a person in distress. From later verses we see that he is distressed over his enemies, over deceitful people, over evildoers. Like David, our worries, fears, groaning, and crying may stem from human opponents. But what he is describing is not limited to that. **v.4** speaks of wickedness and evil in general, which can come from any source. What he is describing applies to all cases when we find ourselves in the fetal position on the bathroom floor, crying at night because of what the doctor has told us that afternoon, or worried sick about our child, our marriage, or our livelihood.

But in the midst of our distress, look at two things David says in **vv.2-3**. In **v.2** he says, "**I pray to you, my King and my God.**" There are three important things we need to see here:

- First, he is not just talking or thinking or worrying to himself, but he is praying. And he is not just praying "**to whom it may concern.**" He is praying to God. That is important. We are not alone. God is sovereign over the universe. He created us, he knows when every sparrow falls, and he knows exactly what we are going through.
- Second, and this is key, he is not just praying to a remote or impersonal God, but he is praying to "**my King and my God.**" IOW, he is in a personal relationship with God. We will talk more about this when we get to the last part of this psalm, but right now it is important to emphasize the fact that one can believe that God exists and yet not be in a personal relationship with him.

In **John 17:3** Jesus said, "**This is eternal life, that they know you the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.**" Whenever the Bible talks about "knowing" God or God "knowing" us, it means not just that one knows *about* someone but that one is in a personal relationship with him. One enters into a personal relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ. As Paul says in **Rom 10:9**, "**If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.**"

Some people seem to think that this is simply a matter of saying certain words or believing certain facts. That's not it. David prayed to "**my King and my God.**" Paul talks about confessing that Jesus is **Lord**. To call someone your Lord or your King or your God means that he is your boss, the most important person in your life. And since we are not talking about a human lord or king, but about the creator, sustainer, and owner of the entire universe, that means that he is the lord over all of our life—what we do with our time, our money, how we treat people, everything. Because if he is not the lord over every aspect of our life, he is really not our lord at all. That would mean that *we* are really calling the shots, *we* are making the rules and setting the limits over him. I'm sorry; that doesn't work. As Jesus said in **John 14:15**, "**If you love me, you will keep my commandments.**"

So the crucial question we need to ask ourself is: "Is God, the only God, the true God—God in Christ—is he *my* God and *my* King?" We can say the words, but does our life reflect it? Can other people see him in us?

- But the third important thing we see in the opening of this psalm is found in v.3, where David says, “In the morning you hear my voice; in the morning I prepare a sacrifice for you and watch.” What he is saying is much like he says in Ps 30:5, “Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning.” Our fears and worries always seem worse at night. But morning brings a new day and a new start.

And note what he does in the morning: he prepares a sacrifice for God and he watches. When he talks about preparing a sacrifice, David was speaking in the Old Covenant terms of a physical sacrifice—of an animal or grain offering—because that is what he was familiar with. But Christ has made the one sacrifice of himself for us. That is why Heb 13:15 says that, through Christ, “let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name.”

What’s going on here? One article puts it like this: “The terms ‘sacrifice’ and ‘praise’ might seem to be opposites. We think of sacrifice as offering something at great cost to ourselves. Praise, on the other hand, sounds joyful as it bubbles from a grateful heart. However, in the spiritual realm, sacrifice and praise are intertwined. . . . We often find it easy to praise God [w]hen He has blessed us, helped us, and protected us. . . . We can sing, worship, and talk about how good He is because we can see it. That kind of praise, although worthwhile, does not cost us anything. It is not a sacrifice.

Then there are those times when God did not come through the way we thought He would. The medical test comes back positive. The spouse wants a divorce. A child is wayward. The mortgage company calls in the loan. God seems very far away, and praise is the last thing to bubble up from our hearts. We can't see His goodness, and circumstances scream that He has forgotten us.

To praise God in those times requires personal sacrifice. It takes an act of the will to lay our all on the altar before a God we don't understand. When we bring a ‘sacrifice of praise,’ we choose to believe that, even though life is not going as we think it should, God is still good and can be trusted. When we choose to praise God in spite of the storms, He is honored, and our faith grows deeper. . . . The ‘sacrifice of praise’ comes from a humble heart that has been purified by fire. It rises from a spirit that has chosen to honor God in spite of the pain that life is causing.”

And what about the watching? To “watch” is to acknowledge that God *is* here; he *does* hear our prayers; and he *acts*. To “watch” is to have the confidence to expect God to act in our circumstances—indeed, to know that everything we are going through has first passed through his hands and will work together for good since we are in relationship with him. IOW, we have been called according to his purpose, so even though we may neither like nor understand why things are happening to us as they are, we know that he is working all these things together for ultimate good.

Consequently, we can have a peace that God gives us even in dire circumstances, just like David experienced in Psalm 3. You may recall that, when we looked at Psalm 3 a couple of weeks ago, in that psalm David was running from his son Absalom and Absalom’s army in fear for his very life, and his relationship with his son was *not* restored. Yet he could say that he “lay down and slept and woke again, for the Lord sustained me.” We can have that peace in our dire circumstances. Get connected with the Lord in the morning when you begin your day. It can set the tone for the rest of your day.

This leads us to vv.4-6, 9-10—those who are far from God [READ]

Everyone, in fact, has a relationship with God—even if you don’t believe in him. These verses are telling us the natural state of all people. See how v.10 concludes: “**Because of the abundance of their transgressions cast them out, for they have rebelled against you.**” That’s just the way Paul describes unsaved, natural humanity in Eph 2:1-3 [READ]. And the specifics that David describes in today’s psalm—wickedness, evil, boastfulness, blood thirst, deceitfulness—Paul describes as the condition of unregenerate humanity in Rom 3:9-18. In fact, in Romans 3 Paul even quotes from v.9 of this Psalm.

What David and Paul are both saying is that the relationship we all have with God in our natural state is one of rebellion against him. Most people don’t realize this, or they don’t think it is true of themselves. The reason is because the way we are is “natural” to us; it’s the way we are; it’s normal; it’s the way we are in our innermost being. So we don’t think anything is wrong. It’s all we know.

That’s why v.9 of today’s psalm says, “their inmost self is destruction.” Jesus said the same thing in Mark 7:20-22 [READ]. The problem is the real us, who we are inside. We all know innately that we should love God and love others as we love ourselves. But instead, we are radically self-centered. We put ourselves at the centers of our universe. My world revolves around me. My pleasure, my wellbeing, my security, my happiness all come first.

The problem is our heart. As Jeremiah says, **“The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick; who can understand it?”** Our problem is: we can’t change our own heart, no matter how hard we try. We need a new heart.

That leads us to vv.7-8, 11-12—those who are close to God [READ]

We talked earlier about being in a personal relationship with God. In the last part of v.7, David is again using the language of his Old Covenant life to speak of a relationship with God, just as he did in v.3. In v.3 he talked about preparing a sacrifice; here he talks about bowing down toward your holy temple. But we need to understand something: Jesus and the NT writers make clear again and again that the entire OT—and all aspects of ancient Israel—were what are called “types” or “shadows” that were really pointing to Jesus Christ. For example, in **John 2** when Jesus said **“destroy this temple, and I will raise it up in three days,”** he was really talking about himself. So when v.7 of today’s psalm says, **“Through the abundance of your steadfast love I will enter your house,”** God has demonstrated his steadfast love to us by coming to us in the person of Jesus. We do not bow down to a physical temple; instead we come to the true temple—Jesus Christ.

v.12 of our psalm concludes by talking about God blessing “the righteous” person. But as we have seen, the fact is that all of us have a desperately sick heart. In **Romans 7** Paul said that all of us are corrupted by the problem of indwelling sin. Which means that none of us can be truly righteous. How can we resolve the dilemma that, as David says in v.5 **“God hates all evildoers,”** yet we are all evildoers at heart. And he says in v.12 that **“God blesses the righteous,”** but none of us is truly righteous.

Even though David was writing this psalm 1000 years before Christ came to earth, this psalm itself points us to the answer to our dilemma.

- First, the fact that this psalm contrasts evildoers with the righteous—but none of us, in ourselves, is truly righteous—is telling us that we have to look *outside ourselves* to find the righteousness we need to be in right relationship with God.
- Second, vv.9 and 11 give us the answer. v.9 says, **“Lead me, O Lord, in your righteousness.”** And v.11 talks of **“all who take refuge in you.”** When we come to Christ and **“confess with our mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in our heart that God raised him from the dead,”** the righteousness of Christ is imputed or credited to us. As **2 Cor 5:21** says, **“For our sake he made him [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”** This means that all the bad we have done and that is in us and all the punishment we deserve for our sins was laid on him at the cross, but all the good that he is and he deserves is imputed to us. IOW, Christ is the means whereby we are transformed from the evildoer whom God hates into the righteous person whom God **“covers with favor as with a shield.”**

But he does more. **Ezek 36** says that God takes our heart of stone and gives us a heart of flesh; IOW, we are no longer dead to God but now have a new, living heart, so we can have a new, living relationship with him. **1 Cor 2:16** says that when we come to Christ we receive the mind of Christ. In **John 14**, Jesus said that he does not leave us alone, but actually comes and lives inside us in the person of the Holy Spirit. And several times Paul talks about how, in Christ, we are adopted into a new family—the family of God, the church.

PROP: All of this is telling us that: **The Lord will be with those who turn to him.**

Through all of these means, God is enabling us to have a peace, a stability, and even a joy (as David mentions in v.11) in the midst of our troubles—even in the midst of our most dire circumstances. I think our biggest problem is that many of us who are believers, while we say we believe all this, we really haven’t taken Christ—the truth of who he is, what he has done for us, what he is doing now in our lives—we really haven’t taken all this deeply enough into ourselves. I mean, he loves us so much that he did for us what we never could do for ourselves. Then he rose from the dead, so he is alive today. He is in us, so he knows everything about us and our situation. He is sovereign over the entire universe. And the Bible says he is constantly making intercession for us with the Father. If all of that had been deeply in my heart and mind—a living reality to me—I wouldn’t have been in the fetal position on the bathroom floor.

Perhaps the biggest reason why we have difficulty truly “resting” in him (like David who lay down, slept, and then woke again for the Lord had sustained him) is that God and Christ are invisible. We are physical people, and we get our picture of reality from our senses. I know I can count on my wife because I know her well; I can see her and touch her and talk with her and can hear her audibly when she speaks with me. God is not like that. So we have to live based on faith, not sight.

Let me mention three things that may help us, and then I will close.

- First, God knows that we are physical creatures, so even though Jesus ascended back to the Father in heaven, he still left us his physical body on earth—the church. James says this, **“Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.”** The specific context there was physical illness, but what he is saying applies to all manner of problems. Develop close relationships with one or two or a few other, mature Christians. Draw on them in your times of need. They supply the flesh and bone, the sight, the hearing, and the wisdom that we need—so that we can know in a real, physical way that we are not alone in our suffering.
- Second, think of the times when you have seen the hand of God active in your life. For example, when I was writing my book on *Biblical Eschatology*, just a few months before I had to get the manuscript to the publisher, I had lunch with a friend of mine who told me of a book on eschatology written by a guy I look up to. I had not been aware of it before. So I immediately ordered it and ended up referring to it on several occasions. That meeting was not by accident. When I was in Burundi in January, I was revising the subject index for the second edition of the book. The thought came into my mind that I should begin the index with a list of all the tables, diagrams, and outlines in the book. That thought, I am convinced, came from God. My point is that, when we remember how God has worked in our lives in the past—even in little things—that will help give us the confidence to know that he will still work in our lives in the big thing we are facing. IOW, we can “watch” (as David said in v.3) to see what he will do with a confident expectation.
- Finally, God is speaking to us all the time, not necessarily audibly—but in written form through his book, the Bible. God has revealed himself—who he is, what he does, what he is like—in the Bible. As Tim Keller puts it, **“You can know the Bible without knowing God, but you can’t know God without knowing the Bible.”** The Bible is the primary way in which God speaks to us. Spend time reading, studying, meditating on it, even memorizing it. There will be some passages that will leap out at you even though you may have seen them a dozen times before. If you want to hear from God, and if you want direction—particularly in times of need—become a person of the Word.

CONCL: All of us have gone through or are even now going through some incredibly stressful circumstances. If you haven’t, you will. It is guaranteed. **Psalm 5** is assuring us that **the Lord will be with those who turn to him.** We turn to him through entering into a relationship with Jesus Christ. Then we deepen that relationship as we see his working in our lives, as we become people of his Word, and as we draw on his body, the church. Through all of these means he changes us to become more like himself. That will affect how we deal with others, but more: as we become more and more like Christ, we will be able to face the storms of life with the security of knowing that we are in him and he is in us and will never let us go; he hears us, and even the worst of circumstances are part of his overall, loving plan. We will be like—as one of my law professors once said—**“a Christian with four aces!”**