
O Lord, Hear My Prayer

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 2 August 2026

Psalm 17:1-7 • Matthew 14:13-21



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

The readings this week speak of protection and provision: protection in that God will save David, traditionally the writer of the psalm, from his adversaries; provision, in that Jesus will provide food for the five thousand. (Actually, it was more like twenty thousand, once you count the women and children.) It is good to be reminded that if we have faith, God will protect us and provide for our needs.

The Psalms are the book of life — of our lives. They are very human in their exposition of human joy, fear and faith. Quite a few are like this one, which depicts the author in fear of his enemies, crying out to God, “the saviour of those who seek refuge from their adversaries” (Ps 17:7). Consider Psalm 71:

In you, O Lord, I take refuge;
let me never be put to shame.

In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me;
incline your ear to me and save me. (Ps 71:1-2)

Or Psalm 70:

Be pleased, O God, to deliver me.
O Lord, make haste to help me!

Let those be put to shame and confusion
who seek my life. (Ps 70:1-2)

Or this alarming one:

Save me, O God,
for the waters have come up to my neck.

I sink in deep mire,
where there is no foothold;

I have come into deep waters,
and the flood sweeps over me. (Ps 69:1-2)

These are the cries of one who is in real distress, overwhelmed with fear and worry. Have we not all felt this way at some time, as if the waters were up to our necks, and there is no one to help us? But there is someone to help us:

Awesome is God in his sanctuary,
the God of Israel;
he gives power and strength to his people. (Ps 68:35)

And God does save his people:

But you have saved us from our foes,
and have put to confusion those who hate us. (Ps 44:7)

The psalmist does not cry out in vain. God will help. Sometimes we cry out to God, when will you help me? Even Jesus cried out: O God, why have you forsaken me? We do not know all the ways of God, and we do not always know what is best for us, and so in our distress, we may become angry with God for not helping us exactly as we would like. But God is not ours to command. Jesus is our servant, and gives us the example of service for us to follow towards others, but we are not Jesus' masters. That may be one of the hardest things to accept about faith in God. It lies at the bottom of the question, often asked: Why does God allow cruelty and pain in the world? For one who is suffering, no answer to that question, perhaps, may be acceptable.

My knees are weak through fasting;
my body has become gaunt. (Ps 109:24)

O God ... you have rejected us, broken our defences ...
You have made your people suffer hard things. (Ps 60:1,3)

God hears these pleas, these cries for help, and will respond; but we cannot understand why God allows us to get into these terrible situations. It is not particularly satisfying to say that God's ways are not our ways, and that God's

ways are best. Yet it is the only answer I have come up with, and I know it's true — but not satisfying. What tempers it a bit for me is something Melissa used to say: when tragedy strikes someone, it is God's heart which breaks first. God is with us throughout the terrible times.

Notice one very important thing: nowhere in these psalms is there any doubt of God's existence. Some today will pray something along the lines of: O God, if you are real, help me! or O God, if you're up there, help me! The writer of these psalms would never pray that way. There is no doubt. Even poor Job, who had everything taken away from him by Satan (with God's permission), never gives up on God. He struggles to understand, and he freely blames God for his wretched condition:

If I sin, what do I do to you, you watcher of humanity?

Why have you made me your target?

Why have I become a burden to you?

Why do you not pardon my transgression

and take away my iniquity? (Job 7:20-21)

Although he questions and argues with God, his faith in the existence, sovereignty and power of God never changes. He knows God can forgive him, and I suspect believes that he eventually will; and God does in fact rescue him.

Another aspect of our Psalm 17 is interesting: David seeks to justify himself before God. He boasts that there is no wickedness in him; that he has avoided violent ways, and walked in God's paths. He feels that he deserves rescue.

This too is familiar to anyone who has ever been in trouble, or very ill, or facing some terrible trial: O God, help me! I've been good! It is, perhaps, the same with children who pray to Santa Claus: I've been a good boy (or girl) all year! So bring me what I want! But although God is pleased when we do good things, when we help the needy or welcome the stranger, we cannot earn God's good will. God's favour is shown to those to whom he wishes to show it. You can't really say much more than that. It is entirely God's decision. What God wants is our faith and our love. We may pray, Lord God, if it be thy will, let this or that come to pass.

What we can say is that God loves us, and wants us to be happy. It is in that spirit that we pray to God, that we cry out to him when we are alone or despairing, that we lean on him when we are too weak to keep going on our own. God will always hear our cries and, I think, likes it when we reach out to him, when we say those beautiful words: Lord, hear our prayer. (*response?*) Amen.