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## A LESSON ON PRAYER

Psalm 86

By

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## A Lesson on Prayer Psalm 86

A man who worked as a messenger for a photo lab got a message on his beeper instructing him to pick up a package at an unfamiliar company with a long, difficult name. He looked skyward and exclaimed, "God, where am I supposed to go?" Just then, his pager came on, this time with the client's exact address.

A man nearby witnessed this scene. Raising his arms to the heavens, he cried, "Why don't you ever answer me?" (Adapted from *Reader's Digest* [April, 1991], p. 127.)

Do you ever wish that prayer worked like that? You pray and instantly a voice gives you the answer you're looking for! Sign me up! But I find prayer to be a much more difficult process. I need all the help I can get on how to pray more effectively.

Psalm 86 gives us a helpful lesson on prayer. It is the only psalm in Book 3 of the Psalter labeled as written by David. In many ways, it is not a very original psalm. It's like a mosaic, piecing together verses and phrases from other psalms and Scriptures. That has led some to think that David himself did not write it in this form. But it seems to me that David easily could have taken things he had already written and used them in this prayer. We don't need originality in our prayers, but rather, reality with God. And Psalm 86 is the earnest, heartfelt cry of a man of God in a desperate situation laying hold of the God whom he knew well.

The psalm is peppered with 15 requests, some of them repetitive, fired at God with a strong sense of urgency. It falls into four sections: In 86:1-7, David cries out in great need for God to hear and act on his behalf. Then (86:8-10), in a deliberate statement of praise, David extols God as the only true God, the Lord of the nations. The praise is deliberate, says Derek Kidner *Psalms 73-150* [IVP], p. 311), "because the final verses reveal no abatement of the pressure, and no sign, as yet, of an answer." In 86:11-13, David asks God to teach him His way and to unite his heart to fear God's name, so that he will glorify His name forever. Finally (86:14-17), in

light of his fierce enemies, David again appeals to God's mercy and grace to deliver him.

Although there are many lessons on prayer in this psalm, which could comprise a sermon series, the main lesson is simple:

Our great needs should drive us to pray to the great God,  
who alone can deliver us.

I want to explore four questions: Why should we pray? To whom should we pray? How should we pray? And, what should we pray for?

1. Why should we pray? We should pray because we have great needs.

David begins (86:1), "Incline Your ear, O Lord, and answer me; for I am afflicted and needy." The fact that he cries out for God to *save* him (86:2, 16) shows that David knew that he could not save himself. In 86:7 he mentions that he is in "the day of trouble." In 86:14, he specifically mentions the band of arrogant, violent men that were seeking his life. David was deeply aware of his great need, which drove him to earnest prayer.

It sounds obvious to say that we have great needs that should drive us to prayer. But the truth is, our pride blinds us to how needy we really are, so that we rely on ourselves or on other people or on some godless method to get us out of our troubles. Finally, when nothing else has worked, we say, "We've done all that we can do. The only thing left is to pray!" It's our last resort. But, as John Bunyan said (source unknown), "You can do more than pray, after you have prayed, but you cannot do more than pray until you have prayed." Prayer should be our first resort!

The main reason that people do not cry out to God to save them from their sins is that they do not see their great need as sinners before the holy God. They see themselves as basically good. Sure, they know they're not perfect, but they aren't *evil sinners!* They compare themselves with terrorists and child molesters and think, "I'm doing okay." Not seeing their desperate need, they don't cry out to God to save them.

But, even once we are saved, we fall into this same trap. We're oblivious to the power of the enemy, who prowls about as a roar-

ing lion, seeking to devour us (1 Pet. 5:8). We overlook the strong appeal of indwelling sin that lurks within us (Gal. 5:17). We don't recognize our own selfishness, which undermines our relationships in the family and in the church. And so, we don't pray. So perhaps our first prayer should be, "God, show me my great needs that only You can meet."

2. To whom should we pray? We should pray to the only true God, great in power, love, grace, and mercy.

This psalm shows that David knew the God to whom he was praying. Knowing God's attributes and His promises gives us hope and endurance in prayer. To approach God's holy throne, we must know that He is good, ready to forgive, and abundant in loving-kindness to all who call upon Him (86:5). We must know that He is "merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness and truth" (86:15). In this prayer, David basically pits who God is against his enemies and leaves the outcome to God.

A. God is the only true God, great in power.

David exclaims (86:8-10), "There is no one like You among the gods, O Lord, nor are there any works like Yours. All nations whom You have made shall come and worship before You, O Lord, and they shall glorify Your name. For you are great and do wondrous deeds; You alone are God."

Seven times in this psalm, David uses the name, *Adonai*, or Lord (3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 12, 15). It emphasizes God's lordship and sovereignty. He made the nations. He has ordained that they will all come and worship before Him. He is great and does wondrous deeds. The Lord alone is God.

By referring to "the gods," David means the idols or demons that the heathen worship. Satan is called the god of this world (or, "age," 2 Cor. 4:4; John 12:31). The whole world lies in his power (1 John 5:19). Paul, referring to the demons, says that there are many gods and many lords in heaven and on earth (1 Cor. 8:5; 10:20). These demons are spirit-beings, organized under Satan, with great power over individuals and entire nations (2 Thess. 2:9; Acts 19:13-16; Dan. 10:13, 20).

But, at the time which God determines, He will bring fire down from heaven to destroy His enemies. Satan and all of the

demons will be thrown into the lake of fire, where they will be tormented forever and ever (Rev. 20:9-10). And even now, before that time, we are assured (1 John 4:4), "greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world."

This should give us great confidence to pray. Although the forces of darkness are powerful, none of them can compare to God. Because God has willed that all the nations whom He has made will worship Him, we can pray for the lost peoples of the world, knowing that God will bless our missionary efforts. There may be temporary setbacks, as there often have been in church history. But ultimately and finally, God will prevail. We can pray to Him as the only true God, great in power.

B. God is great in love, grace, and mercy.

Twice (86:3, 16), David entreats God to be gracious to him. Twice again (86:5, 15), he cites Exodus 34:6-7, where God revealed Himself to Moses. Here is how God disclosed Himself: "The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression, and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished...."

This great self-revelation of God is one of the most frequently quoted texts in the Old Testament. It is referred to in Numbers 14:18; Nehemiah 9:17; Psalms 103:8 & 145:8; Joel 2:13; and Jonah 4:2. Here, in 86:5, David uses it to appeal to God to answer his prayer: "For You, Lord, are good, and ready to forgive, and abundant in lovingkindness to all who call upon You." Again (86:15), David prays, "But You, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness and truth."

Since this is God's repeated revelation of Himself to us, it provides us with a sure basis to approach His throne of grace to receive mercy and find grace to help in our times of need (Heb. 4:16). If you have never come to God through Jesus and His shed blood to receive forgiveness for your sins, He invites you to come and ask. You will receive His abundant mercy and grace.

If, as a Christian, you have failed God by sinning, He invites you to come for forgiveness, mercy, and grace. When David asks God to preserve his soul and adds (86:2), "for I am a godly man,"

he does not mean that he deserves for God to answer based on David's godliness. David sinned often, sometimes in major ways, as you know. Rather, the word *godly* stems from the Hebrew word (*hesed*) for lovingkindness, or God's loyal covenant love. It means that David is a loyal follower of the Lord (H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Psalms* [Baker], p. 618). David is not being self-righteous, but simply stating the fact that he was committed to the Lord.

If you're following the Lord, but you're struggling with overwhelming problems beyond your ability to handle, He invites you to come as you are to His throne of grace to receive mercy and grace to help in your time of need. And in case you're worried that your problems are too great or that you've bugged Him once too often, He repeatedly reminds you that His lovingkindness is *abundant!* You can't exhaust His love!

God's abundant love, grace, and mercy should motivate us to come to Him in prayer with all our needs, whether great or small. Suppose that you were poor and a superrich billionaire said to you, "I've got more money than I can ever spend. Any time you have a need, just ask and I'll meet your need." Wouldn't you ask often? Maybe you'd feel like you were imposing on his time, but God is not bound by time. It's not like signing up for welfare: There is no application to fill out to justify your need. There are no lines to wait in to present your case. Just come to the gracious, loving Father with your needs. If you've sinned, He's ready to forgive. If you feel you don't deserve His blessing, grace is for the undeserving. He is abundant in lovingkindness to all who call upon Him. Just call!

So, we should pray because we have great needs. We pray to the God who is great in power, love, and mercy.

3. How should we pray? We should pray earnestly, continually, thankfully, in humility, and in faith.

David's close relationship with God permeates the entire prayer. He knew God intimately and personally. So he felt free to pour out his heart as he does here.

A. Pray earnestly.

David's earnestness and intensity oozes out of the entire prayer. It stems from his awareness of his great need. If God

doesn't answer, David knows that he is doomed. So he cries out from his heart for God to save him from these powerful enemies.

The point is, he wasn't mumbling through a formal liturgy. He wasn't just going mindlessly down a prayer list. Like a starving beggar, he was entreating God to give him food. John Bunyan ("On Praying in the Spirit," *The Works of John Bunyan* [Baker], 1:633) pictures two beggars that come to your door. One is poor, lame, wounded, and almost starving. The other is healthy and robust. They both use the same words in asking for food. They both say that they're starving. But the first man speaks out of his misery and pain, whereas the second more calmly sets forth his need. You will be more inclined to give to the first man, not to the second. Even so, Bunyan says, it is with God. Those who come to Him out of custom and formality, going through the motions of prayer, are less likely to be heard than those who earnestly pray out of the anguish of their souls.

#### B. Pray continually.

David says (86:3), "For unto You I cry all day long." Again, his continual prayers were driven by his intense awareness of his great need. Paul tells us (1 Thess. 5:17), "pray without ceasing." He does not mean that we should pray non-stop, which would be impossible. Rather, the word was used of a hacking cough and of repeated military assaults. The idea is, keep coming back to prayer over and over again, all throughout the day.

#### C. Pray thankfully.

David writes (86:12), "I will give thanks to You, O Lord my God, with all my heart." Similarly, right after telling us to pray without ceasing, Paul says (1 Thess. 5:18), "in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." We cannot give thanks to God from the heart unless we are submissive to His sovereign hand in our circumstances and we believe that He is working even our trials together for our ultimate good.

#### D. Pray in humility.

David's prayer is permeated with humility. He doesn't angrily demand better treatment in light of the fact that he is God's chosen king. He doesn't complain, "After the way that I've served You all these years, I deserve better than this!" Rather, he prays for God to

be gracious to him (86:3, 16). He refers to himself as God's servant, the son of His handmaid (86:2, 4, 16). He admits that he is afflicted and needy. He admits his weakness by asking God to grant him strength (86:16).

These were not "cool" things for a king to put in print for everyone to read! Kings have an image to maintain. Kings need to convey that they're in control of the situation. Kings want everyone to think that they know how to solve problems. But David humbly acknowledges his weakness and his need for God's strength. Even so, prayer is not asking God to give us a little boost. Rather, it is acknowledging to Him and anyone who is listening that our need is total, not partial.

#### E. Pray in faith.

David affirms his trust in God (86:2). He knows that God will answer him (86:7). His affirmation (86:13), that God has delivered his soul from the depths of Sheol, may be referring to a past deliverance, or it may also be a statement of faith about his present need for deliverance, viewing the future as if it is already accomplished (Kidner, p. 313). His request that God would show him a sign for good (86:17), does not stem from doubt. David is not saying, "Lord, if you give me a token for good, then I'll trust in You." Rather, David has been in this trial for some time now, without any hint of God's deliverance. His enemies are gloating, "Ha! He trusted in God, but God hasn't delivered him!" So David asks for an encouraging sign that God is going to answer him and shame his enemies, who were really mocking God Himself.

Faith is not a matter of closing your eyes to reality and leaping into the dark. Rather, faith rests on God's revealed character and on the many revealed instances of how He has answered prayer in the past. Faith does not presume to command God, as many modern, irreverent preachers claim to do. Even Jesus prayed, "yet not My will, but Yours be done" (Luke 22:42). But faith rests on God's power and abundant love. Faith knows that if something is for our good and God's glory, He will do it.

So why should we pray? Because we have great needs. To whom should we pray? To the only true God, great in power, love,

and mercy. How should we pray? Pray earnestly, continually, thankfully, in humility and in faith. Finally,

4. What should we pray for? Pray for salvation; for joy in trials; for a teachable, obedient, single-minded, reverent heart; and for God's glory and supremacy over all.

That's enough for another sermon, but briefly...

A. Pray for salvation.

David asks God to save him (86:2, 16), which in the context obviously refers to being delivered from his enemies. But in New Testament terms, pray for God to save you from His judgment. Jesus came as the Savior (Matt. 1:21; Luke 19:10). He didn't come to save decent people who just need a boost in their self-esteem! He came to save sinners (1 Tim. 1:15). If you've never cried out to God for salvation, that is your main need!

B. Pray for joy in trials.

David asks (86:4), "Make glad the soul of Your servant." That was a bold request at a time like this (Kidner, p. 313). C. H. Spurgeon said (*Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* [Pilgrim Publications], 34:630), "We ought either to be rejoicing in the Lord, or pining after him! Ask God to make you miserable, unless his conscious presence makes you happy."

C. Pray for a teachable, obedient, single-minded, reverent heart.

Here I'm focusing on the wonderful request of verse 11, "Teach me Your way, O Lord; I will walk in Your truth; unite my heart to fear Your name." In any trial, a teachable heart is essential. Ask God what you should be learning about Him and about yourself in the difficult situation. Most of us instinctively pray for quick deliverance, but David prays that he will learn God's ways so that he will walk in obedience to God's truth. He prays that his loyalty will not be scattered or divided, but rather be united or single-minded. He wants to be wholly devoted to God. And the end result is that he will fear or reverence God's name.

So often in trials, people who professed faith in Christ when things were going well, quickly turn to whatever they think will get them out of the trial. They aren't interested in learning more about

Christ and His sufferings (Phil. 3:10). They don't want to hear about walking in His truth. Their hearts are grabbing for anything, even false gods, that will give them relief. Rather than submitting reverently to God, they rail angrily at Him for allowing their suffering. But these reactions are indicative of the seed sown on the rocky soil. Not having any roots, it withers under trials.

D. Pray for God's glory and supremacy over all.

David prophesies that all nations will worship before God and glorify His name (86:9). He also affirms that he will glorify God's name forever (86:12). One reason that God brings trials into our lives is so that we will call upon Him and then glorify Him when He rescues us (Ps. 50:15). So in all of our troubles, we should be looking for ways to magnify the Lord, so that others will be drawn to Him. In the midst of life-threatening situations, such as David was in, we can still affirm (86:5), "For You, Lord, are good, and ready to forgive, and abundant in lovingkindness to all who call upon You."

### Conclusion

President Lincoln came to know Christ personally through the burdens that he faced during the Civil War. He later said, "I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had absolutely no other place to go." (Cited by Ray Stedman, *Jesus Teaches on Prayer* [Word], p. 51.)

We live in a time where our city and our nation desperately need God's salvation! This weekend, our city has flaunted degradation with the "Pride in the Pines" festival, celebrating what God calls shameful. President Obama proclaimed June as "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Pride Month." He lauded what he called the determination and dedication of the LGBT movement.

But what might God do if we pray for His mercy to be poured out on this evil country? We certainly have great needs. But He is great in power, love, and mercy. Let's come before Him and ask Him to pour out His Spirit on the churches and on this land, so that sinners will come and worship before Him, glorifying Him for His great mercy!

## Application Questions

1. To what extent is our prayerlessness due to our not seeing our great needs? How can we be more aware of our true needs?
2. How does your view of God stack up with Psalm 86:5, 15? How would believing this biblical view change your prayer life?
3. How can we develop true joy and thankfulness in the midst of trials? Are we supposed to fake it when we don't feel it?
4. Why is a teachable heart essential when we're going through trials? How does a defiant heart block God's mercy and love?

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