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Session 4 - David - Answer Me

Psalms 86:1-86:end

Brief Notes

Introduction

This prayer of David's is a wonderful model for our prayer. Many of the commentaries mention that the psalm seems to be a "mosaic of quotations", drawing throughout on many different Scriptures, and even that is an example to us of how the Scriptures should feed and shape our praying. David approaches God with a real sense of need ("*I am poor and needy*", verse 1), although the immediate need is not explained until the end of the psalm (v.14); to begin with his focus is less on his need than on the God to whom he calls, and his relationship with God.

Alec Motyer comments

the prayer is more occupied with "telling God about God", dwelling meditatively on the divine nature, than with "telling God about me". In this it mirrors the way people pray in the Bible (eg. Neh.9:5-37; Acts 4:24-30) and is a model for us.

It is tempting with a Psalm like this to simply pick out the nuggets, and not try to grasp the flow or logic of the prayer. Different suggestions have been made as to how the Psalm is structured (and there is no one right answer), but getting people to think about the structure would be one way of encouraging them to think about the flow. It could be divided into four (vv.1-5; 6-10; 11-13; 14-17), with each part having a prayer and then reasons or grounds for making the request. Or, perhaps more simply, vv.1-5 might be seen as an introduction, as David approaches God and confesses

his need of help; vv.6-13 are the heart of the prayer, where strikingly he sees his need rather differently; and in vv.14-17, now with new trust in God's compassion and goodness, David sets out his immediate need.

Verses 1-5

As David approaches God - "the LORD", his covenant God - he looks for grace, making a series of requests: "hear and answer me", "guard my life", "save your servant", "have mercy", "bring joy to your servant". But especially these verses are taken up with the grounds for his approach. Verse 1 suggests that our need and helplessness is a valid plea as we approach our faithful God. Verse 2 refers to the relationship David has with God as the basis on which he prays ("*you are my God*"). Verse 3 speaks of his persistent, expectant intercession. In verses 4,5 he bases his appeal on the character of the God to whom he lifts up his soul - one who is "*forgiving and good ... abounding in love*".

Verses 6-13

This central section is framed by the cry for help in vv.6,7 and confident expectation that he will indeed be delivered (v.13 probably looks ahead to future deliverance, though it could refer to a past deliverance).

Verses 8-10 are a wonderful meditation on God's universal sovereignty and saving purposes. A God like no other (v.8), indeed there is no other (v.10). Such reflection on the character of God not only gives David great confidence to bring his needs to Him, it also changes his perception of what his most profound needs are.

Verses 11-13 are the heart of the prayer, and now his request is very different from the one he felt burdened to make at the start of the psalm. Whereas then he felt a lack of joy (v.4) now his heart is moved to praise. His prayer now is not "teach me how to get out of this trouble", but "teach me how to live your way in the midst of trouble". And notice the lovely prayer for an undivided heart - if He alone is God, with none like Him, then He must have our undivided love and allegiance, a heart wholly given over to His praise.

Verses 14-17

Only now does David explain the nature of the trouble he is facing. He is mindful of his foes (who are God's foes too - "*men with no regard for you*"), but is now more aware of his covenant God. Verse 15 is a quotation of Exodus 34:6, God's great declaration of his character to Moses, which gives him renewed confidence now as he lays his need before God. Wilcock comments on these final requests

his prayer for mercy may be recognizing not merely his need but his sin; the enemies may be in the wrong, but he does not pretend that he is without blame. The prayer for strength shows that he is not spineless nor defeatist. The prayer for a sign is not for something that will reassure him, like Gideon's fleece, but for something that will expose and confound his, and his Master's, enemies.

Some possible questions

You could perhaps start by getting people to think about the structure and flow of the Psalm (in pairs?) - how would they divide it up? etc.

- What do we learn of David's situation and need?
- As he approaches God in vv.1-5, what does he pray for, and on what grounds does he make his requests?

Quickly his thoughts are taken up less with his own needs than with the God whose grace he seeks.

- What are the truths about God he meditates on?

At the heart of the prayer is his request in v.11.

- What has led him to pray now for this? How so?
- How are our hearts often divided?
- What should characterize an undivided heart?
- In vv.14-17 he returns to his immediate needs, which are now more fully explained. But though conscious of his enemies, who is David now most conscious of?
- What truths about God does he hold on to (truths which contrast sharply with his foes)?
- Does v.15 sound familiar? What is David doing that we might learn to do in prayer?
- What does he pray for in the final verses, and why?
- What lessons for our own prayer life could we learn from this prayer of David's?

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