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# Psalm 17

## meditation 1— Introductory

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The Book of Psalms began with two introductory psalms (Ps. 1 and 2). Then came a cycle of five related psalms (Ps. 3-7). In this cycle, the Psalmist faces a similar private threat in each psalm. Enemies attack his character, accusing him of guilt before God.<sup>1</sup> The Psalmist maintains his innocence and his trust that God will come to his defense.<sup>2</sup>

This cycle is followed by what we have classified as an interlude (Ps. 8). This interlude takes the form of an apotheosis. This apotheosis offers the reader both emotional relief from the intensity of the previous five psalms, and presents a more global view of God than was offered in Psalms 3-7.

This first cycle with its interlude is followed by another five-psalm cycle (Ps. 9/10-14). In this cycle, enemies continue to attack. But just as the view of God became more global in Psalm 8, the Psalmist's view of his enemies becomes more global in this cycle. There are others all over the world who, like him, are vulnerable to attack and in whose lives enemies abound. In this cycle the enemies are specifically named: they are the "malevolently immoral." God defends not only the Psalmist but all who are under attack from this global cabal.

This five-psalm cycle is followed by a second interlude (Ps. 15). Like the first interlude, this one offers emotional relief from the intense emotional and spiritual wickedness portrayed in the second cycle. In this interlude, relief is found in the assurance that there is a life opposite that of the malevolently immoral. We can think of those who abide in this alternative lifestyle as "beneficently moral." These have access to God's presence, with special attention given to the access to God's presence that is found in the temple.

Though the text shows signs of corruption and the precise nature of the threat is uncertain, Psalm 16 evidences several similarities with psalms found in the first cycle, and, perhaps, begins a new cycle with similar themes to the first. As in Psalms 3-7, the complaint is quite individualistic and private. The Psalmist is once more under threat and under necessity of calling upon God for help (vs. 1). As before,<sup>3</sup> he perhaps undergoes some type of nighttime ordeal (vss. 7-8). The Psalmist adds a previously unexplored danger: the danger of idolatry (vss. 2-3). The Psalmist resists this temptation, so often yielded to by so many (vss. 4-9).

Psalm 17 shows many connections with what has gone before. Like psalms in the first cycle and again in Psalm 16, it opens with a plea for help (vs. 1-2).<sup>4</sup> The Psalmist follows this plea with an assertion of innocence, an invitation for God to judge him, and a description of what looks like a nighttime ordeal (vss. 3-9). Enemies, identified as the malevolently immoral (vss. 9 and 13), seem to be the source of the Psalmist's woes (vss. 7-12). Here, it seems that the Psalmist's enemies have once more brought accusation of wrongdoing against him. The enemies attacks threaten death (vs. 11). In verses 13-14, the Psalmist pleads once more for God's help against the attacks of his enemies. Finally, the Psalmist ends with an expression of confidence: he will be found innocent and given access to God's presence.

All in all, the connections with the previous two cycles and with Psalm 16 suggest that in Psalm 17 we are

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<sup>1</sup> See 3.<sup>2-3</sup>; 4.<sup>2</sup>; 5.<sup>8-9</sup>; 7.<sup>3-4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See 3.<sup>3,7</sup>; 4.<sup>3</sup>; 5.<sup>8-9</sup>; 7.<sup>6-11</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See 3.<sup>5</sup>; 4.<sup>8</sup>; 5.<sup>3</sup>; 6.<sup>6</sup>; 16.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> See 4.<sup>1</sup>; 5.<sup>1-2</sup>; 6.<sup>1-3</sup>; 7.<sup>1</sup>; 16.<sup>1</sup>

looking at the second psalm in a new cycle of psalms that deal with much the same type of situation as that found in the two previous cycles. Again, the Psalmist's unrelenting reliance, trust, and confidence in God inspires us and draws out a desire to follow his faithful example.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

*(edition: February 7, 2025)*

## Meditation 2— psalm 17.<sup>1</sup>

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Invocation/ plea

<sup>1</sup>Hear, YHWH, what is right.  
Give heed to my pained outburst.  
Give ear to my prayer, offered without pretense.

This Psalm begins with a tripartite request to God: “Hear,” “Give heed,” “Give ear.” Beginning a prayer with a tripartite repetition is common in the Psalms. Psalm 5, for example, began with a similar repetition of plea.

“O *give ear*, YHWH, to my words.  
*Give heed* to my groanings.  
*Give close attention* to my call for help, my King and God,  
for it is to You that I present my plea!”<sup>1</sup>

The three-fold repetition is not always in the form of plea, as we see in Psalm 3 where the repetition takes the form of exclamation.

“YHWH! How my adversaries have multiplied!  
How numerous are those that rise against me!  
How many are those who say of me:  
‘He’ll get no help from ’ēlohîm’!”<sup>2</sup>

This three-fold repetition is often expanded to four, as, for example, in Psalm 9 when the Psalmist promises to direct praise to God.

“*I will praise* You, YHWH, with my entire being.  
*I will certainly recount* Your unparalleled wonders,  
*joyously shout* about and boast in You,  
and *sing of* Your power, ‘elyôn...’”<sup>3</sup>

The Psalmist offers a four-old repetition of complaint in Psalm 13.

“*How long*, YHWH? Will You always ignore me?  
*How long* will You conceal Yourself from me?  
*How long* must I suffer deep doubt,  
deeply grieving day in and day out?  
*How long* will my enemy continue to have the advantage over me?”<sup>4</sup>

Such repetition may reveal something of the intensity of the Psalmist’s experience and feelings. Then, too, we should not be too quick to discount the possibility that such repetition is indicative of a cultic form which the Psalmist imitates in his personal life. But, rather indicative of the intensity of the

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 5.<sup>1-2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 3.<sup>1-2</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 9.<sup>1-2</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 13.<sup>1-2</sup>

Psalmist's feelings or imitative of a cultic form, the Psalmist's need is very real. The nature of the Psalmist's need will become increasingly clear as the psalm proceeds.

In the first line, the Psalmist pleads that God hear "what is right." The Psalmist, then, is counting on God to pass judgment of some kind. Like the nature of the Psalmist's need, the nature of the anticipated divine judgment will become increasingly clear as the psalm proceeds. In the second line, the Psalmist pleads that God hear his "pained outburst." The Psalmist's need is not casual. His need and the feelings they elicit are intense. The Psalmist's plea is not subdued or muted. It is expressed in a loud and strong voice. The Psalmist needs God to take him and his need seriously. He needs God to respond with compassion. In the third line, the Psalmist needs God to understand that in his present circumstances and prayer there is nothing false about him. His prayer is honest and sincere.

God, then, is called upon to be a wise judge, judging his need and his expressions of that need accurately.

Whether we give it thought or not, in approaching God in prayer and making requests of God, we depend upon him to pass discerning judgment—judgment about the reality, legitimacy, and degree of our need; judgment about our intents and motives; and judgment about our sincerity. In approaching God for help in prayer, then, we open ourselves up to his scrutiny. In opening ourselves up to his scrutiny, we are expressing trust in God: trust that He judges us and our circumstances rightly, and trust that He responds appropriately.

It is quite the privilege God grants us in prayer. This privilege is accompanied by tremendous accountability. May we respond to and enjoy the privilege of prayer, and measure up to the accountability that comes with prayer.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

*(edition: January 24, 2025)*

## Meditation 3— psalm 17.<sup>2-5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>May my case come before You.  
May You discern the proper decision.

The psalmist's ordeal under divine trial

<sup>3</sup>You may examine my heart.  
You may spend the night scrutinizing me, putting me to the test.  
You will find no guilt in me.

I am determined: I will not transgress.

<sup>4</sup>In regard to personal conduct, by Your spoken word  
I have avoided criminal behavior.

<sup>5</sup>By steadfastly keeping myself in Your path,  
I have not slipped up.

In our previous meditation on Psalm 17, we noted that as in many psalms of the two preceding cycles of psalms (3-7 and 9/10-14) the Psalmist is once more under stress. In response to that stress, the Psalmist offers a tripartite plea to God for His attention. In pleading, “Hear, YHWH, what is right,” there is recognition that in God’s involvement with human beings there is an element of judgment: judgment about the individual, judgment about the human condition, and judgment about how best to engage in human affairs.

However, as this psalm continues, the specific nature of the Psalmist’s need for God’s judgment comes into sharper focus. The Psalmist, undergoing some type of formal and legal trial and in need of God’s specific forensic skill as a judge, invites Him to examine him closely and take as long as it takes.

“May my case come before You.  
May You discern the proper decision.  
You may examine my heart.  
You may spend the night scrutinizing me, putting me to the test,  
You find no guilt in me.  
I am determined: I will not transgress.”

In pleading that God hear “what is right,” the Psalmist hopes specifically for a legal decision in his favor: a decision that establishes his innocence. In asserting his innocence and in seeking God’s confirmation of his innocence, the Psalmist stays far away from the precipice of self-righteousness.

“In regard to personal conduct, by Your spoken word  
I have avoided criminal behavior.  
By steadfastly keeping myself in Your path,  
I have not slipped up.”

God is the originator of the Psalmist’s innocence. Without Divine direction the Psalmist would be clueless as to the path of innocence, whatever his intentions or nature.

But what, we must ask, is the impetus of this examination by trial in the first place?

Three possibilities come easily to mind. First, God has arbitrarily instigated the trial for His own reasons.

Second, the Psalmist has arbitrarily requested the trial for his own reasons. Third, a third party has brought accusation against the Psalmist, thus making God's forensic skills necessary. Due to several similarities with Psalms 3-7, which, we have proposed, all address the same or a similar situation in which the Psalmist's enemies accuse him of wrongdoing, we opt for the third possibility. As we will see, the Psalmist's enemies come very much to the fore in verses 9-12.

As is clear in verse 3, this trial takes place at night and extends throughout much of it. We have seen and discussed indications of nighttime ordeals in association with enemies and their accusations in previous psalms.<sup>1</sup>

Based upon the sentiments expressed in the Psalm's final verse, we can reasonably consider the temple as the location of the trial.

"I, innocent, will gaze upon Your face.  
I will be utterly content in awaking to the sight of You.

Psalm 11 reminded us that God judges from and in his temple

"The LORD is in his holy temple,  
the LORD's throne is in heaven:  
his eyes behold,  
his eyelids try, the children of men."<sup>2</sup>

As here, Psalm 15 reminds us that it is the ethical who follow God's directions that can abide comfortably and worthily in the temple and thus enjoy God's presence and influence.

As we understand this Psalm, then, the Psalmist is once more under attack, accused of wrongdoing. He enters the temple and submits himself to God's discerning judgment, knowing that he is innocent of the accusations brought against him. He credits God and His directions for his innocence in relation to the accusations. He trusts that God will judge rightly and find him innocent.

How wise the Psalmist is! How good God is!

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

*(edition: January 27, 2025)*

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 3.<sup>4</sup>, 4.<sup>8</sup>, 5.<sup>3</sup>, 6.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 11.<sup>4</sup>

## Meditation 4— psalm 17.<sup>6-9</sup>

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The psalmist's plea for deliverance from the enemy

<sup>6</sup>I call out to You, knowing that You always answer me, O God.

So, turn, now, an ear to me  
and hear what I have to say.

<sup>7</sup>Offer Your unimaginable, unwavering devotion, O Savior of those who seek protection.

Exert Your power, against those who rise up against them.

<sup>8</sup>Safeguard me as one precious to You.

Hide me in the cool shade of Your wings

<sup>9</sup>from the malevolently immoral who seek my ruin;  
my passionate enemies who surround me.

Psalm 17 begins with the Psalmist's plea for God's attention (vs. 1). He seeks God's attention in a forensic setting (vs. 2), looking to God to examine him and find him innocent of guilt in relation to whatever accusations have been brought against him (vs. 3). In maintaining his innocence, the Psalmist acknowledges God's hand in instructing him so that he could avoid criminal behavior, especially the sort of criminal behavior of which his enemies accuse him (vs. 4-5).

In verses 6-9, the Psalmist provides additional information concerning the nature of his ordeal and his need.

We note, first, the presence of the "malevolently immoral." We have met them before. We met them even before we met God, in the very first verse of Psalm 1. We met them in Psalm 3,<sup>7</sup> where they were mentioned as enemies to the Psalmist and where, as we understand it, they defamed the Psalmist's character (3.<sup>2</sup>). We met them in Psalm 10, where they were once more the Psalmist's enemies and where we are served with a long and detailed meditation on or tirade against them (2-11). Here, however, consistent with the more global view found in Psalm 8, they also were portrayed as the enemy of all who are, like the Psalmist, vulnerable, innocent, and downtrodden. We met them in Psalm 11, where they were once more the Psalmist's enemies (vs. 1-2). We met them in Psalm 12,<sup>8</sup> where the Psalmist complained that they seem to be everywhere, taking over a world that seem to celebrate their doings.

Here, the malevolently immoral "rise up" against the Psalmist and seek his ruin. They are passionately opposed to him. They are numerous, as they "surround" him. The Psalmist seeks God's protection from his numerous and passionate enemies.

A rational, common sense, plain reading of the text assumes a relationship between the Psalmist's opening plea, his request that God hear his case and judge him, his expectation of being found innocent, and his enemies' accusation and intent to ruin him. A rational, common sense, and plain reading of the text understands that the nature of the enemies' attack is one of accusation. They have brought some unspecified charge against him. It is in light of this accusation that the Psalmist calls upon God to closely examine him and find him innocent of the charges.

The Psalmist is confident that God will come to his aid and defense. This confidence is based on at least two things. First, the Psalmist's past experiences with God, whatever their nature, has taught him that God is dependable.

“I call out to You, knowing that You always answer me, O God.  
So, turn, now, an ear to me  
and hear what I have to say.”

But he is also aware of others’ experiences. Knowledge of these experiences, has revealed to the Psalmist something of God’s character. He is a “Savior of those who seek protection.” This is not the first time that we have seen the Psalmist find confidence in others, often past, experiences. In Psalm 9, the Psalmist found reason to have confidence in God as he considered his own nation’s experiences in relation to hostile nations.

“You rebuked entire nations; You brought an end to those guilty of hostility;  
You wiped them from existence, always and forever.  
The enemy still lies in complete and perpetual ruin.  
You tore down their cities,  
their influence obliterated.”<sup>1</sup>

Here, we are reminded of one of Moroni’s last exhortations.

“Behold, I would exhort you that when ye shall read these things, if it be wisdom in God that ye should read them, that ye would *remember how merciful the Lord hath been* unto the children of men, from the creation of Adam even down until the time that ye shall receive these things, and ponder it in your hearts.”<sup>2</sup>

Has any people been more faithful to this admonition than the Jewish people—even if the Jewish nation of Israel is untrue to the lessons learned and has become, itself, an oppressor? To this day, Jews remember through Passover celebrations that their very first encounter with God came at a time of great need as they suffered the bitter trials of slavery in Egypt, and that He heard and responded to their pleas for help and relief.

This Psalm serves as a reminder that God hears those who seek God’s help and protection against oppressors of all kinds. As we will see in following meditations on this Psalm, it also serves as warning to the oppressor. God is not blind. He is not deaf. He does not slumber or sleep. He sees what the oppressor does and hears the complaint of the oppressed. The oppressor will not always be safe in their oppression. They will get their comeuppance. What a happy day that will be!

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(*edition: January 27, 2025*)

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 9.<sup>5-6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Moroni 10.<sup>3</sup>

## meditation 5— psalm 17.<sup>10-12</sup>

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the enemy's threat

<sup>10</sup>They shut up all feeling.

Their mouths spew hubris.

<sup>11</sup>Having rejected me, they now surround me.

They set their sights on casting me into the underworld.

<sup>12</sup>They are just like a lion that craves to rend asunder;  
like a lion's welp that crouches in ambush.

Psalm 17 began with the Psalmist's tripartite plea for God's attention (vs. 1). The nature of that desired divine attention was forensic. The Psalmist wishes for God to examine him and sit in judgment of him (vss. 2-3). The Psalmist is sure that he will found innocent as He has, through God's wise instruction, avoided error (vss. 4-5). We must not think of the Psalmist as claiming to be innocent of all error. Rather, we should think of him as innocent in respect to a specific charge. We are not informed as to the nature of the specific charge.

In verses 6-9, the Psalmist turns his attention to numerous enemies who "rise up" against him and "seek [his] ruin." The juxtaposition of trial in verses 1-5 with the presence of enemies in verses 6-12 is not accidental. Trial and enemies are connected, revealing the nature of the enemies' attack. Just as in the cycle of psalms 3-7, the Psalmist's enemies bring accusation against the Psalmist, necessitating God to act as judge.

Here, the Psalmist's accusatory enemies are identified as "malevolently immoral." We have met them several times in previous psalms. They will continue to play an important and adversarial role in much of the Psalter. After hearing of them briefly in 1.<sup>1</sup> and 3.<sup>7</sup>, the Psalmist engaged in a long description of them in 10.<sup>2-11</sup>. We heard briefly of them again in 11.<sup>1-2</sup> and 12.<sup>8</sup>. But here, in Psalm 17, the Psalmist pauses to identify them once more as his enemies and to explore their character and actions.

The malevolently immoral "shut up all feeling." One might imagine them working hard to ward off all compassion for others, but this, it seems to me, is not their character. In Psalm 14, the Psalmist spoke of the "antisocial" (14.<sup>1</sup>), whom we identified with the malevolently immoral. Perhaps they won't feel, refuse to feel. But it is just as likely that they cannot feel. Perhaps they were born that way, or perhaps they have "shut up all feeling" for so long that they are now "past feeling." Whatever one decides, the Psalmist's enemies, the malevolently immoral, feel no compassion, no love, no connection to the Psalmist. But they do have feelings. They have feelings for themselves and about "satisfying their own lusts"<sup>1</sup> against the Psalmist and for whatever they hope to gain from his demise.

Like the enemies in Psalm 3-7, their weapon is their mouth, their words: "Their mouths spew hubris." They are guilty of more than possessing an inflated sense of themselves. They are guilty of aiming their words at others. They not only boast of themselves, their genius, their achievements, etc. They slander, demean, and devalues others, including the Psalmist. They cannot be satisfied with building themselves up, they must actively reject and cast others down. This nearly always leads them to lying. Lying about themselves and lying about others. Lies are part of the hubris they spew.

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<sup>1</sup> See Psalm 10.<sup>3</sup>

In the case of the Psalmist, the malevolently immoral will not be satisfied with anything less than seeing their him utterly defeated and dead. Whatever charge they bring against the Psalmist, they hope to apply the death penalty and see him sent backing into the underworld:

“They set their sights on casting me into the underworld.”

As dramatic as all this is, none of it, the Psalmist seems to feel, has adequately plumbed the depths of his enemies’ brutal depravity. So, as he so often does, he resorts to a word picture—metaphor, as we call it.

“They are just like a lion that craves to rend asunder;  
like a lion’s welp that crouches in ambush.”

In his intense interest to reveal the brutal depravity of his enemies, the malevolently immoral, the Psalmist had resorted to a similar word picture in Psalm 10.

“Like a lion, they lie in wait from a concealed place in the brush.  
They lie in ambush to seize the downtrodden.  
They seize the downtrodden, dragging him into their lair.  
They crouch low, hunch down,  
and fall upon the bones of the vulnerable.”<sup>2</sup>

Having described his enemy and the danger they pose to him, the Psalmist will return to petition in verses 13-14. We will explore this petition in the next meditation.

It is no sin to be clear-eyed about the malevolently immoral, notwithstanding appeals to Jesus’ admonition that only those without sin should cast stones.<sup>3</sup> There are dangerous people about—people dangerous to others and people danger to society at large. Indeed, as the Psalmist observed in Psalm 12,<sup>8</sup> the malevolently immoral seem to “roam about absolutely everywhere” and are often unjustifiably “celebrated.” We can feel good about taking our complaints about them and their machinations to God, and pleading with him for help and relief, even if that help and relief will bring adverse effects upon the malevolently immoral. They really must be stopped. And no one is better at stopping them than God Himself.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

*(edition: January 30, 2025)*

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<sup>2</sup> Psalm 10.<sup>9-10</sup>

<sup>3</sup> While Jesus’ cautions about judging others are to be taken seriously, this episode is actually not found in the best attested texts of John (8.<sup>3-11</sup>). Even with it, Jesus is just as likely denouncing violence as a response to others sins as he is suggesting that no one has the right to accurately evaluate others actions and character.

## meditation 6— psalm 17.<sup>13-14</sup>

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the psalmist's renewed plea for deliverance

<sup>13</sup>Rise up, YHWH! Confront them head on. Bring them to their knees.

With Your sword, save my life from the malevolently immoral.

<sup>14</sup>Remove Your oversight from such people, YHWH.

Shorten the life appointed such already short-lived beings,  
while filling the stomach of those You cherish,  
satisfying their children,  
and providing an abundance of security to their little ones.

In this Psalm, the Psalmist has called out to God for His attention. He has asked that God examine him, judge him, and find him innocent of whatever crime his impassioned and relentless accusers have brought against him. This situation is, we have proposed, essentially the same as that found in the series of psalms 3-7.

The Psalmist's accusers are the malevolently immoral, about which the Psalmist has so much to say through much of the Book. As a lion hunts prey, the malevolently immoral now seek the Psalmist's life. The Psalmist has already pled that God protect him through the exertion of divine power against his enemies, the malevolently immoral, and safeguard the Psalmist's life.

“Offer Your unimaginable, unwavering devotion, O Savior of those who seek protection.

Exert Your power, against those who rise up against them.

Safeguard me as one precious to You.

Hide me in the cool shade of Your wings  
from the malevolently immoral who seek my ruin;  
my passionate enemies who surround me.”<sup>1</sup>

Here, in pleading for Yahweh's protection, the Psalmist does not specify the form that protection might take. However, notwithstanding the difficult and corrupt nature of the text, particularly verse 14, in verses 13-14, the Psalmist spells out what form of divine protection he has in mind.

“Rise up, YHWH! Confront them head on. Bring them to their knees.

With Your sword, save my life from the malevolently immoral.

Remove Your oversight from such people, YHWH.

Shorten the life appointed such already short-lived beings...”

The Psalmist asks that God get right up in his enemies' face, “confront them head on.” He asks that God “bring them to their knees.” The Psalmist suggests that God use force, his “sword” against his enemies. As I understand verse 14, the Psalmist then asks God to withdraw from the lives of the malevolently immoral: “Remove Your oversight from such people.” Such withdrawal of divine providence would bring an early death to the already short-lived enemy: “Shorten the life appointed such already short-lived beings.” At the same time, and in contrast to His activity, or His inactivity, in the life of the malevolently immoral, the Psalmist asks God to continue his oversight in the lives of “those You cherish,” including, of course the Psalmist. This oversight brings temporal security to them and their children.

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 17.<sup>7-9</sup>

“...filling the stomach of those you cherish,  
satisfying their children,  
and providing an abundance of security to their little ones.”

As we have so often noted, few books have been more influential in the western world than the Book of Psalms. It has been cherished by laymen and clergy alike. Its witness of God’s unwavering devotion to humanity and more especially to those who reverence him have served as a universal source of comfort and strength. It is impossible to overestimate how much its witness of the benefits that flow from trusting God have increased faith from one age to the next. With all that said, many have struggled with one aspect of the Book: the Psalmist’s frequent resort to imprecation. Imprecation is what we have in verses 13-14.

“Rise up, YHWH! Confront them head on. Bring them to their knees.  
With Your sword, save my life from the malevolently immoral.  
Remove Your oversight from such people, YHWH.  
Shorten the life appointed such already short-lived beings...”

For those unsure of its meaning, English “imprecation” comes from the Latin noun, *imprecationem*, “an invoking of evil.” The verb, *imprecari*, means to “invoke, pray, call down upon.” And, as we have noted, imprecation is a common feature of the Psalms. We are just barely out of the Book’s introductory psalms (Ps. 1 and 2) when the Psalmist issues his very first imprecation against his enemies.

“Arise, then, YHWH.  
Bring me victory, my God  
by hitting all my enemies in the mouth—  
shattering the teeth of the malevolently immoral.”<sup>2</sup>

The imagery here is violent. Disturbing. The next imprecation comes two Psalms later.

“O ’Ēlōhîm, pronounce them guilty.  
Let them fall prey to their own malicious intentions.  
Banish them because of the enormity of their legal overstep,  
since their defiance is really directed against You.”<sup>3</sup>

We have another in Psalm 10.

“Break the power of those guilty of malevolence and cruelty.  
Give full attention to their willful wrongdoing until it can’t be found.”<sup>4</sup>

These two are less violent than the first, but, in calling for the banishment of his accusers and the shattering of their power, we have examples of the Psalmist “invoking evil” upon others—especially when one considers that the possession of power is one of the greatest desires of the malevolently immoral.

In the ninth psalm, as the Psalmist considers his enemies and his desire to see their attacks on him thwarted, he looks back into his national history when, according to his tradition, God thwarted Israel’s

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<sup>2</sup> Psalm 3.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 5.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 10.<sup>15</sup>

enemies.

“You rebuked entire nations; You brought an end to those guilty of hostility;  
You wiped them from existence, always and forever.  
The enemy still lies in complete and perpetual ruin.  
You tore down their cities,  
their influence obliterated.”<sup>5</sup>

“Nations have sunk in the very pit that they themselves dug;  
their feet ensnared in the trap that they themselves hid.  
YHWH is known for the way He governs—  
in those guilty of malevolence being ensnared by their own devices.”<sup>6</sup>

In this, the Psalmist finds precedent for his own desires to see God thwart his enemies. In addition, he finds evidence of God’s good governance in His treatment of the malevolently immoral, big and small. The Psalmist seems quite confident that his imprecations are consistent with God’s character and will.

“YHWH approves of the just,  
but for the malevolently immoral, those devoted to violence,  
He feels true abhorrence.  
He casts down upon the malevolently immoral  
coals of burning sulfur;  
and a scorching wind is their destiny.”<sup>7</sup>

We have surveyed the imprecations that exist in Psalms 3-17. Such imprecation is found throughout the Book. Imprecation sits right alongside passages we find so beautiful and comforting—passages lauding God for His happy involvement in individuals’ lives; for His forgiveness and for His mercy, and for so much more. The reader will have to decide what they will do with the imprecations found over and over again in the Book. But they cannot ignore the imprecations, pretend they do not exist, pick and choose, casually dismiss what does not fit their preconceived notions or provide whatever it is they turn to scripture for.

Perhaps the Psalmists’ imprecations can be chalked up to flawed individuals asking for something that fulfills their own lusts, while, in doing so, they create a God in their own image. Perhaps in our own insecurity about our own failures to adequately abide by God’s counsel, we have domesticated God, taken a multi-dimensional Being and made Him one-dimensional.

Whatever one decides, one cannot read the Book of Psalms without being acutely aware that the Psalmist is very, very serious in his imprecations and his desire to see God act against his enemies and the world’s malevolently immoral. Without question, viewing and calling upon God as one who so acts in such ways is a slippery slope. Holding such a view of God has certainly been responsible for some of human history’s most ugly moments.

I have, myself, struggled with the Psalmist’s use of imprecation against his enemies and against the world’s malevolently immoral. Now, I confess, not so much. It seems the natural thing to do to look for some higher power when one, outnumbered and outgunned, is hopeless against the onslaught. I can relate to the Psalmist’s feelings. I find myself uttering imprecation on a fairly regular basis against the

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<sup>5</sup> Psalm 9.<sup>5-6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Psalm 9.<sup>15-16</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Psalm 11.<sup>5-6</sup>

malevolently immoral of my day and my nation. They are a serious threat to individual life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. They are a sickness, a epidemic, a threat to the continued existence of life, both on this planet and in the great beyond. This is especially true when they rise to positions of power and influence. It does not seem such a bad idea to petition God to stop them before they bring extinction to societies and life as we know it and hope it to be.

These are, I admit, somewhat new thoughts and feelings for me. They have largely developed and grown since 2016. The man whose name I refuse to utter or write, who as of this writing in February of 2025 sits in the U.S. White house, polluting it daily with his presence, has been a revelation in more ways than I can easily or quickly articulate. Among those revelations is an appreciation for the Psalmist's discernment about the existence and character of the malevolently immoral. While God is the Psalmist's main topic and focus, the malevolently immoral have an important place in his thought, his view of the world. They have an important place in what we can, should, must learn from the Book.

And make no mistake about it, the vile man who sits in the White House meets every criterion of the malevolently immoral that the Psalmist provides. He is a danger, a threat to all that is true, all that is honest, all that is just, all that is pure, and that is lovely, all that is good, all that is virtuous, all that is praiseworthy.<sup>8</sup> He is everything that true followers of Christ shun. He is everything that leads to hell and the bottomless pit.

So, yes, imprecation doesn't seem like such a bad idea. Imprecation seems like a reasonable and proportional response to the deep depravity that irredeemably sullies his soul. Coals of burning sulfur and a scorching wind seem like appropriate responses to me.

We leave it to You, O God. We put it in Your hands. Oh, that You might act quickly!

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

*(edition: February 5, 2025)*

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<sup>8</sup> See Philippians 4.<sup>8</sup>

## Meditation 7— psalm 17.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>I, innocent, will gaze upon Your face.  
I will be utterly content in awaking to the sight of You.

Our final meditation on Psalm 17 explores just one verse, two lines of poetry. But these two lines are packed with possibility and meaning.

We have maintained that this Psalm can be read together with Psalms 3-7. The Psalmist stands accused of unspecified wrongdoing, criminality. His accusers are part of a class of people known as the malevolently immoral. The Psalmist has come to the temple seeking God's help and protection. There, he experiences a welcome all-night ordeal of judgment before God.

“May my case come before You.  
May You discern the proper decision.  
You may examine my heart.  
You may spend the night scrutinizing me, putting me to the test.”<sup>1</sup>

During the divine examination, the Psalmist maintains his innocence in relation to whatever charges his enemies have brought against him.

“You will find no guilt in me.  
I am determined: I will not transgress.  
In regard to personal conduct, by Your spoken word  
I have avoided criminal behavior.  
By steadfastly keeping myself in Your path,  
I have not slipped up.”<sup>2</sup>

The Psalmist looks forward to the divine verdict, sure that at the end of the nightlong ordeal he will be found innocent and received happily into the presence of God.

“I, innocent, will gaze upon Your face.  
I will be utterly content in awaking to the sight of You.”

That's the story I hear in Psalm 17—its *sitz im leben* to use the scholar's term. That's the possibility and meaning I see in Psalm 17: to experience some specific accusation, to undergo God's judgment, to be found innocent, to meet with God's approval, and to be allowed to joyfully abide the pleasing presence of God.

This is a story that resonates with every believer. Many know the suspense of uncertainty—uncertainty about one's state and standing with God. Many hear the accusatory voice. This voice is often our own, we being our own worst enemy, our greatest accuser. Many squirm under the discerning eye of God's judgment. Many hope to somehow, someday be found innocent and comfortably abide in God's presence.

Now, it seems true that we “all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.”<sup>3</sup> Scripture levels the

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<sup>1</sup> Verses 2 and 3.

<sup>2</sup> Verses 3-5

<sup>3</sup> Romans 3.<sup>23</sup>

charge of “guilty” against all. Thus, ultimately, the key to abiding the presence of God is divine grace and forgiveness rather than “innocence” through our own merits. In his writings, Paul drives this point home over and over again.

But, while the Psalter addresses this ultimate reality elsewhere, it is not the focus of Psalm 17. In Psalm 17, we should understand the Psalmist as being accused not of sin in general, in the Pauline sense, but of some specific sin. And, in relation to this specific sin, the Psalmist is, in fact, innocent through his own actions. He is innocent because God has graciously instructed him and, having accepted the instruction, the Psalmist has avoided the specific wrongdoing that his accusers bring against him.

“In regard to personal conduct, by Your spoken word  
I have avoided criminal behavior.  
By steadfastly keeping myself in Your path,  
I have not slipped up.”<sup>4</sup>

This, we can all do. This, we are all invited to do. God’s grace does not make this invitation obsolete. We can hear, accept, and follow God’s gracious instruction, imperfect though our discipleship be. We can avoid the insinuations, the counsels, the values, and the behavior of the malevolently immoral. These were the very first words of the Book of Psalms.

“How truly fulfilled is one who  
does not walk by the direction of the malevolently immoral,  
does not stand in the path of wrongdoers,  
and does not sit in gatherings with the contemptuously antisocial!  
Rather, they choose YHWH’s instruction,  
and consult his teachings at all times.”<sup>5</sup>

In so walking, standing, and sitting, our “confidence [can] wax strong in the presence of the Lord,”<sup>6</sup> even in the face of others aggressive and unrelenting accusations of wrongdoing. This is not legalism. It is not self-righteousness. It is dependency upon God, His direction, His protection, and His help.

The world needs this perspective. Much of modern Christianity needs this perspective as it has put all its eggs in the ultimate Pauline basket, often ignoring the Psalmist’s perspective and, more tragically, the perspective of Jesus of Nazareth as found in the New Testament Gospels. There are divine standards of thought, attitude, and behavior—standards which much of modern Christianity, American Christianity in particular, has abandoned for cheap grace and temporary worldly power. God rewards those who labor daily—and it can be hard labor—to conform their thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors to generously bestowed divine instruction and standards with His willing, encouraging, and empowering presence—a presence that is beautiful above all other presences.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

*(edition: February 7, 2025)*

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<sup>4</sup> Psalm 17.<sup>4-5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Psalm 1.<sup>1-2</sup>

<sup>6</sup> See DC 121.<sup>45</sup>