

## “The Apple of Your Eye”

Psalm 17; Matthew 5:5-8  
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### INTRODUCTION

Have you ever been hurt by what people say *to* you or *about* you to others? People can be cruel or uncaring in what they say, even when they are our friends or members of our family. Are you ever distressed when you are misunderstood or misinterpreted? Our words often fail to carry adequately our messages. And our friends and colleagues don't always take the necessary time to understand us. Do you ever feel defensive when you are criticized—or attacked or belittled? Some criticism, of course, is constructive but plenty of critical comments are of the destructive kind.

All of us have to learn to handle the hurts that come from people around us. Some people argue politically or theologically in ways that come across as personal attacks. Political primaries and elections present a public platform to hear and see such attacks between candidates. I wonder if it hurts more when Christians fight unfairly. We sometimes are prone to question the other's theology or even his or her status before God. We must remember that God alone is the infallible judge.

Psalm 17 can help us handle the hurts and the criticism we get by turning to God for his care. Over the years I've received many notes from parishioners. The overwhelming majority of those notes have been expressions of kindness and appreciation. I've saved a number of them over these 30 years of ministry. But I've gotten my share of unfriendly cards and letters—someone criticizing me or taking issue with me; it is amazing how long you can remember such biting words. I have saved NONE of those notes. And long ago I resolved never to write such a note. If you need to say something hard to someone, say it to his or her face, once and for all. Do not put it on paper where it can be read and re-read and thus keep the fire smoldering.

I read about a preacher who one day entered the pulpit and found a note there waiting for him; the note had one word written in bold, black letters, “**Fool!**” The preacher responded in quick-witted fashion. He said, “*I have received many letters which the sender forgot to sign. Today I have received the first one that was signed and the writer forgot to write the message.*”

So how do we consult the Lord about our critics and our enemies? How do we learn from criticism that is accurate and justified without being wounded by words and attacks that seem thoughtless or mean-spirited? Let's turn to one of David's prayers and see how he turned to the Lord for help.

### **EXPOSITION** (Psalm 17 similar to & different from Psalm 3)

Psalm 17 is a prayer in which an individual who trusts in God, identified as David, appeals for deliverance from wicked and hostile adversaries. It is a prayer for help or deliverance in the first person singular. It contains:

1. Petitions for deliverance (vss 1-2)
2. A plea of innocence (vss 3-5)
3. A description of the adversaries and a petition for their defeat (vss. 10-12, 13-14)
4. A concluding assertion of trust (v.15)

The language employed and the images drawn are quite varied. The opening petition employs *legal* language and appeals to God as *judge*. "*May my vindication come from you*" (v.2). Another petition makes use of the image of *asylum* or *sanctuary* in which the persecuted takes refuge at a shrine.

**Example**: grabbing the horns of the altar

The enemies are described as predatory animals. "They are like a lion hungry for prey, like a great lion crouching in cover" (v.12) And God is asked to overthrow the enemies acting as the divine warrior who intervenes on behalf of his own. "Rise up, O LORD, confront them, bring them down; rescue me from the wicked by your sword" (v.13).

The concluding statement of confidence makes it clear how important the relation to God is in the theology of these prayers. The purpose of praying this and similar psalms is not simply to gain relief from dangers and difficulty. The real trouble with the trouble described in these prayers is that one's relationship with God is troubled.

Do you know these poetic lines from Rudyard Kipling??

If you can keep your head when all about you  
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,  
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,  
But make allowance for their doubting too;  
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,

Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,  
Or being hated, don't give way to hating,  
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise: (Kipling)

Those are the first two stanzas. Here are the last two.

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,  
Or walk with kings - nor lose the common touch,  
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,  
If all men count with you, but none too much;  
If you can fill the unforgiving minute  
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run –  
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,  
And - which is more - you'll be a Man my son!

There is a good dose of distilled wisdom in the poem. “*Don't listen to your critics and do not be too much influenced by the company you keep. Do your job and stay on the path.*” Kipling's poem unfortunately is incomplete—he makes no reference to God but he does salute character and does advocate seeking equilibrium. We go one step beyond Kipling and invoke God's help and find that our trust in Him steadies us in the face of trouble.

And we learn this from the biblical David. We know that Psalm 17 is attributed to David. And we know quite a bit about David's life—he had lots of enemies, including Philistines, King Saul, and his own son Absalom.

David obviously was under fire when he wrote this psalm. Many scholars have guessed that David prayed these words when Saul's jealousy forced him to flee for his life. Remember the story. David had slain Goliath and become a national hero. Saul recruited him for the army. He became a warrior and a leader of Saul's army. After he distinguished himself in battle, the people foolishly compared him even to the king himself. “*Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands.*” (1 Sam 18:7).

The king grew suspicious of David—paranoia gripped Saul; he set a price on the young man's head and uttered slander about him. David fled into the wilderness to preserve his life. During those long nights of exile David turned to the Lord for strength and courage in the midst of accusations and anxiety. How and what David prayed became for Israel and becomes for us a source of wisdom on how to pray when we face unjust opposition.

Remember the words of the hymn? “*Do thy friends despise, forsake thee; Take it to the Lord in prayer. In His arms He’ll take and shield you; you will find a solace there.*”

That is precisely what young David did—he found relief and comfort from the Lord. Look at how he describes the God of comfort.

7 Show the wonder of your great love, you who save by your right hand those who take refuge in you from their foes. **8** Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings...

**15** And I—in righteousness I will see your face; when I awake, I will be satisfied with seeing your likeness.

David uses three striking images in those words as he seeks God’s help.

**1. (keep me as the) apple of your eye**

This lovely phrase occurs several times in Scripture  
([Deut 32:1](#), [Proverbs 7:2](#), [Zechariah 2:8](#))

The English idiom translates three Hebrew words and denotes the pupil of the eye. It may refer to the reflected image of oneself that the beholder sees in the eye of another person. Let’s try it! Look at your **neighbor’s eye**... Here is the notion that God looks on us and sees Himself—we ARE created in His image!

Metaphorically it means a person very dear and precious to God. God loves us and cares for us. Charles Spurgeon commented,  
*“No part of the body is more precious, more tender and more carefully guarded than the eye; and of the eye, no portion more peculiarly to be protected than the central apple, the pupil, or as the “daughter of the eye.”*

**Example:** God’s *segullah* (the king’s treasure chest)

*“For the Lord has chosen Jacob for Himself; Israel for His special treasure”*  
([Psalm 135:4](#); cf. also [Deuteronomy 14:2](#) & [1 Peter 2:9](#))

**2. (hide me under) the shadow of your wings**

The same confidence in God’s great love for us is claimed further in the metaphor of God’s wings. Just as the protecting love of the eagle covers the little eaglet, so God hovers over us and guards us from all that would debilitate us. Jesus Christ, the express image of God, is both the apple of God’s eye and

the shadow of his wings. In Christ we experience both healing and forgiveness; and we gain a sense of what we can become when the Spirit fills us.

### 3. (I in righteousness will) **see your face**

The psalm-prayer concludes with the final image of David expressing satisfaction in beholding God's face. God's face represents his person and his faculties. To see His face is to behold Him for who he is. David seeks communion with the divine presence—a comforting presence and a protection consonant with God's mighty power.

In the most familiar of all benedictions, the preacher blesses the congregation with these words: "*May the LORD bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you...*" Or conversely, the psalmist prays "*O Lord do not hide your face from me.*" Remember Moses when he came down from the mountain after meeting with the Lord. His face shown with the reflection of God's glory—too bright for people to see and to endure

In the NT Paul told the Corinthians, "*Now we see through a glass, darkly, but then face to face*" (1 Corinthians 13:12, KJV).

Deliverance from the anxiety of enemies and critics comes from the great assurance we have of God's love for us—His face turned toward us. If God is for us who can be against us?

**Example**: seeing the **face** of a loved one after a long separation