

Gamma 12

Study 13

Psalm 4-5: Petitions

Introduction

We look again at psalms of petition, in which we place our needs and requests before God. Petition is the most well known of all the forms of prayer, but that does not mean we do it well! Here are two prayers that come back to back in the Psalter. The first is an evening prayer, in which David is trying to put his heart at rest regarding his concerns before he puts his body down to rest in a night's sleep. The second is a morning prayer.

Psalm 4: EVENING PRAYER

Psalm 4, an evening prayer, and Psalm 5, a morning prayer, are strategically placed by our prayer masters early in [the Psalter] to establish these fundamental rhythms in our lives and get us praying in the cadence of God's word... [which is] now integrated into the rhythm of going to sleep and waking up. ...We never arrive at a condition where we are beyond sleep, self-sufficient in twenty-four hour control. Daily we... [submit] ourselves to that which is deeper than consciousness in order to grow and be healed... [Now, in prayer we sink] into the quiet rhythms of God's creating and covenanting words. ...Evening prayer is a deliberate act of spirit that cultivates willingly what our bodies force on us finally. ¹

1. Compare and contrast the beginning of the prayer (v. 1) with the end (v. 8). What does that tell us about the purpose of this evening prayer?

The beginning of the prayer is "loud," but the ending is "soft." The opening statement — "Answer me when I call to you, O my righteous God" — is almost demanding, and its conclusion — "Give me relief from my distress" — reveals the inner anxiety and restlessness of the supplicant. If we look ahead briefly to verse 2, we see more of the same. The first two verses exhibit an agitated, distracted, anxious heart.

The ending of the prayer is remarkably different. In verse 6b, David turns away from talking to himself back toward addressing God. In verse 8 he achieves the goal of an evening prayer. "I will lie down and sleep *in peace*." It is not a statement of triumph to say, "I will lie down and sleep." That is not something we can avoid! Sleep will finally overtake us; we can't help it. But the purpose of evening prayer is seen in the phrase "in peace." As Peterson says (in the above quote), evening prayer aims to give the soul the same "peace" and restoration that the body will get in a night's sleep. Of course, doctors will tell us that the soul and the body always rest better if they do it together! A troubled soul will lead to fitful sleep, and the body won't fully get what it needs

Regular evening prayer is important, therefore, for both our physical and spiritual health. It is not primarily a prayer of praise or of repentance (though true petition can never be separated from them). It is primarily a prayer of petition. The needs and concerns that burden us are prayed into the hands of God so that our soul is not weighed down as it goes into the night's sleep.

So there are two purposes for petitioning prayer. One is *external*. Through our petitions, God effects the circumstances of history (James 5:16b-18). He will work justice in the world through our prayers (Luke 18:7-8). He says there are many things he will not give or enact until we ask (James 4:2b). When we do ask, he will give us above and beyond what we have asked for (Eph. 3:30). He will begrudge us no good thing we ask for (James 1:6). The second purpose of petitioning prayer is *internal*. Through our petitions, we receive peace and rest. Just as physical sleep involves giving up control and becoming vulnerable, so petition is a giving up of control — a resting and trusting in God to care for our needs.

But how does David get from the distress and clamor verse 1 to the peace of verse 8?

2. In order to lay his burdens on God, David does not simply read God a list. He begins to wrestle and argue. What is actually going on in verses 2-7? Who is he talking to?

Derek Kidner is probably right when he sees these three verse couplets as referring to three groups of people surrounding David. He is "speaking" to each group in verse 2 through verse 7 and correcting them for their errors. (In verse 2 he describes a state of mind and in verse 3 gives an answer. He follows suit in the next two couplets, answering a mindset (v. 4: "anger... on your beds"; v. 6: "Who can show us any good?") with some kind of critique or response (vv. 4-5: "Search your hearts... trust in the LORD"; vv. 6-7: "the light of your face... greater joy") The first group is idolatrous, the second group is angry, and the third group is self-pitying.

However, we cannot believe that he is literally sitting in a room, speaking to actual individuals. This is a form of "self-communing" or meditation. He is working on his own heart as he answers these imaginary groups of people. Therefore, as he gives these critiques and counsels, he is giving himself critique and counsel, working truth into his heart. That explains why, when he is done with "counseling," his own heart has changed from the clamor of verse 1 to the quiet of verse 8. In short, David is preaching to himself, which enables him to unburden himself and put his needs in God's hands.

3. How does David critique and counsel himself in verses 2-3, and how does this ensure that our petitions really unburden our hearts?

In verse 2 David addresses what Kidner calls "the fickle" 2: "How long will you love delusions and seek false gods?" This is a *divided* heart. The first reason we find ourselves crushed and burdened by our concerns may be that we have made some things into "false gods." For example, we may be far too worried

and despondent about criticism or rejection because we have made our reputation into an idol. Or we may be unduly crushed by financial setbacks partly because our status (the ability to live in a posh neighborhood) is so crucial to our self-image.

Note: Ironically, if you petition God over an issue without confronting the underlying idolatry, your petitioning will only make you feel worse, not better. You may find that the more you think about the issue in prayer, the more despondent you get!

In verse 3 David responds with two statements that counter idolatry: (a) “the LORD has set apart the godly for *himself*” and (b) “the LORD will hear when I call to him.” The first means, “God’s choice of a man [is] not... for office or honor but for fellowship (‘for himself’), [which] is the ultimate answer to the most wounding of aspersions and discouragements.”³ The second means that it is the Lord alone who can give you any hope or security. It is not your financial status, reputation, or anything else. What David is doing is *putting his needs in perspective*. It is absolutely critical to do this, before we even ask God about them. David is saying, “Remember, heart, if I have the fellowship and love of God, and if I am protected by the wise power of God, I have everything I really need. The things that are in jeopardy are not my *real* hope, strength, and joy.” If you don’t work that into your heart before you pray about some matter, you will get no peace at all as you petition. There is no use petitioning God to help you continue to serve an idol!

4. How does David critique and counsel himself in verses 4-5, and how does this ensure that our petitions really unburden our hearts?

In verse 4 he addresses what Kidner calls “the hot-heads”⁴: “In your anger do not sin; when... on your beds... be silent.” This is a *bitter* heart. The second reason we find ourselves crushed and burdened by our concerns may be that we are mishandling anger. Notice that the anger David critiques is the kind that makes you brood “on your beds.” Anger that simmers and makes you brood has at least two forms. On your bed you may be (1) “replaying the tapes” of what he/she/they did to you. This keeps the hurt alive and deepens the bitterness. Or you may be (2) planning an agenda that will “show them” or maybe even pay them back. This will, of course, have a terrible effect on your petition. Much of what we ask God for concerns the real or potential wrongdoing of others. There is a tremendous amount of injustice and

unfairness in life. We must, however, beware lest our petition only increase our bitterness, allowing us to feel justified in our anger as we pray.

Note: We saw in verses 2-3 that if we don’t deal underlying idolatry in our hearts, our petitioning might lead to *greater* despair rather than less. In the same way, if we are not careful to deal with any underlying bitterness in our hearts, our praying might lead to *greater* anger. Why? One “feeder” of bitterness is a sense of superiority. You can’t stay angry with people long term unless you feel “I would never act the way they did!” When you are praying to God about an issue, it can make you feel very “righteous” (in the wrong way). It

may feed your bitterness. In that case, the praying will not increase the peace of your heart, but only the clamor. You will never get from verse 1 to verse 8!

In verses 4 and 5 David responds with wonderfully nuanced advice. First, he strikes one of the most difficult yet wise balances possible. The NIV masks this a bit when it renders it, "In your anger do not sin" (v. 4a). Notice that David assumes that anger itself is right. He does not say "Don't be angry," but rather "Don't sin with your anger." A more vivid and forceful translation is the RSV: "Be angry, but sin not." The balance is this. On the one hand, face squarely what is happening to you — the spite, the malice, the unfairness — and be angry about it. Don't make excuses for people. Don't paper over the wrongdoing, or you will find that your heart gets angry and you can't even admit it! Be angry. But, on the other hand, do two things that will keep you from plotting vengeance and being poisoned by your anger: First, "*search your heart*" means to humble yourself by remembering your own heart's flaws and sins. Second, "*trust in the LORD*" means to humble yourself by remembering that he knows best. Don't think you know what the other person deserves or how the world has to go now. ("Offer right sacrifices" may mean the same as, "When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate. ...Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly" (1 Peter 2:23). David may be saying, "Give your injustice to God and let him deal with it. You don't have the power, the wisdom, or the right to judge others. You've had this burden all day. Now give it to the judge. Give it up to God. It's not yours now."

Paul picks this up verse from Psalm 4 in Ephesians 4:26 and he applies it this way: "Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry." The purpose of evening prayer is to forgive and send to God the injustices done to us. Then we can pray without bitterness.

5. How does David critique and counsel himself in verses 6-7, and how does this ensure that our petitions really unburden our hearts?

In verse 6 he addresses what Kidner calls "the doleful."⁵ "Many are asking, 'Who can show us any good?'" This is a *self-pitying*, ungrateful heart. We can tell what the people mean by "good" by David's retort. They feel that they are

not prospering in the circumstances of life (see "their grain and new wine abound," v. 7). These are people who feel that "nothing ever goes right for me." They feel their lives do not have enough blessing. They want a prosperous, comfortable life, and this does not appear to be happening.

This is the third reason we find ourselves crushed and burdened by our concerns. We may have a definition of a good life and expectations about what God owes us that are not in line with biblical wisdom. How does David respond? Eugene Peterson puts it well.⁶

"[This] contrast is between those who are perpetually asking God for what they do not have (v. 6) and those who are overwhelmed before God with what he has already given (v.7). St Francis de Sales divided the population similarly: the immature who are unhappy over what they don't have, and the mature who are happy with what they [have already received from God]."

The overwhelming blessing we “already have” is stated in verse 6b: “the light of your face... upon us.” Verse 7 is then a remarkably powerful statement. “If I have the privileges of the gospel — the assurance of and access to the love, grace, and friendship of God — then everything else is ‘gravy.’” Years ago, the young Jonathan Edwards wrote a sermon ⁷ with the following outline:

1. Our bad things will turn out for good. (Rom. 8:28)
2. Our good things can never be taken away from us. (Ps. 4:6-7)
3. And the best things are yet to come. (1 Cor. 2:9)

David (and Edwards and Peterson!) here tells us that our petitions may be defiled by self-pity if unaccompanied by praise and thanksgiving for the miraculous, permanent blessings of salvation itself. We are to be amazed at our access to God (“light of your face”) and the “joy” of knowing we belong to God. Not until we put our temporal needs in perspective with the glory given and guaranteed will we be able to make petitions without getting deeper into worry and self-pity.

In summary: if, as we lay our requests to God, we find ourselves sinking deeper into despondency, anger, or self-pity, it is because we have failed to do this kind of heart work. We must be sure that the things we are asking for aren’t idols, or else our petition will make us only more discouraged; be sure that the things we are asking for do not enhance our anger and sense of superiority over others, or else our petition will only make us more bitter; and be sure that when we ask for things, we also rejoice and thank God for what we already have and cannot lose in the gospel.

Psalm 5: MORNING PRAYER

The evening prayer prepared our hearts for petition. Now, the morning prayer is the place where petitions are made. Eugene Peterson says, “Psalm 5 prays our reentry into the waking world’s daylight... Morning prayer prepares for action. Passivity, in which we let God work his will in us [as in the evening Psalm 4] is primary, but activity, in which we obey the will worked in us in the world, is also essential.” ⁸

1. What do verses 1-3 teach us about the attitudes and methods we should have as we petition God? How does verse 2 give us the “warrant” to come to God with our petitions?

First, we see a *spontaneous but disciplined* balance in method here. In verse 1, David calls attention to the “sighing” of the heart. His petitions are the deepest fears, hopes, concerns, and longings of his heart. They are his heart’s spontaneous cries. However, in verse 3, he “lays” his requests before God in an orderly and systematic fashion. This is an important balance. On the one

hand, it means we are to take a very careful inventory of everything weighing on our hearts, making our hearts “sigh.” Every sighing should be made into a prayer. Otherwise, we will go through the day sinking under self-absorption, anxiety, self-pity, or anger. I have found that I need to get my “prayer list” from my heart. But, on the other hand it is not enough to just know the heart’s concerns. We have to distill them and then deal with them in specific, orderly, regular (every morning!) petition. In summary, petition must be characterized by both order and ardor. We need to discover our own heart’s deepest sighs, but then take the time and trouble to pray them in a disciplined way.

Second, we see an *active-passive* balance in attitude. This comes out in the phrase “wait in expectation” (v. 3) or, as it is sometimes translated, “watch.” To “watch” or “wait in expectation” shows first an active, eager, hopeful attitude. We move out in confidence. We are not fearful, second-guessing, or looking over our shoulder. On the other hand, “watch” and “wait” mean that we are restraining ourselves from trying to answer God’s prayers *for* him. We relax and allow him to act. We do not take revenge, we do not overwork, and we do not cut corners. We rest in the knowledge of his active care for us.

In Psalm 4:1, David seems assured that he will be answered by a righteous God. In Psalm 5:12, David is sure that he is “righteous” and will be heard. Why do we have even better resources than David did for knowing that “our righteous God” will certainly answer (v. 1)?

We know that God will answer us when we call (v. 1) because one terrible day he did not answer Jesus when *he* called. Jesus also called out to “my God,” but he was forsaken (Matt. 27:46). Jesus’ suffering and rejection, however, was done as our substitute (2 Cor. 5:21). *We* are the ones who deserve to be forsaken and to have our prayers rejected, because he is a “righteous God” (v. 1). Without Christ, verse 1 is rather unnerving. To call to a righteous God for an answer when we ourselves are so flawed is a mistake. The psalmist says, “If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened” (Ps. 66:18). But who of us can say we do not nurture sin in our hearts?

Jesus was given the prayer-rejection we deserved, so that we could have the prayer-reception he deserved (2 Cor. 5:21). We know that God will answer us when we call “my God” because God did not answer Jesus when he made the same petition on the cross. Now, the righteousness of God guarantees that he will answer us. God *must* hear us or he would be unjust, because our sins are paid for. Without Christ, God’s righteousness would guarantee that he would not hear us. With Christ, God’s righteousness guarantees that he will!

This is, perhaps, the ultimate way that petition unburdens the heart — when it is combined with the gospel. David knew intuitively that God would answer him, though in verse 5 he remembers that God will only answer him if he “offers right sacrifices.” The temple was a place to offer sacrifices to cover our sins. But we know that Jesus offered the ultimate sacrifice. Therefore, it is remembering his sacrifice and our acceptance in him that assures us our petitions will be heard — and that he will answer us in the wisest way. If we are turned down, it is not because we are “unworthy” — it is only because our request wasn’t the wisest.

Jesus told us to pray “Our Father,” which is to remind us right up front that we go to God as his beloved children, adopted into the family. (1) Because we are *his* children, we know he is committed to us and *wants* to answer us. But (2) because we are his *children*, we know that we have “little” wisdom and may not always ask for the wisest thing. We have, though, the assurance that God will always give us what we *would* have asked for if we knew everything he knows.

This is all part of the assurance we have that goes deeper than David’s. How much better should we sleep at night than he did! Do we?

3.

Summarize what we have learned about how to bring our petitions to God. (You may draw on what you studied last time.) Which of these principles do you most need to put into practice?

1. The goals of petitioning prayer are: put the world right, and put your heart at rest.
2. The qualities of petitioning prayer are: boldness, specificity, ardor, discipline, yet submission to God’s will and wisdom. The boldness and submission come from knowing we are his children.
3. The accompanying prayers with petition are: repentance for idols — so we are not too despondent to pray; forgiveness of wrongdoers — so we are not too angry to pray; and gratitude and praise for grace in the gospel — so we are not too self-pitying to pray.
4. The basic assurance for petitioning prayer: we get the prayer-reception he deserved because he got the prayer-rejection we deserved.