

God's Righteousness

Believers can live with hope knowing that God will always do what is right and just.

During a Major League Baseball game, the home plate umpire stands behind the catcher carefully watching every throw the pitcher makes to the catcher. According to the rules of the game, the umpire's declaration is not merely his description of whether a pitch is a ball or a strike; his words make each pitch a ball or strike. Even if a pitch is outside the strike zone, it becomes a strike if the umpire declares it to be so. Similarly, given the social setting and the laws regarding a marriage ceremony, when the minister declares a couple to be husband and wife, he is not just making an observation. By the authority vested in him, his words legally make that couple a husband and wife.

Both of these examples are known as performative utterances. They are words that actually accomplish something by their declaration. In the Bible, blessings and curses are also performative utterances. In Scripture, when someone with the proper authority blessed someone, their words were more than a wish or even a prayer. Or, if someone in the proper social setting uttered a curse, it was more than just the speaker expressing frustration. In both these cases, the speakers' proclamations, completely apart from a misguided notion that this was magic, enacted their desired blessing or curse. There was and is genuine power in uttered speech. When Jacob tricked Isaac into giving his blessing meant for Esau (Gen. 27:1-30), the rules of the blessing of the firstborn did not allow Isaac to later retract his blessing from Jacob so as to give it to Esau (vv. 30-38). Indeed, words uttered in the wrong circumstances may have the opposite effect of what the speaker intended. For example, "If one blesses his neighbor with a loud voice early in the morning, it will be counted as a curse to him" (Prov. 27:14).

Words are powerful and can be dangerous as well. Like squeezing toothpaste out of a tube when it is nearly impossible to put the paste back into the tube, once words are spoken they cannot be unspoken. But words can also be wonderful things. A person's words can bring life, encouragement, and joy. In Psalm 5, we will see expressions of both blessings and curses. Some of those words are wonderful, while others are quite startling.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

Psalm 5

The last two psalms studied in this quarter are laments. People sometimes think of the book of Psalms as being composed primarily of praises. While many of the psalms are in fact psalms of praise, a significant number of the psalms are laments. Psalms of lament follow a typical pattern. They usually begin with the speaker uttering some kind of cry of complaint or cry of help toward God. Often, the psalmist's words give a sense of having been neglected or abandoned by God. Next, the psalmist typically explains the predicament he has found himself in. Many times there is some kind of adversary the psalmist is facing or stressful situation the psalmist is going through. Then the lament almost always ends with the psalmist realizing and expressing confident faith in God who will come to the psalmist's aid. There are both individual and communal laments in the book of Psalms.

Psalm 5 is a particular kind of lament known as an imprecatory psalm. The word “imprecate” means “to pray evil against” or “to invoke disaster upon.” Imprecatory psalms ask God to inflict judgment, calamity, or curses upon the psalmist's enemies or those perceived to be the enemies of God. Imprecatory psalms can present a real challenge for Christians in light of Jesus's commands, particularly His exhortation that believers are to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (Matt. 5:43-48). When Jesus was on the cross, Jesus did not pray curses down on His enemies, but prayed for their forgiveness (Luke 23:34). The apostle Paul said to bless, not curse, those who persecute us (Rom. 12:14) and not to seek vengeance, but leave room for the retribution of God (v. 19; see v. 17). Yet, the New Testament itself quotes from some of these imprecatory psalms, including Psalm 5 (compare Pss. 35:19; 69:4; with John 15:25).

The actual imprecation in Psalm 5 is in verse 10. Imprecatory psalms are often ignored by believers who view them as unacceptable. But such psalms depict the emotive character of the Psalms. They express emotions and experiences everyone faces at certain points in their lives. Malevolent speech (curses), just like benevolent speech (blessings), is performative literature. That means that to utter such things is a potent way to actually do something not just describe something. These malevolent words also put the onus on God. The speakers of the imprecatory prayers do not take matters into their own hands, but leave the matters of justice and judgment in the hands of God.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

The Source of Righteousness (Ps. 5:1-6)

The psalmist went to the Lord in prayer to plead his case. He proclaimed that God never delights in evil nor can boastful men stand in His presence. The Lord detests evil.

VERSE 1

Listen to my words, LORD; consider my sighing.

The superscription of Psalm 5 attributes this psalm to David. This particular psalm was to be sung accompanied by flutes. This type of flute was probably a hollow reed pipe with drilled finger holes. This kind of flute dates back to ancient Egypt and is one of the oldest musical instruments still in use.

Verses 1-2 contain a series of imperatives. The Hebrew word for **listen** literally means “give an ear,” and in the wisdom literature the expression is used to address God directly. For example, Psalm 55:1 says, “God, listen to my prayer and do not hide from my plea for help.” The second imperative **consider** means to understand or discern. Sometimes quiet sighing expresses a considerable amount of torment. David suffered considerable anguish because of his adversaries (5:8-9).

VERSE 2

Pay attention to the sound of my cry, my King and my God, for I pray to you.

The imperative **pay attention** expresses a third plea of David to God that He listen and act, a common request in laments. As previously noted, laments typically begin with the psalmist begging God to listen and act on his behalf (4:1). Questions often begin these laments such as “LORD, why do you stand so far away? Why do you hide in times of trouble?” (10:1) or even a demand, “LORD, hear a just cause; pay attention to my cry; listen to my prayer” (17:1).

David the king prayed, “**my King and my God.**” David knew that his role as king of Israel was due to his King, the sovereign Lord of all creation. It may appear obvious that David was praying to God. Yet, David explicitly stated, “**for I pray to you.**” While supplication has its place in prayer, prayer first and foremost is not primarily a list of requests.

God is a Person, and prayer is a conversation with God, as “*I pray to you*” reminds us.

VERSE 3

In the morning, LORD, you hear my voice; in the morning I plead my case to you and watch expectantly.

Psalm 4 is a night prayer. Psalm 5 is a **morning** prayer. Scripture says much about praying in the morning. Morning prayers are often strategy times and evening prayers are reflective times. Praying in the morning brings joy (30:5). It is a time to praise God (59:16). David prayed, “But I call to you for help, LORD: in the morning my prayer meets you” (88:13). Yet, praying at night is good too, “LORD, I remember your name in the night” (119:55). Jesus prayed very early in the morning (Mark 1:35) and also at night (6:46-47; 14:32-40). Ultimately, no place is any better than any other place to pray, and no time is better than any other time to pray. That is because God is omnipresent in space and time and omniscient.

Hear translates the same Hebrew word that begins the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4. The Hebrew term translated **plead my case** means to direct, arrange, or set in order. This Hebrew word is used to describe how altars and their sacrifices were arranged (Gen. 22:9; Num. 23:4).

David waited in faithful expectation. The Hebrew term for **watch expectantly** describes watchmen (1 Sam. 14:16; 2 Sam. 18:24). The term also appears in Proverbs 31:27 to describe how the wife of noble character “watches over” the activities of her household. With his words, David was expressing his trust in and dependence on God.

VERSE 4

For you are not a God who delights in wickedness; evil cannot dwell with you.

Verses 4-6 read much like Psalm 1:4-5. **Wickedness** and **evil** are synonyms, and neither can dwell in God’s presence. This is the first of three instances in the Hebrew where a negative begins the clause: “not a God” (v. 4); “cannot stand (v. 5); and “nothing reliable” (v. 9). These three negative clauses separate who God is not from who God is.

The Hebrew term for **dwell with** is the same word used elsewhere in the Old Testament in association with a “sojourner” or an “alien” (“resides,” Ex. 12:48,49). These people dwelled temporarily in the holy land but had no property rights. **Evil cannot dwell with you** is another way of saying that “evil cannot be your guest.” God has no evil

in Him (Ps. 92:15), and He will not allow evil in His presence even temporarily. Even the sin of the redeemed was paid for (judged) by the atoning sacrifice of Christ. That is how seriously God takes sin and evil.

VERSE 5

The boastful cannot stand in your sight; you hate all evildoers.

In Hebrew, this verse also begins with a negative, “not stand the boastful in front of your eyes.” Oddly, the root of the term **boastful** means “to shine.” Sometimes we envy the arrogant (73:3). They sound so assured, and we are attracted to such confidence. But a person is not approved by God just because he or she makes confident claims. Those who boast should boast only that they know Him (Jer. 9:23-24; 2 Cor. 10:17-18).

God is not neutral toward evil. The writer chose a very common word for **hate**, a word that can be used for hating humans as well as God. Proverbs 8:36 even says that some people hate wisdom. It is God’s nature to resist sin. This kind of hatred is no mere human emotion that comes and goes. God executes justice by snaring the wicked with the work of their own hands (Ps. 9:16).

VERSE 6

You destroy those who tell lies; the LORD abhors violent and treacherous people.

God will **destroy those who tell lies**. David was not commanding God but rather making an affirmation of faith that God whom he worshiped and served is just and will not tolerate these kinds of sinful acts. At the time of God’s own choosing, He who is perfect in His righteousness will judge the wicked in perfect justice.

Explore Further

Read the article “Music, Instruments, Dancing” on pages 1131–1134 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*.

What part does music play in your church’s worship? In your personal life and worship?

The Benefit of Righteousness (Ps. 5:7-10)

In contrast, the psalmist could approach God because of His great love and ask for His guidance to walk in righteousness. His adversaries had spread lies and caused destruction. He asked God to punish them for their rebellion against Him.

VERSE 7

**But I enter your house by the abundance of your faithful love;
I bow down toward your holy temple in reverential awe of you.**

Evil cannot dwell in God's presence (v. 4), but David could **enter** God's house, His holy temple. At the time David wrote this psalm, the temple in Jerusalem was not yet built. However, the tabernacle that existed before the temple was also known as "the LORD's temple" (1 Sam. 1:9; 3:3). Some suggest that the expression **enter your house** is metaphorical for being under the protection of God.

A person enters the house of the Lord not by righteous deeds, but **by the abundance of [God's] faithful love**. The Hebrew word for *faithful love* is the term that expresses God's faithfulness to His covenant and can also be translated "lovingkindness," "steadfast love" (ESV), and "mercy" (KJV). God's mercy has always been the way in which people have had and still have access to God. Christians are declared righteous before God forever when He exchanges our sin for Christ's perfect righteousness, which He credits to us permanently (Rom. 4:22-25). This is called justification by faith (5:1-5). **Reverential awe** can also be translated as "fear" (ESV, KJV). The Hebrew term can mean either "dread" (Deut. 2:25) or "reverence" (Ps. 119:38). Such reverence leads to living according to God's ways in wisdom, holiness, and integrity (also known as "the fear of the LORD," Job 28:28; Ps. 19:9; Prov. 8:13; 9:10).

VERSE 8

**LORD, lead me in your righteousness because of my adversaries;
make your way straight before me.**

Lead me is the fourth imperative in Psalm 5. While righteousness and justice are two different words in English, in both Hebrew and Greek a single term carries both meanings. God always acts in accordance with what is right, and He is the arbiter of what is right (Gen. 18:25). Because He is omnipotent, He has the power to always carry out what is right. "The LORD sits enthroned forever; he has established his throne

for judgment. And he judges the world with righteousness; he executes judgment on the nations with fairness” (Ps. 9:7-8).

David had a lot of **adversaries**. The second part of the verse echoes the first half: **make your way straight before me**. David prayed both that God would guide him in His righteousness and protect him from his adversaries.

VERSE 9

For there is nothing reliable in what they say; destruction is within them; their throat is an open grave; they flatter with their tongues.

Verses 9-10 describe David’s enemies. The Hebrew for **nothing reliable in what they say** can more literally be translated “no faithfulness in their mouths.” **Destruction** is in their inward parts; their guts, the seat of thought and emotion. Their throat is an **open grave**. Think of the stench from an open grave. Jesus said that it is not what enters a person that defiles, but what comes out of a person (Matt. 12:33-37; 15:11).

The apostle Paul quoted this verse as one of many Old Testament passages he used to describe the plight of sin in every human heart (Rom. 3:13). Every human being is under sin and therefore subject to God’s judgment. All people begin life opposed to God and under God’s wrath. None are righteous (vv. 9-20). This is why we need our Savior!

VERSE 10

Punish them, God; let them fall by their own schemes. Drive them out because of their many crimes, for they rebel against you.

David openly expressed the desire of his heart concerning his adversaries. **Punish them** and **let them fall by their own schemes** are not commands but rather David’s requests to the Lord. David expressed a similar request in Psalm 141:9-10 when he wrote, “Protect me from the trap they have set for me, and from the snares of evildoers. Let the wicked fall into their own nets, while I pass by safely.” When God judged the Israelites who refused to enter the promised land after most of the scouts gave a bad report, He said, “Your corpses will fall in this wilderness” (Num. 14:29,32). Hosea proclaimed the Israelites would be judged “because of their schemes” (Hos. 11:6). In one of the rare psalms where Yahweh, “the LORD,” is doing the talking, He said of Israel, “I gave them over to their stubborn hearts to follow their own plans” (Ps. 81:12).

David prayed that God would judge his enemies. This naturally leads to the question, Should we pray for God to punish our enemies today? Yes and no. God commands us to pray for our human enemies (Matt. 5:43-48; Luke 6:27-38), so in that sense the answer is no. But, we can pray imprecatory prayers against the Devil and his forces (Eph. 6:12). Ultimately, in both cases we need to trust God to provide justice.

Explore Further

Read the article, “Imprecation, Imprecatory Psalms” on page 795 in the *Holman Illustrated Study Bible, Revised and Expanded*. Should a Christian pray these imprecatory psalms? Why or why not?

God’s Blessing on the Righteous (Ps. 5:11-12)

The psalmist challenged all believers to praise God forever and asked God to protect His people. He concluded the psalm with a declaration of confidence in God’s blessing and safety for the righteous.

VERSE 11

But let all who take refuge in you rejoice; let them shout for joy forever. May you shelter them, and may those who love your name boast about you.

David’s prayer takes a pivotal turn. He no longer prayed for himself alone. Now he prayed for all God’s people. These are not self-focused sentiments. Most laments end with the psalmist believing and trusting in God’s faithfulness. David desired protection, **shelter**, and **refuge**, all vivid descriptions of a blessed life lived before God (Pss. 2:12b; 34:8; Nah. 1:7).

To *take refuge* is to seek protection from someone you trust. The Hebrew word for *shelter* means to cover, conceal, or shield. It often refers to long garments that people would wear to cover or screen themselves. These garments offered protection to the wearer.

Troubles are a part of life, and sometimes those troubles come in bunches. But God in His plans and purposes has a long perspective time wise. His people will **shout for joy forever**. While we experience salvation in this life to a certain extent, the consummation of our salvation

awaits Christ's return (Matt. 6:19-21; 1 Pet. 1:3-9). As indicated by the presence of David's adversaries (Ps. 5:8-10), God does not promise His people trouble-free lives (Matt. 5:11-12; John 15:18-21). But He does promise to always be with and sustain us when we go through life's trials (Matt. 28:20; Heb. 13:5). God is who we should turn to first in times of trouble. The church can help. Believers can assist. Family is great to have around in such times. But God alone is our sure, ultimate Refuge.

In God we can **rejoice** and **shout for joy forever** (Ps. 32:11). The boastful wicked cannot stand (5:5). But, those who **love** God's name **boast** about Him. The Hebrew word translated *boast* means to be joyful or rejoice. It can also mean to triumph.

VERSE 12

For you, LORD, bless the righteous one; you surround him with favor like a shield.

David's words in this verse are an affirmation of faith. A blessing is a potent way to invoke, distribute, or celebrate the well-being that comes from divine favor. Blessing is the enhancement of a life of fullness.

Righteousness refers to right relationship and right actions. Because the **LORD**, Yahweh, is **righteous**, that which conforms to God's moral character is right. To be obedient to God translates into living a moral life. Proverbs 10:6 states, "Blessings are on the head of the righteous."

The Hebrew word for **surround** is used to describe how during Saul's hunt for David, he and his men were "closing in" on David (1 Sam. 23:26). Here David used the term positively. God surrounds *the righteous* with His **favor**. *Favor* does not refer to some magic charm, but it does speak of God's providence and protection that is like a **shield** that surrounds His people. In the ancient Near East there were many different types of shields of various shapes and sizes. Psalm 3:3 refers to a small shield or buckler. But this verse refers to a large shield that covered the entire body and which a soldier could get behind for protection.

Explore Further

Read the article "Blessing and Cursing" on pages 225–226 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*.

What are some other ways that our words actually "do" something?
