

July 14/15, 2001

Arguments for Answered Prayer

Psalm 86

Pastor Bryan Clark

Have you ever stopped to think about what an amazing thing prayer is? Whether you are verbalizing your thoughts or just thinking your thoughts in your mind, you have the ability to communicate with the God of the universe. In some mysterious way that we can't even fully understand, you have the ability to move the hand of the God of the universe simply through your prayers. That is really quite an amazing thing when you think about it.

There have been a number of secular magazines in the last several years with articles on the power of prayer and how prayer changes people's lives. These articles have appeared in medical journals as well as *Newsweek* and *Time* magazines. There seems to be a real emphasis on prayer and a sense of mystery in terms of what it really is all about. Most polls continue to show that the majority of Americans believe in the power of prayer. They might have crazy or mixed-up theology, but they believe in this thing called prayer. They sense there is something about prayer that is real and powerful.

What we want to talk about today is the basis upon which we expect God to answer our prayers. In other words, it is easy to be really careless when we talk about prayer. We go before God and we ask different things. Without giving it a lot of thought, we just offer up our petitions and we go our way. The question is: What is the basis upon which we expect those prayers to be answered?

Many of you have heard of the famous British preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon. He was well known for making the case that, when we make petitions before God, we should include arguments as to why those petitions ought to be answered. He was saying that when we come before God and ask for something, we should give reasons why we think God ought to answer that prayer. What it causes us to do is to think through what we are asking, and why God should answer. Spurgeon's point was that if you can't come up with a good argument, maybe you need to rethink the petition.

That is what Psalm 86 is all about. David is the writer, but we don't really know for sure when he wrote this in his life. Many people think it was related to when his son Absalom had come in and taken the throne, and David was fleeing for his life because his son wanted to put him to death. They think it was out of that experience that David wrote this psalm, but we don't know that for sure.

In Psalm 86, David is offering a very personal prayer to God. Within the prayer, there are 15 petitions or things that he asks of God. In the course of that, David gives 8 arguments to say, "God, this is what I am asking for and this is my argument as to why I expect to have this prayer answered."

It is also interesting to notice in this Psalm that David refers to himself and uses a personal pronoun 35 times in these verses. It is just reminding us that this is a very personal, intimate cry from the heart of David for God to respond in the midst of some very difficult circumstances.

One of the interesting things about Psalm 86 is that very little in the psalm is new. What I mean by that is that almost everything in this psalm can be found in other passages in

the Old Testament. You can find it in other books and you can find it in other psalms. David was familiar, of course, with the writings of the Old Testament and even other psalms. Here he is just pulling them together—taking other writings and bringing them together in this particular prayer, or psalm, and it provides a good pattern for using Scripture in our prayers.

Looking at Psalm 86, notice that the best way to identify these arguments for answered prayer is with the word “for.” Every time you see the word “for,” David is making an argument. He is going to make a petition—to ask for something—and then he is going to say, “Lord, this is my reason why I am asking.” We are going to identify our 8 arguments that way.

The Psalm opens by saying, “Incline Thine ear, O LORD, and answer me; for I am afflicted and needy.” His petition is for God to listen and answer. What is the argument that he makes as to why God should answer his prayer? “For I am afflicted and needy.” His first argument is because he *needs* God—because he needs help. This may seem fairly obvious, but it really is very essential if we are going to experience answered prayer before God.

There is always this danger of two opposite attitudes that get us into trouble. One is an attitude of entitlement where we come before God with an attitude that God really owes us. We come before God and we ask. We expect it to be answered because, really, in our heart of hearts, there is a lot of pride. We feel like God owes us because we went to church...or we put some money in the offering...or we have served here...or we have done this. Therefore, we think God owes us. There is a sense of entitlement.

At the other end of this scale would be an overwhelming sense of unworthiness, or worthlessness, where you come into the presence of God and you really don't feel worthy. You do not ask God for much because you have this sense of guilt and shame. You really don't think you have the right to ask, and if you did ask, God probably wouldn't listen. If He did listen, He probably wouldn't answer. That is at the other end of the scale.

Neither of these attitudes is really what God wants if we are going to experience answered prayer. As David comes before God with his first argument, he says it is because he *needs* God. Our natural bent is to be self-sufficient—to be independent. One of the things that happens when we pray is that we pledge our dependence upon God. We are saying, “God, I am dependent upon you. God, I need you.”

I would have to say that, of the things I struggle with in life, this would be right up towards the top of my list. My natural bent is to be pretty self-sufficient. I just suck it up and, one way or another, say, “Let's get the job done.” Those of us with kids hear that from the time they are tiny when they start to say, “I can do it myself.” The problem is that really doesn't ever go away—we just disguise it a little bit better. There is still something pretty strong within us that says, “You know, I can do it myself. God, I will let you know if I need some help.” What He wants to hear from us is, “I can't do it. I am not self-sufficient. I need help.”

That is why religion has so much appeal in our world. Religion is really a man-made way to get to God. Religion is saying, “God, watch. I can do it myself.” There is a lot of appeal to that, because that is really how most of us are wired. But God does not want religion. God wants us to say, “No, I can't do it myself. I need help.”

There would be many of you who came to a relationship with Jesus Christ in the midst of desperate circumstances—in times of difficulty. Those are the times that really break us of our pride and our arrogance, when we finally reach the point where we say, “God, I can’t do it. I need help.” Often those are the moments of conversion—when we place our trust in Christ.

That is the first argument that David uses, because he needs God’s help. The second one is in verse 2: “Do preserve my soul.” It could be translated, “Do protect my soul.” As we read further in the psalm, we learn that David is in danger of being put to death, and I think he is literally saying here, “God, protect my life.” What is the argument, or the basis, upon which he expects that prayer to be answered? “For I am a godly man.” The word *godly* there means, “I am devoted.” We might say, “I am committed.” He says, “God, I am committed to you.” As a matter of fact, he defines it in the latter part of verse 2, “O Thou my God, save Thy servant who trusts in Thee.” I think he is defining what he means by saying, “I trust in you. I have made you my God. I trust in you and, on the basis of that, I am asking you to protect me.”

Often what happens is that we just live our lives our own way, and do our own thing. Then we get ourselves in trouble and we cry out to God, and we just expect Him to rescue us. David is saying, “God, that is not the way I am living. I have made you my God. I have committed myself to you. I am devoted to you. I trust you. And on the basis of that *commitment* I have made to you, I am asking you to protect me, to preserve me, to come through for me.” So David is acknowledging his need for God, and he is saying, “God I trust you.”

You know, God wants to hear from us. One of the things that we need to learn about God is that He wants to hear our petitions. God wants to hear us say, “I need help.” He wants to hear us say, “God, because I trust you, this is what I am asking...” That is what Jesus said: “Come onto me, all of you who are weary and heavy-laden and I will give you rest.” Jesus also said, “Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be open. Ask and you will receive.” When we place our trust in Him, He wants us to acknowledge our dependence by coming and asking. He wants to hear that and He wants to respond. But He does want us to acknowledge our need, and He wants us to make our commitment and to put our trust in Him.

The third argument is in verse 3: “Be gracious to me, O Lord, for to Thee I cry all day long.” His prayer request is for God to be gracious. It could be translated, “Be merciful.” His reason is because he humbly admits that he does not deserve what he is asking for. When he talks about crying out all day long, he is saying, “God I don’t deserve what I am asking for.” That is evidenced by the fact that all day long he pleads with God, not on the basis of what he is entitled to, but on the basis of God’s mercy. He says, “God, I am asking you to give me what I don’t deserve. I know I don’t deserve it.” We would call it an attitude of humility. He comes before God with an attitude of *humility* rather than an attitude of entitlement. He says, “God, I don’t deserve what I am asking for, but I am asking you to be gracious.”

You can tell if you are praying with an attitude of entitlement by the way you respond when you don’t get what you asked for. When we don’t get what we asked for, we often feel like God is being unfair, and we get angry with God. What we are saying is, “God, I deserve that.” In other words we are saying, “I came before you with an attitude of entitlement. I believe I deserved that and you let me down.” That is not the kind of attitude that God is

going to respond to. Rather, David comes in humility and says, “God, I don’t deserve what I am asking for. I know I don’t. I am not coming out of pride and arrogance saying that you owe me. I am just coming and pleading with you all day long to give me what I don’t deserve.”

If one day I came into work on payday and noticed that the check was not in my box, as it typically is, I probably would not go down the hall to the Finance Office, get on my hands and knees before Lynn and say, “Lynn, please, please pay me today. Please pay me.” I probably wouldn’t go back to my office, shoot off one e-mail after another, begging and pleading, “Please out of the goodness of your heart, pay me.” I wouldn’t do that. I would just walk into the office and ask for my check, because there is a sense of entitlement there. I have earned it. I have done my work and I expect to be paid. There is nothing wrong with that sense of entitlement.

The problem is that oftentimes we take that attitude into the presence of God. We step into God’s presence and we say, “God, I am here and this is what I want; I expect it.” That is an attitude of arrogance and pride, and God is not likely to respond to that. Rather, David comes with an attitude of humility and acknowledges, “God, I don’t deserve this, but I am asking you, out of your mercy, to give me what I don’t deserve.”

The fourth argument is found in verse 4: “Make glad the soul of Thy servant {*make glad, make me happy; make me rejoice*}.” Why? His argument is, “For to Thee, O Lord, I lift up my soul.” He is saying, “God, I lift up my soul to you.” It is the imagery of taking the lamb, or taking his soul and placing it on the altar and saying, “God, I lift up my soul and I give it to you; it is yours.” We would use the term *surrender*: “God, I surrender my life to you, it is yours. And on the basis of that, I am asking you to make me happy again. Make me smile again. Once more, would you make me glad?” Now, just imagine if David really is experiencing his son taking over the throne and he is fleeing for his life, because his own son wants to put him to death. In the midst of those very difficult circumstances, David comes before God and says, “God would you make me happy again? Would you make me rejoice again?” The basis upon which he asks that is because he has surrendered everything to God.

That goes right back beautifully to Psalm 84, which we looked at a couple of weeks ago when we talked about the secret of happiness. We talked about the psalmist seeing the birds in the temple making their nests. The psalmist said, “I wish I could be like that bird and just live in the presence of God all the time.” We said that the secret to real happiness is being intimate with God and dwelling with Him. That is really what David is talking about here. David is saying, “God, I have surrendered. I know that only you satisfy. Only you can make me happy.” David surrendered to God and, on that basis, even in those circumstances, he is asking God to make him happy again.

Think about the circumstances David was going through, related to his sin with Bathsheba, his murder, and then all of the stuff he didn’t deal with in his family. So with all of that going on, human reasoning would say, “David, you have no right to ask that. You have no right to ask to be happy again. You made your choices and they were disastrous choices. You really deserve to be miserable the rest of your life.” David has already said, “God, I don’t deserve what I am asking for, but I have surrendered to you and, on the basis of that, make me happy...make me smile again.”

These first four arguments all deal with David and his attitude before God. In essence, David is saying, “God, I come before you and I am asking you to answer this prayer because I *need* you; I cannot do it myself. God, I am coming before you because I am *committed*. I have made you my God and I am asking you to come through for me and protect me. I know that I am undeserving, so I come with an attitude of *humility*. I am asking for something that I don’t deserve. Finally, because I have *surrendered* to you, I really do believe that only you can satisfy. I am asking you to make me happy again.”

Now, starting with the fifth argument, David shifts to the character of God. He has talked about his own attitude. Now he is going to shift and talk about God, and who He is, as the basis for his arguments. Verse 5: “For Thou, Lord, art good, and ready to forgive, and abundant in lovingkindness to all who call upon Thee.” I think the request is still from verse 4. He is still asking God to make him glad, to make him smile again, to make him rejoice again. He says the reason for that is because he has surrendered. But he gives a second argument for that, and that is because of who God is. “God, because you are good and forgiving and kind, on the basis of who you are, I am asking you to respond to me and to make me rejoice again.” David understands the *character of God*. He was probably wracked with all kinds of feelings of shame and guilt because of what he had done. But he understood that God is a forgiving God. God stands ready to forgive and, on the basis of that, David can experience God’s forgiveness and God’s kindness, and once again, God will answer his prayers.

Some of you really struggle with coming before God and asking. It is because of your past and because of your choices and behavior. You have all kinds of guilt and shame, so you really don’t feel like you have any right to come before God and ask. You really don’t have any right to be happy and you don’t have any right to rejoice. You just can’t go there and ask God for that because of your past failures and your past choices.

The problem isn’t your past. The problem is you don’t understand the character of God, because God stands ready to forgive. God is good; God is kind. He invites you to come and ask. God sent his own Son to this earth to die on a cross so that He could grant you forgiveness. Why would He hold it back? Why would He give it grudgingly? Why would He do anything but freely give out the forgiveness that cost His Son his life? David knows that. David knows that is the character of God. He knows that God is good and forgiving and kind. On the basis of that, he goes before God and asks, “God, make me happy, make me glad, make me rejoice. Put the joy in my heart again, because of who you are.”

The sixth argument begins in verse 6. The request is: “Give ear, O LORD, to my prayer; and give heed to the voice of my supplications! In the day of my trouble I shall call upon Thee, for Thou wilt answer me. There is no one like Thee among the gods, O Lord; nor are there any works like Thine. All nations whom Thou hast made shall come and worship before Thee, O Lord; and they shall glorify Thy name. For Thou art great and doest wondrous deeds; Thou alone art God.”

The psalmist is asking for God to listen to him when he calls upon Him in his hour of need—in his time of trouble when his world is falling apart and the bottom is falling out and everything seems like it is coming unraveled. He says, “God, I am calling upon you and I am asking you to hear me and to deliver me in this hour of need.” And then he gives two arguments as to why—these are arguments six and seven.

In verse 7 he says, “For Thou wilt answer me.” In other words, he is saying, “The reason, God, that I am asking for this (my argument) is that I know you are *faithful*. I know that you will hear me and I know that you will answer me.” David has confidence that, in his hour of need, God is going to listen. . . God is going to hear. . . and God is going to answer. He is saying, “God, I know you are faithful. You are not going to leave me in my hour of need. You are not going to abandon me.” He knows there is something to this power of prayer. He knows that we are not just talking to the air, or as we say at mealtime, “we’re not just talking to the ‘tators.” It isn’t just some psychological thing that makes us feel better. We are actually communicating with the God of the universe. David knows that and he is saying, “In my hour of need, God, I am asking you to deliver me because I know you are faithful. He says, “Thou wilt answer me.”

Wouldn’t it be a terrible thing, in your hour of need, to cry out to God and have Him not hear? Wouldn’t it be awful if, at that time when you need Him most, He just isn’t there? But Jesus promised, “I will never leave you or forsake you.” David knew that God would not do that. He knew that God would be there in his hour of trouble. He will hear and He will answer because of who God is. God is faithful. I will grant you that, sometimes in the midst of deep water, it feels like God isn’t there. And it feels like God isn’t listening. I know the feeling—I have been there myself. But in those moments, we do not think with our feelings. We think with our minds and we know what is true. Jesus has promised, “I won’t do that. I won’t leave you and I won’t forsake you. I will be there; I will listen; I will hear and I will answer.” So David, in his hour of trouble, said, “I am going to call because I know He will answer me.”

Then we see argument #7. David is still talking about God answering him in his hour of trouble, not only because God is faithful but also because God is *powerful*. He says, “Because you are a God unlike any other God.” Verses 8-10: “For there is no one like Thee among the gods, O Lord; nor are there any works like Thine. All nations whom Thou hast made shall come and worship before Thee, O Lord; and they shall glorify Thy name. For Thou art great and doest wondrous deeds; Thou alone art God.” He is saying, “God, you are powerful. There is no God like you; there is no God with your power. There is no other god that I can turn to. You have unlimited power and because you are God and you do works unlike any other gods, that is the reason why I come and ask you to deliver me in my hour of need.”

The pagans around had hundreds of gods. But David is saying, “God, I am not asking anybody else. I am not asking any other gods; I am just asking you because you alone have the power. You alone are God.” David is not coming before God and asking Him, while having Plan B in his pocket. He is not saying, “God, if you don’t come through, I am going to go to Plan B.” David is saying, “God it is just you. There is no other option. It is do or die because you alone have the power to deliver me. You alone can do this.”

It’s interesting how many times we come before God and ask for something. Then we walk away and we try to control or manipulate, or put our own plan into place, to resolve what we just asked God to resolve. We get ourselves into all kinds of trouble when we do that. God does not want us to come before Him, just doing lip service, and then go out with another plan and try to control and manipulate things to work out. He wants us to come before Him and say, “God, only you can do this. Only you have the power. It is all about you and your power.” He wants us to trust Him to do what only He can do.

The last argument David makes is in verses 11-13. He says, "Teach me Thy way, O LORD; I will walk in Thy truth; unite my heart to fear Thy name. I will give thanks to Thee, O Lord my God, with all my heart, and will glorify Thy name forever. For Thy lovingkindness toward me is great, and Thou hast delivered my soul from the depths of Sheol." The argument here has to do with the love of God. He says, "God, you have reached down and snatched me from death itself." David's life was probably right on the edge and he feels that God has reached down and snatched him from the very jaws of death. David says, "You did that because you love me, because your *lovingkindness* toward me is great. And so I am asking you to make yourself known to me." His last petition is "God, I want you to make yourself known to me. Teach me your ways. I want to walk in obedience to you." Basically he is saying, "God, I want to know you better, and I want to become more intimate with you. Teach me your ways." Why? He says, "Because you love me and you snatched me from the very jaws of death, and that just makes me want to commit to you all the more."

This is not a foxhole conversion where David is under duress. It is not David crying out to God and God delivering him so that he can go right back to his old way of life. That is not what this is about at all. As a matter of fact, David is saying, "You know, God, I have trusted you to deliver me and you have snatched me from the very jaws of death itself. Therefore, I just want to know you more. Teach me your ways. Show me what you want from me. I just want to be all the more obedient."

What if we were to cry out to God when we were going through difficult times, and God answered and delivered us, but shortly after that we went back to our old ways and patterns? Chances are pretty good that God is not going to answer that prayer. Why would He do that? Why would He answer, if it is only under duress that we even look to Him? Before He answers that prayer, God wants to know that if He delivers us from those circumstances we will love Him all the more. He wants us to long to learn His ways so that we can walk in obedience and follow after Him. Then God is happy to answer that prayer, as we continue to pursue our relationship with Him.

David, on the basis of his attitude and on the basis of God and His character, asks his petitions. It is not until verse 14 that David even gets to the nuts and bolts of what is going on here. He says, "O God, arrogant men have risen up against me, and a band of violent men have sought my life, and they have not set Thee before them. But Thou, O Lord, art a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness and truth."

Verse 15 is an interesting verse because it comes right out of the book of Exodus. You remember when Moses was up on Mt. Sinai and Aaron was with the people. They made and worshiped the golden calf, and it was just a disastrous scene. Moses came down and he saw them. God was angry with them and He poured out His judgment. God even said, "These will be the consequences because of the choices you made." Moses made an appeal to God saying, "God, don't depart from us; don't leave us. Lead us into the land of promise." And Moses even went so far in that scene to say, "God, make yourself known to me and show me your glory." God answered, "Moses, because you asked for that, I am going to give it to you." And Moses responded with these words that are recorded in the psalm: "Thou, O Lord, art a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness and truth."

Maybe even David is thinking of his own choices and the consequences of his own decisions. He is still sensing God's deliverance and he responds the same way Moses did. He quotes Moses as saying, "God, you are so good and you are gracious. You are going to be

faithful. Verses 16-17: “Turn to me, and be gracious to me; Oh grant Thy strength to Thy servant, and save the son of Thy handmaid. Show me a sign for good, that those who hate me may see it, and be ashamed, because Thou, O LORD, hast helped me and comforted me.”

Notice the assurance in the very last statement of this psalm. David is crying out for help. He is crying out for comfort, but he writes the last statement in the past tense, which is a Hebrew technique. It is a way of saying, “God, it is as good as done. I am going to write it in past tense because it is as good as accomplished. I know you are going to comfort me. I know you are going to help me. I know you are going to deliver me.” As a matter of fact, he says, “God, show my enemies a sign. I know that I am as good as delivered, so you might as well show them a sign and say, ‘Boys, the game is up. You can’t defeat me. God is going to win. You might as well just get used to it.’ ” David has that kind of confidence at the end of his prayer because he knows God will answer him.

When we come before God and we make our petitions, it is easy to be careless. It is easy just to crank through and ask God for all kinds of stuff. It would be a good habit to cultivate to make your argument. Why should God answer this prayer? Why should God answer that petition?

A good place to start would be to go right through David’s list from Psalm 86. When you come before God, come with a brokenness that says, “God, I *need* you. I can’t do this myself.” When you come before God, are you able to say, “God, I am *committed* to you. I am devoted to you. I trust you and I have made you my God”? It is not a case where we are living our own lives our own way and we are wanting God to bail us out because we have got a problem. But, we are able to say, “God I am committed to you and I trust you. My life gives evidence of that.”

Do we come before God with an attitude of *humility* and say, “God, I know I don’t deserve what I am asking for. I am not coming with an arrogant, prideful heart of entitlement. But God, I am asking for something I don’t deserve. I am just appealing to your grace and your mercy”?

Do we come before God really *surrendering* to God, saying, “God, I know only you satisfy, so it is on the basis of that that I am asking for this”? Do we really understand the character of God? Do we really believe He is *good*, that He stands ready to *forgive* and that He is *kind*? Do we really believe He is *faithful* in our hour of need, that He won’t desert us, but He will hear us and He will answer?

Do we really believe His *power*—when we don’t have several options and God is just one of those? Do we say, “God, I will trust in you. You are God and you have the power. Only you can deliver”?

And finally, do you really believe that God *loves* you? It is on that basis that God will hear your prayer and respond. Arguments for answered prayer.