

## **It's Not Fair!**

Ancient City Baptist Church—Fred O. Pitts  
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### ***Psalm 17***

We were living in the Atlanta area when the city hosted the Centennial Olympics back in 1996. Our family attended track and field, gymnastics, baseball, and more. It was a fun time for us. But those games were somewhat overshadowed by an event that happened during the games. On July 27, 1996, in the midst of the games, a security guard discovered an unattended package in Centennial Olympic Park, a place we had visited just a day or two before. This security guard alerted his supervisors and helped evacuate the area before a pipe bomb that was hidden in the package exploded. This security guard was initially hailed as a hero, one who had helped save the lives of many. Three days later, however, the life of this security guard was turned upside down as the Atlanta Journal-Constitution reported that the FBI had turned their attention to the security guard himself as possibly the instigator of the whole affair in an effort to portray himself as a hero.

The media frenzy soon began, and this man and his mother, with whom he lived, faced this accusation in a very public and intimidating way. Finally, he was vindicated; his work had indeed been heroic. But the hurt remained. In an interview when the ordeal was over, his mother was reported as saying, "The media has descended upon us like vultures upon prey. They have taken all privacy from us. They have taken our peace. They have rented an apartment which faces my home in order to keep their cameras trained upon us around the clock."

That young security guard's name was Richard Jewell, and I met him a time or two after those Olympics and before his untimely death at age 44, because his mother, Bobi, was a faithful member of the last church I pastored, and Richard visited from time to time when he was in town. The hurt they experienced lingered over many years. They ended up receiving settlements from some media outlets because of unfair coverage.

It's a terrible thing to be falsely accused and to be unfairly treated. It is painful, and there can often be hurtful consequences.

When Cindy and I lived in Texas during our seminary days, she worked at a private Christian school. The school had just hired a new principal, who, as he was trying to learn his way around town, discovered a park. Little did he know the reputation of the kinds of things that went on in that park, nor did he know that the police were conducting a sting. An overzealous undercover policeman lured this somewhat naïve principal into following him down a path, not really understanding what was going on. The policeman then turned around and arrested him for solicitation, and the local newspaper trumpeted how this new principal of a "Christian" school had been arrested. The board members were embarrassed and quickly terminated the man, who a few weeks later was fully cleared when all of the facts became

established. In a rare gesture, the local newspaper wrote an editorial of apology to this man, stating their regret for the ongoing part they had played in the incident. While the man's name was cleared, the damage had been done. He was not offered his job back.

It is likely—and hopeful—that most of us will never experience false accusations and unfair behavior on such a level as these two examples. However, it is quite probable that all of us have, on occasion, been wrongfully accused and mistreated.

Not the most recent, but somehow the most memorable occasion for me was when I was about 6 or 7 years old. My two older sisters and my younger brother and I were being watched by Willie, our housekeeper and babysitter. One day she called us into the bathroom where the rug was no longer on the floor but was in the toilet bowl. "Who put that rug in the toilet?" "Not me," said Debbie. "Not me," said Marsha. Surely, she thought, two-year-old Stan couldn't have done it. When the eyes of justice turned toward me, I said, "Not me"—but inexplicably I started giggling at the same time. That sealed my fate. "Get that rug out of the toilet, and squeeze all the water out of it!"

Well, my laughter turned to tears as I had to reach into that toilet bowl and wring out that wet rug for an offense that I had not committed! It's not fair!

Can you remember a time when you have been falsely accused or mistreated? Perhaps you have had untrue rumors spread about you, spread by those you had counted as friends, which made it hurt all the more—especially when you realized that they had believed it and spread it without even checking with you.

And isn't it interesting to hear through the grapevine that you have already made a definite decision about something you thought you were still deliberating?

Or perhaps you have been seen in a situation that looked compromising but you could easily explain, but others jumped to wrong and hurtful conclusions. Later, you hear not only what you *supposedly* were doing but *why* you were doing it. "He did it just to spite me," someone says. Or, "She was just going through the motions of doing that to make everyone think she is so generous, but I know the truth!"

Consider the way bullies and cowards today use social media to shame and accuse and judge. If it wasn't enough to lose a two-year-old child to an alligator in several inches of water at a Disney resort a few years ago, imagine the added hurt when people accuse you of being a poor parent. Some athletes have been given death threats when their teams did not win a championship. Recently, Duchess of Essex Meghan Markle has been the victim of racial bullying surrounding the birth of her first child with her husband, Prince Harry, of the United Kingdom. And these are just well publicized examples.

Sad and hurtful situations, each one. And we have barely scratched the surface. And the power of the word is so destructive that an unkind or untrue word can do almost irreparable damage. The truth doesn't spread nearly as quickly as the falsehood that precedes it. Perhaps you have heard the story of the woman who spread unfounded rumors about her pastor. When finally confronted, she admitted

her sin and asked if there is anything she could do to rectify the situation. The pastor asked her to meet her on the town square in the small city where they lived and to bring a feather pillow. Though puzzled, she did as he asked in an effort to make it up. When she arrived with the pillow, he ripped it open and scattered all the feathers into the breeze. Still puzzled, the lady asked if there was anything else she could do. “Yes,” said her pastor. “Go pick up all the feathers.” “But... but... that’s impossible!” she protested. “Yes, I know. Kind of like the false report you spread. Though you try, you can never undo all the damage.”

When these kinds of things happen to us—false accusations, lying gossip, half truths, vicious rumors—it hurts. It’s not fair! When people go beyond words and hurt us with their actions, what do we do? How do we handle these things? What would God say to us? In Psalm 17, we can gain some insights through the life of King David.

Today we start a summer sermon series in Psalms. There are 150 psalms, and David is credited with about half of them. If you have turned to Psalm 17, you can see that this one is labeled “A Prayer of David.” That gives us a hint before we even read this psalm; when we are treated unfairly by others, we should always begin with prayer. Listen as I read it. You will see that this label is correct. Here, David is crying out to the Lord as he considers the unfairness of his situation.

What *was* his situation? While it doesn’t explicitly state it, it could certainly be the way King Saul treated him. In Psalm 18, we see the label states, “Of David the servant of Yahweh. He sang to the Lord the words of this song when the Lord delivered him from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul.”

Since we *do* know some of the situation with Saul, let’s consider the *kind* of thing that may have prompted this psalm. David was a loyal servant of the nation of Israel and King Saul. He soothed King Saul’s soul by playing the harp for him. He rescued King Saul’s nation by defeating Goliath for him. He enlarged King Saul’s territory by leading his army for him.

How was he repaid? Accusations of treason and murder attempts that sprang forth from envy. The people, enamored with David’s victories, shouted, “Saul has slain his thousands; David has slain his ten thousands.” David was ever loyal; at least twice, he had easy opportunities to slay Saul, and his men encouraged him to do it. Instead, each time he spared Saul’s life to try to prove his loyalty. No wonder he cries out to the Lord, essentially saying, “It’s not fair!” Let’s read his prayer and consider some wise counsel for how we should react when harsh accusations, criticisms, rumors, and hurtful behavior are aimed at us.

### **READ Psalm 17**

It is not only clear that David has been treated unfairly by his enemies here; it is just as clear that David is crying out to God as one seeking to do things God’s way, not merely lashing out in anger. So here’s the first lesson I find here...

**When you *believe* you have been treated unfairly, examine yourself thoroughly.**

As David speaks out of the anguish of his heart to God, it is clear that he has already taken this step. He tells God he is not praying with deceitful lips. He has confidence that when God probes his heart and examines him, he will find that he has told the truth. You can imagine David, when fleeing from Saul among the caves, asking, "Have I done anything to bring this on myself?"

David is a man who examines himself often. We will see other psalms where David admits that he is wrong after he examines himself. (Next week.) And I want you to know that his self-examination heavily includes God, and so should ours.

Listen to a couple of other prayers of David that seem to invite God to help him evaluate his life, and we will look at both more in depth in this series:

In **Psalm 139** we hear David pray, "*Search me, O God, and know my heart. Test me, and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*"

In **Psalm 19**, David says to God, "*May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.*"

David is committed to God, and he invites God to take the lead in helping him examine his own life. So how do we do that? When we are accused...

- ***Lay it all out before God***

"God, here is what people are saying... Help me evaluate my life..."

- ***See if there is any truth***

Here's the irritating part. We are obligated to examine ourselves when we are criticized, regardless of the source and regardless of the motives. Why? We search for truth. On occasion, a loving critic has wrong criticism. On occasion, someone seeking to hurt you actually says something that needs to be considered! So we need to examine first the criticism, not the critic; the accusation, not the accuser.

David himself modeled this for us later on in life. He had been king for some time, and his own son formed an army and turned against him. David decided to leave Jerusalem to regroup. On the way out of town, one of King Saul's jealous kinsmen, Shimei, still jealous after all these years that *David* had been made king, took that opportunity to curse David. He threw stones at him and said, "Go on, you scoundrel! The Lord has repaid you for what you did to Saul's household and has handed the kingdom over to your son. You have come to ruin because you are a man of blood!"

One of David's Mighty Men was irate. "Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king? Let me go over there and cut off his head!" David said, "Leave him alone. Maybe God told him to curse me today. Or maybe God will see my distress and repay me with good for the cursing I am getting."

David wasn't going to lash out—certainly not before he had a chance to examine himself. He wanted to think about it. Was there any truth in it? Finally...

- ***Confess any part of wrongdoing before God***

It may be only a fraction of what has been said about you is right. Does that mean you can ignore the 10% that *is* right because they got it 90% wrong? That would be our temptation, wouldn't it? But we need to deal with God about the 10% that is right as we seek to become more the person he wants us to be.

But sometimes the accusation or actions may be totally in the wrong, as in David's case here. What then?

**When you *are* treated unfairly, recommit to God's way.**

What do I mean by that? A common mistake is to act just like those who have treated you unfairly—to lash out at them and seek to hurt them. Is that God's way? Well, let's see what David did. He describes those who are unfair...

**READ v. 10-14**

Is that what David did in return? No, he asked God for wisdom; he asked God to rescue him. Might God call us to act? Might God call us to confront the person in some godly way? Yes, he might indeed. Just remember, don't do it like *they* did it.

- ***Don't be deceitful; tell the truth***

That's how David handled it. **[READ v. 1b-3]**

- ***Don't seek petty revenge***

David said: **[READ v. 3b-5]**

After you have determined to not lash out in kind but to proceed God's way, there is one more thing that is closely related when you are treated unfairly...

**When you *are* treated unfairly, depend on God for help.**

David did not depend on himself first and foremost. He depended first and foremost on God himself for help, and the help he asked for was primarily two things *here*...

- ***Vindication***

You read v. 1-6 again. Let me just **read v. 2:**

*"May my vindication come from you; may your eyes see what is right."*

When we are wrongly accused or treated unfairly, of course we want to be vindicated before men. We want everyone to know that this was false. That's what Richard Jewell and his mother wanted and finally got. But, it does not always happen quickly or become well known. In fact, it may *never* come—not here, at least. What is more important is the way you appear to God. History books may record you as a criminal, a traitor, a racist, a homophobe, whatever—but God does not get his information from our history books, newspapers, or blogs.

David cries out about his "righteous plea." He is not asking to have his sin swept under the rug. He wants vindication from God—from the truth coming out—not from political maneuvering or the issuance of bribes. No vindication was acceptable to David unless it was from God. And David was confident in God: *"I call on you, O God, for you will answer me!"* Remember, we will all stand before the judgment seat

of Christ, and if it doesn't happen here, for all eternity we will be vindicated when we have been treated unfairly.

So David sought vindication. But there was something else David needed, too...

- **Comfort**

This is what we really need most when we are treated unfairly. Some of the most beautiful words in all the Bible are found in **v. 7-9 [READ]**

Can you hear the emotion in David? He is saying, in these words, "Lord, I feel all alone. I need to know you still love me. I need to know I'm special to you, and right now, the outward circumstances don't give me that affirmation."

This is so important. A grave mistake we often make when life is unfair is that we get mad at God and run away from him because *he* let this happen. We will look into this more when we consider Psalm 73, but let me just say right now, it's in times when bad, unfair things come into our lives that we need God the most. He's the only source of real help in such times.

We cry out, "Why does God allow life to be unfair?" There are many answers to that. Let me briefly mention two. First, we humans must accept that we live in a sinful, fallen world of our own making. It wasn't God's plan. Humans brought sin into the world through disobedience. That's why life isn't always fair.

"Yeah—but it wasn't *my* sin that caused *this*! Why can't he make life fair?" Well, the second answer I will give you today is that God *is* going to make all things right one day. Look at **v. 14** again: "*O Lord, by your hand save me from such men, from men of this world whose reward is in this life.*"

But this life isn't all there is. There will be a Day of Judgment, and on that day all will be set right. Why the delay? God is patient, giving you and me and our friends and even our enemies opportunities to repent and turn to him to receive grace and be changed. Remembering that makes it a bit easier for us to patiently endure hardship—to endure with grace and truth when "it's not fair."

Look how David ends the Psalm: **[READ v. 15]**

What a day that will be! Just let me say that until God sets all things right, he is here to bring us comfort when it seems that everything is going wrong. Jesus said, "*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.*" Let me encourage you to come to him today. Believers, come to him. Those not yet believers: Trust him as Lord. Trust him as your eternal Savior. You can do that this very day. And you will receive comfort. Let us know...

Remember, we will be treated unfairly at times in this world. Let us keep our confidence in God and trust in him.

Today, we have talked about what to do when we are accused and mistreated when we are in the right. In the next message in this series, we will talk about what to do when we are in the wrong. Let's pray.