

## **“The Prayers of the People”**

### **Psalm 86**

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I like to listen to and read prayers. I cannot tell you how many times I have been touched in a worship service by someone’s prayer. Some of my favorite devotions are prayers. To be candid with you, I can recall more prayers than sermons.

Obviously, I find a lot of value in prayers. I agree with Karl Barth who said, “If you want to know what someone believes about God, don’t listen to what they say about Him, but what they say to Him.”

Perhaps this is one reason I have such a fondness for the Psalms. They are filled with prayers, honest, thought-provoking, inspiring prayers that reveal the Psalmist’s heart.

In light of Barth’s advice, what did the Psalmist believe about God? This question is too broad to answer in a sermon, so let me rephrase it. Using the prayer in Psalm 86, what did the Psalmist believe about God at that point along his spiritual pilgrimage? What can we learn from him that might help us as we develop our faith? Let’s examine it and see.

**The first thing I think he believed was that God was approachable.** It is impossible to read Psalm 86 and overlook how personal it is.

“The Psalms are prayers addressed to a known, named, identifiable, reachable You. This is the most stunning and decisive factor in the prayers of the Psalter,” Brueggemann wrote in The Psalms and the Life of Faith.

Sixteen times in Psalm 86, the Psalmist addressed, “You.” Due to an element in Hebrew grammar, five of those were used for special accent.

“You are my God” Psalm 86:2.

“You are forgiving and good, O Lord, abounding in love to all who call upon you” Psalm 86:5.

“You are great and do marvelous deeds; you alone are God” Psalm 86:10.

“But you, O Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God; slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” Psalm 86:15.

“For you, O Lord, have helped me and comforted me” Psalm 86:17.

This simple, direct speech distinguished the Psalmist’s prayers from others. He was not talking about someone but to someone that was not beyond the real substance and issues of common life.

**Secondly, the Psalmist believed that God was good to him and for him and was someone that he wanted to approach.** Look how he described God. “You are forgiving and good, O Lord, abounding in love to all who call upon you. You are great and do marvelous deeds; you alone are God. You, O Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.” Psalm 86:5,10,15.

The Psalmist left no doubt concerning what he believed and how he felt about God. He wanted and needed a relationship with this God that had been good and faithful to him and his people. As a matter of fact, in Psalm 86:17, he insisted, “Turn to me and

have mercy on me.” This was his way of saying, “Face me and look me in the eye. Let me know that I am not alone.”

I have to believe the Psalmist was ahead of his time. His generation, for the most part, feared God and trembled in His presence. In Judaism to see God was, so they believed, to die. When the angel of the Lord came to Manoah and his wife to tell them their son Samson was to be born, how did they respond? “We shall surely die for we have seen God” Judges 13:22.

The Psalmist certainly gives us a different impression of God. It is much more in line with the image of God that Jesus portrayed. Jesus called God Abba or Father and invited us to address Him this way. What does Abba mean? To this day it is the word that a small Jewish child would use to address his father. It is a word that is saturated with love, warmth, security and trust. I believe this was the kind of relationship the writer of Psalm 86 had with God.

He felt safe in God’s presence, not afraid. He appeared comfortable venting his greatest doubts, bitterest resentments and deepest angers. Why? **I think he believed that God understood and would help him, whatever the challenge.** Even though his culture offered many options, the Psalmist needed no other God in his life. Yahweh’s grace was sufficient to provide the life-changing gifts needed to transform any situation.

“Among the gods there is none like you, O Lord; no deeds can compare to yours. For you are great and do marvelous deeds; you alone are God” Psalms 86:8,10.

This was no small affirmation of faith for the Psalmist’s needs were varied and numerous. Look at his requests. He asked God for protection from his enemies, the redemption of his enemies, deliverance from death, forgiveness for his sins, joy in his work, strength for his labor, guidance for his journey, clarity to understand God’s will and the discipline to do it. He believed that God could help him with all these challenges and humbly yet boldly presented them to Him.

There is no doubt that the Psalmist’s beliefs about God molded and shaped this prayer. Perhaps the most striking characteristic of this prayer is the delicate balance between petition and praise. He began by asking for God’s help and then paused to reflect upon God’s nature and character. This is one reason scholars refer to this Psalm as a Thanksgiving lament.

This prayer is not all about God or all about the Psalmist. It is about both which makes it a good model for us. Our prayers need to achieve this balance, too. How easy it is to let our problems consume us and blind us to previous blessings and God’s tenacious love for us. Sprinkle your prayers with praise and it will make a difference.

Have you ever written a prayer and then analyzed it? Let me encourage you to do so. I know of nothing that you can do that will more fully reveal what you believe about God and life. You may even be surprised at what you learn from your own prayers.

“If you want to know what someone believes about God, don’t listen to what they say about Him, but what they say to Him.” Let’s talk to Him now.

“Father, I thank you for being with us today and meeting us where we are along our journey through life. Help us to talk to you before we attempt to speak about you and remind us to balance our prayers with petitions and praise. In your son’s name, the one who taught us to address you as Abba, Amen.”