

How to Argue With God

by John Piper

David's prayer in Psalm 143 is a model for how to approach God with confidence, by filling our mouths with arguments and pleading for mercy, and by recognizing that God's righteousness is his faithfulness to his name.

Duration: 34:25

Scripture: Psalm 143:1-4, Psalm 143:7-12

Topics: "Prayer Life", "Gods Character"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker focuses on Psalm 143 as an example of how to approach God with our arguments. The psalmist, David, fills his mouth with arguments, listing his requests and his arguments against judgment. He acknowledges his sinfulness and his desperate situation, but also appeals to God's faithfulness, righteousness, and mercy. The speaker emphasizes the importance of not letting sin stop us from seeking God's help and encourages believers to approach God with a combination of arguments based on God's character and their own plight as sinners.

Transcript

Back in the spring, I read a sermon by Charles Spurgeon, called Effective Prayer. And it was based on the text, Job 23, 3 and 4, which say, O that I, now this is Job talking about God, O that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his seat. I would order my cause before him and fill my mouth with arguments.

And Spurgeon wrote this, which really took a hold of me, it's been simmering ever since. He said, The ancient saints were given, with Job, to ordering their cause before God, as a petitioner before coming into the court does not come there without thought to the state of his case on the spur of the moment. But he enters into the audience chamber with his suit well prepared, having also learned how he ought to behave himself in the presence of the Great One to whom he is appealing.

So it is well to approach the seat of the King of Kings, as much as possible, with premeditation and preparation, knowing what we are about and where we are standing and what it is which we desire to obtain. And then he adds this personal testimony from his experience there at the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London. He said, and this rings true with my experience, though it's much more limited than his, The best prayers I have ever heard, he said, in our prayer meetings, have been those which have been fullest of argument.

Sometimes my soul has been fairly melted down when I have listened to the brethren who have come before God feeling the mercy to be really needed and that they must have it, for they first pleaded with God to give it for this reason, and then for a second reason, and then for a third, and then for a fourth, and a fifth, until they have awakened the fervency of the entire assembly. Now, ever since I read that sermon back in the spring, I've become more and more conscious that, in fact, in the Scriptures, especially the Psalms, this is the way the saints prayed. They piled up arguments toward God that he should give them what they need.

And I want you to turn with me to Psalm 143 to see an example of David doing this, filling his mouth with arguments. Now, I'm going to stress the arguments here by hitting the... well, you'll be able to see as I read it. I think there are at least 15 arguments in this Psalm for why God should help David.

We'll look at those more later. Let's read Psalm 143 as an example of how we might approach God with our mouths full of arguments. Hear my prayer, O Lord, give ear to my supplication.

In thy faithfulness answer me, in thy righteousness. Enter not into judgment with thy servant, for no man living is righteous before thee. For the enemy has pursued me, he has crushed my life to the ground, he has made me sit in darkness like those long dead.

Therefore my spirit faints within me, my heart within me is appalled. I remember the days of old, I meditate on all that thou hast done, I muse on what thy hands have wrought. I stretch out my hands to thee, my soul thirsts for thee like a parched land.

Make haste to answer me, O Lord, my spirit fails. Hide not thy face from me, lest I be like those who go down to the pit. Let me hear in the morning of thy steadfast love, for in thee I put my trust.

Teach me the way I should go, for to thee I lift up my soul. Deliver me, O God, from my enemies, I have fled to thee for refuge. Teach me to do thy will, for thou art my God.

Let thy good spirit lead me on a level path. For thy namesake, O Lord, preserve my life. In thy righteousness, bring me out of trouble.

And in thy steadfast love, cut off my enemies and destroy all my adversaries, for I am thy servant. Now we'll list all those in a few minutes, but I think you can get an idea of how David begins to argue with God. There are three questions I want to try to answer with you from this psalm tonight.

The first one is, what did David want from God? And the second one is, how did he propose to get it? And the third one is, how did he argue with God? First then, what did David want? The best way to find out what David wanted is just to assemble a list of all of his requests and then try to categorize them. See if they fall into groups. You can follow me through here, but I'm going to leave out all the arguments and just give you the requests.

Verse one. Hear my prayer, O Lord. Give ear to my supplication.

Answer me. Verse two. Enter not into judgment with thy servant.

Verse seven. Answer me. Hide not your face from me.

Verse eight. Let me hear in the morning of your steadfast love. Teach me the way I should go.

Verse nine. Deliver me from my enemies. Verse ten.

Teach me to do thy will. Let thy good spirit lead me on a level path. Verse eleven.

Preserve my life. Bring me out of trouble. And verse twelve.

Cut off my enemies. Destroy all my adversaries. Now, we try to take all of these dozen or so requests or petitions of David, and they fall into three categories as I see it.

The first category is that there's this general desire to be heard by God. That's basic. If God is turning his face away, paying no attention to David's prayer, it doesn't matter how many arguments he piles up, they're not going to have any effect.

So, request number one is listen to me. Answer me. Pay attention to me.

Look at me, God. Getting God's attention. Now, the other requests fall into two groups, I think.

They're a prayer for safety from his enemies and a prayer for godliness. We'll take the second one first. His desire for godliness comes out in verse eight and ten.

Verse eight. Cause me to know the way that I should go. And verse ten.

Teach me to do your will. Lead me on a level path, or as it could be translated, lead me in the land of uprightness. Now, there's a great lesson here, I think, for us in our praying that we should attend to along the way.

Whenever we plead with God for something physical or material, like David is doing here. He wants to be rescued from these enemies. We should never forget that we ought to also heavily salt our prayers with petitions for moral and spiritual transformation.

David was crying out for protection. He needed deliverance. But sheer existence wasn't enough for David.

It wasn't enough just to pray for let me live. There has to be a reason for going on living. At least for a Christian, to live is not merely an end in itself.

There's got to be a justification for life. And one of the justifications for life is to do God's will. And so David doesn't just merely pray that God live, let him live.

He prays that God teach him how to live. He doesn't just want to live. He wants to live for God.

I think you can measure the spiritual maturity of your own prayers in this way. Look back over your prayers and ask yourself, have they been predominantly requests for things and safety? Deliverance from sickness or getting out of a financial pinch or predicament at work? Or have they been mainly requests that God would work on you? Work on you to make you more godly, more holy, more patient, kind and so on. I think every time we pray for something material, and there's nothing wrong with that.

We should pray for the spiritual graces to handle it as well. David knew that if God was gracious enough to lift him out of this pit, like last week, delivering from his enemies, he had better be instructed by God how to walk, because otherwise his life would have proved to be of no value. Now that's one group of requests.

The group in which he requests godliness. The other group is the request for safety. First of all, safety from human enemies.

And then we'll see somebody else he wants safety from. Verse 9. Deliver me, O Lord, from my enemies. Verses 11 and 12.

O Lord, preserve my life. Bring me out of trouble. Cut off all my enemies and destroy all my adversaries.

David was a great warrior. He was a fighter for the Lord. And probably from those early days when Saul was after him, you know, in the caves, right on down to the end of his fighting career, he had enemies who would love to do away with him.

And they caused the writing of many of these psalms. But even at times of apparent peace, there was the danger of intrigue in the courts of the king. For example, when his son Absalom stole the hearts of the people and tried to wrest the kingdom from his own father.

David was always beset by adversaries and it drove him to prayer again and again. I ask the question if I were in that situation or the times when I felt myself in the midst of animosity, how can you go on living day and night, day after day, when you know you're surrounded by hostile forces that at any moment might break in upon you and do you harm? Won't that rob us of all peace and make us tense? It seems like it would. But perhaps not.

If we do like David did and beseech the Lord in prayer and turn to the Lord and pray earnestly and fill our mouth with arguments until we argue ourselves right into the peace of God. Now, as I was thinking about about this particular dimension of David's prayer, prayer for deliverance from enemies, I said, well, no, they're going to say, well, I don't have any. That's completely foreign to my experience in America where we don't get persecuted as rule, at least not bodily persecuted.

But I, as I thought about it, how I might apply it to our fairly easy situation, I thought of at least two things. One is this. Animosity does come, if you're faithful to the Lord, many times in a work situation, in a recreation situation, in a neighborhood situation where people just might get fed up with all that talk of yours about Christianity and might expose you to verbal, if not physical animosity.

I suppose that Mary Stouffer never would have dreamed that hostility could linger in one of those students for 15 years or so. Who knows where hostility might come from? But there's another thing that I thought of. Lest we think that we can contend ourselves in this country with putting these psalms aside and we don't need to pray those.

Perhaps we should let these psalms remind us of something that Jesus taught us to pray. Lead me not into temptation, but deliver me. And then you could translate it either from evil or from the evil one.

Because the same word applies there in the Greek. All of us have an enemy who never tires with all of his supernatural forces from bombarding us with his attempts to destroy us. And he doesn't want to just destroy us physically.

He's after the juggler of our life. He wants to destroy our faith and so our eternal hope as well. And so I think it's not contrary to the spirit of a psalm like 143, that when we read about deliverance from enemies, we let it remind us of the fact that we are surrounded by enemy forces.

And that God alone is the one who can deliver us. And then maybe we'll sing with Martin Luther. Martin Luther had a great awareness of the reality of demonic forces.

And when he wrote his great hymn, Mighty Fortress, he had this verse. And though this world with devils filled should threaten to undo us, we will not fear, for God has willed his truth to triumph through us. The prince of darkness grim, we tremble not for him.

His rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure. One little word will fell him. Martin Luther was a great saint and a great warrior of faith and therefore knew the reality of Satan and his forces.

And so perhaps we should pray with David. Deliver us from our enemies and put them to naught. Destroy our adversaries including those demonic ones.

Now, that's one group of people from whom David needs deliverance. There's another person from whom David needs deliverance. And this is going to come out, the second question that we want to raise of how does David propose to get this godliness.

I raised back at the beginning, how does David go about getting what he wants. The godliness that he wants, the safety that he wants, he's going to get through prayer. Now, that's an encouragement to me.

First of all, this is just a little sandwich comment in here. When I look at David praying, I get encouraged to pray for this reason. David was a very handsome, strong and wise and sensitive king.

And yet he doesn't have a hesitation to go to God like a beggar and cry out like a child. And if that weren't so, then I'd be very discouraged. Because I'd get the impression that, well, I suppose in order to get a favor from God, you got to be like David.

You got to be handsome or strong or powerful or extremely wise. But it's not true. David went after God in prayer.

And that's a tremendous encouragement to me to go after God in prayer. Everybody can pray, no matter how homely or weak or foolish. Now, in answer to the question, who can you flee from when you've got this other enemy that I didn't mention a minute ago and want to mention now? Namely, God.

Look at verse two. Enter not into judgment with thy servant. God is against sinners.

And David knows that. And he's confessed himself a sinner. So not only does he have to escape from worldly enemies, he's got to escape from the judgment of God.

And where can you go from the judgment of God? Well, you've got two possibilities, it seems to me. If one of my sons incurs my wrath through disobedience, which happens more often than I wish, he's got two possibilities. Benjamin can head for the back door, or Carsten, and take off, run away from daddy.

Now, that's hopeless. There's no point. I'm faster than they are.

But the main reason is that if they go away from home, where are they going to go? All the food is at home. All the clothes are at home. All the protection from the rain and that horrible lightning that Benjamin hates is at home.

So they've got one other possibility. They can run at me, and cling to my neck like this, and fill their mouths with arguments into my ear, and plead for mercy. Where are you going to go from the judgment of God? You're going to go to God.

That's the only place you can go. The only hope for the judgment of God, to escape it, is the mercy of God, isn't it? The only hope to escape a spanking is the mercy of that hand, instead of the force of it on the rear end. Now, there's a surprising use of language here in verses 1 and 2 that makes me qualify this.

If I were to leave it that we flee to the mercy of God in order to escape the judgment of God, I think I'd be confirming a misunderstanding that's way too prevalent in the church. David doesn't, first of all, flee to the mercy of God. Where does he flee in verse 1? He flees to the righteousness of God.

Hear my prayer, O Lord, give ear to my supplications. In thy faithfulness answer me, in thy righteousness enter not into judgment with thy servant. Now, I don't know how that sits with you, but that sounds like suicide to me.

He just said that no man living is righteous in verse 2. It's all over if God judges us on the basis of our merit. And then he says, in your righteousness answer me. Now, don't we have the impression that the righteousness of God is precisely that which is going to damn us if we come to him as sinners? And here he comes as a sinner saying, we're all sinners, so answer me in your righteousness.

Now, apparently David does not agree with that view of righteousness. Evidently, for him, it's not suicide to say, answer me, a sinner, in your righteousness. So, what we've got to do is try to find out what David means by righteousness.

Evidently, David thinks that the righteousness of God has something to do with his faithfulness. You can see verse 1. In thy faithfulness answer me, in thy righteousness. Now, coming back to back like that, most scholars suggest that the righteousness of God is the doing right by God's promises or God's covenant.

If God does right by his promises, that is, the promises to which he's always faithful, then he's righteous. I have a problem with that, though, because it appears to me that David doesn't argue that way. David nowhere says, well, let's see what he says.

What are the arguments that he uses? I've got them listed here. I listed a minute ago the request. Now let's list the arguments.

Let's go a verse at a time. Notice what's missing here. In your faithfulness, verse 1. In your righteousness, verse 2. For no one living is righteous before you.

Verse 3. For the enemy has pursued me. And then he catalogs how he's crushed and faint and in darkness. Verse 4. My spirit faints within me.

My heart is appalled. Verse 7. My spirit is failing, lest I be like those who go down to the pit. Verse 8. For in thee I put my trust.

For to thee I lift up my soul. Verse 9. I have fled to thee for refuge. Or more literally, I've covered myself with you.

Verse 10. For thou art my God. Verse 11.

For thy namesake, in thy righteousness. Verse 12. In thy steadfast love, for I am thy servant.

All those are the arguments with which David is filling his mouth. But what's missing is a statement like, Rescue me because you promised you would. Or, save me because you made a covenant with me.

He never refers to a promise or a covenant. Which makes me very hesitant to say that the righteousness of God, in verse 1, is his doing right by his covenant. I'd rather look elsewhere in the psalm to see if he uses righteousness in a context which might shed light on its meaning.

And he does, here in verse 11. It's the only other place where he refers to righteousness in this psalm. Notice how he refers to it.

This is the clue. For thy namesake, preserve my life. In thy righteousness, bring me out of trouble.

Now, in verse 1, faithfulness and righteousness were back to back. In verse 11, for thy namesake and in thy righteousness are back to back. Which makes me think that very probably what David means by faithfulness is not primarily faithfulness to his promises, but faithfulness to his name, to himself.

He will always be true to his own character. He will always uphold his own honor. And, of course, that involves keeping his promises.

But that doesn't seem to be primary in David's mind. Therefore, my suggestion for what the righteousness of God means, here in verse 11 and verse 1, is it's God's faithfulness to his name. It's his desire to uphold the honor of his name.

And I got a confirmation of that as I was poking around in some of the other psalms. I found in Psalm 7, verse 17, this. Listen to this parallel.

I will give to the Lord the thanks due to his righteousness. I will sing praise to the name of the Lord. That same correlation of exalting his name and exalting his righteousness.

So that I'm inclined to believe now, if I'm tracking with David here, that what he means by righteousness is that he will always do right by his name. And not merely his promises. So, what David has is a firm rock to which to appeal.

He knows what God is always going to do. God is going to be righteous. That is, God is always going to uphold his honor or his name.

Now, the question is, how is it that David thinks that can be appealed to, to guarantee deliverance from his enemies, when he's a sinner? Why shouldn't God, to preserve his honor, smash David to the ground in his sin? That would preserve his honor. I presume that when God judges people at the end of this age, he is going to preserve his honor in doing so. How is it that David could be so confident that it would result in mercy for him? That's the key question to me.

And I think the answer comes when we look at the other two sorts of arguments he uses. He argues not only from the character of God, his righteousness, faithfulness, allegiance to his own name, his mercy, but now he argues from his plight as a sinner and as helpless, and his faith. We can see his plight, for example, in verses 2 through 4. And notice how he argues.

These two little words, for, are really there in the Hebrew, and they're meant to be taken seriously, I think. Don't enter into judgment with your servant, for no man living is righteous. If you go to judgment with me, God, and want to punish me, it's curtains for me.

Please don't do it. But then there's this second argument here in verse 3. For the enemy has pursued me. He has crushed my life.

In other words, God, if you're going to enter into judgment with me to humble me, to lower me and level me to the ground, look, it's already happened. I'm on my back. My spirit is fainting.

I'm like a parched land. You don't need to do anything to bring me to the ground. I am down as low as you need to make me go.

That seems to be the argument to me in verse 3. So don't enter into judgment with me to discipline me. I have had it. I am really disciplined as far as I can go.

Now, that's the first argument. But that's a pretty weak argument, if it stands by itself. I mean, God, He can judge a sinner, whether that sinner is in a dire strait or not.

But now David adds the crucial link between God's righteousness and his salvation. In verses 8 to 10, we see his claim to be a man of faith. He says in verse 8, For in you do I trust.

That's why you should help me. To you I lift up my soul. That's why you should save me.

For I cover myself with you. I seek refuge in you. That's why you should help me.

You are my God. That's why you should help me. In verse 12, at the end, I am your servant.

The crucial link between God's allegiance to his own name on the one hand and David's deliverance from his enemies on the other is David's faith. Evidently, David was sure that when he trusted in God and lifted up his soul to God only and sought refuge in God, God's honor was at stake in whether he saved David or not. Apparently, David thought that it would be a blotch on God's name if somebody who was cleaving to God like a child and hoping in God were ultimately lost.

You see how the argument works? Then David found a way to escape, escape from the judgment of God, not by fleeing merely to his mercy, that was crucial, but by fleeing to God's commitment always to act for his namesake. So that when you pray, you can do that. You can go to God and say, I am holding to you.

You are my God. I lift up my soul to you. I trust you.

I take refuge in you. If you put me to naught, your name is going to be dirt in the eyes of the world. That's just the way Moses argued, isn't it? When he tried to save the people of Israel after they built the golden calf.

He said, Lord, they're going to laugh you to scorn in Egypt if you put these people to flight in the wilderness. There's so much to learn in this psalm. Let me just conclude with three lessons by way of review.

First of all, don't let sin stop you from seeking God's help. Many people think that they just have no right. I've heard that before from one old lady in particular.

Oh, I have no right to go to God. You better believe you have no right. And that's why you better go.

In other words, we don't need a right in ourselves to get into God. We're not pleading his distributive justice by which he accords to every man his dessert. If that's the way God acted, it's all over for everybody.

What we plead is his mercy. We're all beggars before God. So don't let your sin stop you.

Let your sin be a fire under your seat to move you to prayer. Second, fill your mouth with arguments when you go to God. Argue from your helpless condition like verses two through four.

Argue from God's character as one who is faithful both to his name and to his promises. And argue from your faith and your cleaving to him. Of course, you have to have faith before you can argue like that.

So let's have it. And then finally, the third lesson I think we should learn is that in our praying, we should only ask for what honors God. And the way we can be sure that we're doing that best, I think, is to season our prayers with requests for godliness.

Request that God will work on us to make us more patient, more kind, more merciful, less irritable, less grumbling, and so on. In other words, in conclusion, let's pray not merely like Psalm 79.9, which says, Help us, O God, for the glory of thy name. Deliver us, forgive our sins for thy namesake.

That's a prayer for deliverance for God's namesake. But let's pray also like Psalm 31.3, which says, You are my rock and my fortress for thy namesake. Lead me and guide me.

Those two things that David prayed for, safety and godliness, both of them for God's namesake. Because when God hears somebody appealing to his namesake, then he is very much inclined to answer. Let's pray.

For your namesake, O Lord, we speak. For your namesake, we ask for help. O how we want to be godly, to be taught your ways, and to be guided tomorrow morning and all day long in the ways that we should go.

Do it, Lord, not for our namesake, but for your namesake, we pray. To you we lift up our soul. To you we cleave in trust.

You are our God. We are your servants. In your righteousness, O Lord, in your faithfulness, for your namesake, answer us.

And make us holy as you are holy. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

You're dismissed.

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