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Sermon – Psalm 17

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(Just to set your expectations, this message may be six or seven minutes longer than you are accustomed to. I appreciate your patience.)

Title: Two Roads

Illustration: When I was in grade school, I had a best friend whose name was Todd. We did everything together. I hung out at his house. He came to my house. I liked his parents and his sisters and he liked my parents and my brothers. Some of best memories in childhood were from time spent with Todd and his family.

But as we got to be in junior high school, Todd gravitated toward a different set of kids and a different set of behaviors than me. And Todd increasingly made it evident that he didn't want me hanging around him anymore. He got into partying, alcohol and other kinds of illicit behavior. But I was a believer in Jesus, I liked going to church, and I just didn't fit in with those things. In reality, I probably would have been willing to get into some of those things myself, if that meant that I could continue to be friends with Todd. But Todd regarded me as not belonging with him – or with his new friends. As Todd and I drifted apart, I suffered a great sense of loss. Unlike Todd, I did not have a lot of friends so the few friends I had meant a lot to me. But Todd and I were on different roads to live different lives leading to different outcomes.

Yes it is true – a person can make terrible decisions early in life and then turn to God later. It happens. But as it pertains to my friend Todd – even now (I am told) he persists in his rejection of God – though I'm sure he is increasingly aware that more and more of his life is behind him and that he has erred by giving little thought to matters of eternal significance.

As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:18,

...we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are temporary, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

Today, we are in Psalm 17. And one of the main features of this Psalm is the contrast between living in God's ways – and the outcome that brings – and living in the ways of the world – and the outcome that follows from THAT.

Psalm 17 is 15 verses long and is written by David, the son of Jesse – the greatest of Israel's kings. We do not know if this song was written before or after David ascended the throne, and we don't know the specific circumstance that prompted its writing.

As with much of the poetry of the Psalms, it is written in a way that lends itself to being abstracted so that many people in diverse situations, are able to find within it ideas, patterns and principles that are fitting to their OWN circumstances.

We know David was a military man, and it seems likely the mortal enemies that Psalm 17 speaks of were persons who intended to confront him and his men in combat.

While you and I may not be presently facing mortal enemies, some of us have friends or loved ones in the military or police whose lives are often at risk. And we do well to keep them in our prayers.

But as it relates to you and I, personally, if we are living for Christ, we will indeed find ourselves in various caldrons of duress where we desire to advance the interests of Christ over and against powers to the contrary. And as we face such challenges, we do well to imitate David by proving to be persons of prayer. Indeed, prayer – combined with the obedience that follows from prayer – is the means God has given us by which we engage and prevail in spiritual conflict.

Having said these things, I'm going to burden you with some academic stuff. I only do this because there are some tools that may be useful to you in your own reading and meditation in the Psalms. These tools apply not only to Psalm 17, but to much of the poetry that is found in the Psalms.

In the book of Psalms, God could have just listed the true things that he wanted us to know. And it would read like a doctrinal statement. But instead, God has chosen to adorn truth in poetry and in the emotions and thoughts of real, historical persons, and to (pause) shroud the truth ... in riddles.

The effect of all this, is to promote a perception that TRUTH is RARE and difficult to find. So when we FIND the truth, we will TREASURE IT. And we will LIVE by it.

Some of these riddles pertain to figures of speech. I have listed some of the most important figures of speech that you will find in the Psalms in your bulletin insert. Each of these figures can be thought of as a kind of riddle. But in addition, there are other kinds of riddles in the Psalms. Sometimes they are in the form of truths that are not explicitly spoken within a given psalm but are pointed to and must be inferred or triangulated with the help of other Scriptures and the Holy Spirit.

For example, in Psalm 24 verses 3 and 4, it teaches that people must practice righteousness in order to draw near to God. From this we are expected to conclude that God Himself is righteous – though that particular Psalm never explicitly says so.

Also, Psalm 24 causes us to object on the grounds that none of us is righteous. Therefore, we would think no one can draw near to God. No one meets the standard. But in verse 5 of Psalm 24, it says the person who draws near to God by practicing righteousness will quote 'receive righteousness from the God of his salvation'.

So we are left to figure out that what it all means is that when we prove our trust in God genuine by learning to live in God's ways, God responds by putting His perfect righteousness onto us so that we are thereby qualified to draw near.

But the text doesn't plainly say that. It is a riddle that we must prayerfully think through in order to get at the truth it is pointing to. And we do well to understand that the very intelligent and committed pharisees of Jesus' day

often made the wrong conclusions about what the Psalms teach. The Apostle Paul, before his conversion was a pharisee and he did not formerly have a right understanding of the Psalms. So if these very intelligent and committed persons got it wrong, you and I must be humble, prayerful and dependent upon the Holy Spirit to help us make the right conclusions.

So figures of speech are just one of the ways the poetry of the Psalms, as inspired by the Holy Spirit, shrouds the truth in riddles. It also points to some truths which you and I must prayerfully deduce, based on the information that is given.

In relation to our bulletin insert, the first figure of speech is 'metonymy'. Metonymy is by far the most common figure of speech found in the Psalms. It occurs many hundreds of times throughout the book of Psalms.

Metonymy is a figure of speech in which the real or ultimate meaning is obscured by being replaced with an attribute of the real or ultimate meaning.

Often, you and I do this in everyday conversation without even thinking about it. For example, our XYZ group often says to people that when they come to XYZ, they should quote 'bring a dish'. We intuitively understand that what they are to bring is FOOD in a dish. The ultimate meaning – food – has been replaced by an attribute of the ultimate meaning – the dish that holds the food.

Another example is Hollywood. Hollywood is a suburb of Los Angeles. But often when people say 'Hollywood', they mean 'the film industry', whose origins in the United States is associated with that location. Likewise when the US Government issues a statement on some subject or other, it is often reported as 'Washington issued this statement in response', by which they mean 'someone speaking for the Federal government, which is seated in Washington D.C. issued this statement'.

Another example is the word 'suits'. Often this word is used to refer to Business leaders or High ranking officials. So a blue-collar person could say

of a given problem, 'Let's let the suits work this out'. And of course the word 'blue collar' is ITSELF a metonymy for physical laborers.

So you and I use metonymy often and we intuitively understand what they mean. Sometimes metonymy is used in very clever or humorous ways.

But the book of Psalms was written 3,000 years ago and it was written in a different language and culture, so it sometimes takes some effort on our part to recognize and resolve the metonymies.

The second figure of speech that we find in the Psalms is metaphor. This is far less common than metonymy, but it is still pretty common.

Metaphor is when the real meaning is replaced with something for which the real meaning is an attribute. (I forgot to say this on the bulletin insert, but...) Often with a metaphor, the figure of speech itself is more concrete while the meaning it points to is more abstract. For example, when David says, 'God is my shield', the 'shield' is very concrete. It is a specific and tangible object. The 'shield' is a metaphor whose meaning is more abstract. What David means is 'God is my source of protection'. Likewise, when David says, 'God is my Rock'. The 'rock' is very tangible and specific and it points to a meaning that is more abstract. What he means is, 'God is trustworthy to me'. When David says of the wicked in Psalm 5:9, 'their throat is an open grave' the 'throat' is metonymy for their spoken words and the 'open grave' is metaphor indicating that which is repugnant and unclean'. Thus, he is likening the heart of the wicked – which is revealed by their words – to the repugnance and uncleanness of a grave, when it is dug up and exposed.

It can take some practice to recognize when a figure of speech is there and to distinguish what is a metaphor from what is metonymy.

A third tool is anthropomorphism. This simply means, 'attributing human characteristics to something that is not human'. So a seaman might say of the weather, 'she has a mind of her own'. The most common anthropomorphisms of the Bible are those that describe God as if He had human characteristics. For example, in Deuteronomy 8:2, God says He tested Israel in order to know what was in their heart. But God always

knows all things, so this is an anthropomorphism – God is speaking of Himself as if he went through a discovery process as humans do. In reality, it is the PEOPLE who did not know what was in their own hearts, until God exposed it by means of testing.

Also, in today's text, we will run into a zoomorphism, which is when characteristics of an animal are attributed to something that is not an animal.

Finally, we will run into something called antonomasia, which is when you use a description as if it was a name. So one might speak of a person who is very resourceful, 'he is Mister 'fix-it'.

Okay. We are ready to proceed in Psalm 17, where a theme is the contrast between two roads and two outcomes.

It begins with David praying as a person who has already been living on the right road. And there is much to be said for this. There is a huge difference between calling out to God as a person who is serving God and living in daily fellowship with God, as opposed to calling out to God as a person who persists in wayward behaviors.

## SLIDE #1

At verse 1 David says...

1 hear      O Yahweh      a just cause!  
attend                      unto my cry!  
give ear                      unto my prayer  
not from lips of deception!

David recognizes his need for God's help and he knows that outcomes are from God. So he appeals to God for a favorable outcome.

When he says 'not from lips of deception', the word 'lips' is a metonymy for speech. David is saying he is not characterized by the speaking of lies. But in addition, the phrase 'lips of deception' can be understood as metonymy for living an overall godly life. It is literally true that David is generally not a

liar. But, in addition, honesty can be understood as an attribute of righteousness. Ultimately, David is saying to God that he is living an overall godly life. David's prayer is not from the position of weakness as it would be if He was living contrary to God's ways. This does not mean David is prideful or works oriented like the Pharisees of Jesus's day. It simply means he is praying as a person who is living – by God's grace – in a right relationship with God.

## SLIDE #2

In verse two, David is still praying and he says this:

2	from your presence	my vindication	let come forth
	your eyes	let see	with uprightness

I'm using my own translation – with the aid of various online tools – because I want the word sequence to closely follow that of the Hebrew text. Part of Hebrew poetry pertains to presenting the poet's thoughts through words that form certain patterns and structures, so my intent with these slides is to show forth that aspect of Classical Hebrew Poetry as found in the Old Testament.

In this slide, David understands that God is a righteous judge so he is asking for a righteous verdict – a verdict that favors him over his mortal enemies. When David says, 'your eyes let see' he is employing an anthropomorphism – speaking as if God had the human attribute of eyes. In addition, the 'eyes', in this context, are metonymy for perception. David is asking God to perceive the situation through the lens of righteousness, so God will favor David over his unrighteous enemies.

## SLIDE #3

Next, David invokes four statements - each beginning with the word 'you':

3	you have tested	my heart	
	you have searched	me in the night	
	you have tried	me	and
	you find nothing		

When David says 'my heart', that is a literally true reference to the inner person. David is saying that the test to which God subjected him caused the truth about David's devotion to come out into the open. Not contrary to this, the two words 'my heart' is metonymy for 'me', that is, David. Ultimately, it is David himself that God has tested, so that even what is hidden within him has been brought fourth.

When David says 'you find nothing', we interpret this to mean 'you find nothing against me'.

David has been through many trials and hardships. And in the midst of these 'tests', he has proven steadfast in his trust and genuine in his devotion to God.

The phrase 'in the night' could be literal, if it was in the night when God 'searched' David. And this is indeed plausible, as the Psalms periodically present sleepless nights as a time of introspection, meditation and prayer. But again, God always knows all things, including what is in a person's heart. So God never needs to search a human heart because He already knows what lies within it. So line two on our slide can be thought of as another anthropomorphism.

Again, David surely knows he is not sinless, for by God's standards, no one is. And as the story of David's life unfolds, you and I now know in hindsight that David would commit the gravely serious sins of adultery and murder. So David is not at all sinless. But as he prays this prayer, he IS claiming that his trust and devotion have been proven genuine and that he presently lives in fellowship with God.

## **SLIDE #4**

The poem continues...

3b I have committed  
I will not transgress with my mouth



Just as the previous word 'lips' was metonymy for speech, here the word 'mouth'. So he is saying 'I will not transgress with my words'. He will not speak lies, he will not speak against God, he will not use words to do evil. But this refusal to sin with his words is an attribute of overall righteousness, so the phrase 'not transgress with my mouth' can be understood a metonymy which indicates overall righteousness - not just righteousness with respect to spoken words. Also, the word 'transgress' (in line two) can be thought of as the opposite of 'practice righteousness'. The word 'not' on line two negates it, so the words 'not transgress' can be understood as a negated opposite which ultimately means the same thing as 'practice righteousness'. This is David's poetic way of insisting that he has committed to live a godly life.

## SLIDE #5

At verse 4, David says:

4 concerning the deeds of men  
by the word of your lips  
I have kept from the paths of the lawless

Verse four essentially is rhyming its meaning to the previous slide. David is insisting that he does indeed live in God's ways.

Again, the word 'lips' (on line two) is metonymy for speech. And in this case, these 'lips' are those of God, so it is also anthropomorphism, since God (apart from the incarnation of God the Son) does not have a human body. Further, the phrase 'the word of your lips' is metonymy for 'You' - that is, God. Ultimately, it is in obedience to God Himself that David lives.

This is all based on God's self-disclosure in the Law of Moses - which is about all David had to live by, since most of the rest of the Bible had not yet been written. So in line two of our slide, David is talking about the authority of God Himself as expressed in the Law of Moses - that is, the first five books of our Bible. Thus, the phrase 'the word of your lips' can be understood as metonymy for 'The Law of Moses'. And when David refers to 'the paths of the lawless' in line three, it is plausible he is referring to Gentiles who did not have the Law of Moses. They were without the Law of Moses, so in that sense, they were 'lawless'. If this nuance is what the Holy Spirit intended as He inspired these words through David, this would mean the mortal enemies David is facing to are not enemies within Israel but they are foreign enemies.

Also in line three of this slide, the word 'path' is a metaphor indicating a pattern of decisions about direction as one proceeds through life. To the context, the phrase 'the paths of the lawless' is, on one level, true at face value. But it may also be understood as metonymy for 'the Lawless themselves'. If seen in this way, then David is saying he has no kindred fellowship with them, for that would require that he compromise relative to their lawless behavior. Which, of course, is sometimes how people seriously mess up their lives - they hang around with and are influenced by the wrong group of people.

Going back to my illustration about my childhood friend, I see in retrospect that when I experienced rejection from him and from others at various points in my life, God was protecting me from being pulled onto the wrong path. At the time, was very upsetting to me, but God was working purposefully to keep me from going down the path that these persons were on.

## SLIDE #6

In verse 5, David insists upon what he has already said. And he introduces a contrast between God's 'path' or 'road' and that of the lawless. He says...

5 have persisted            my steps            in YOUR paths  
not have faltered        my footsteps

Here, the 'steps' and the 'footsteps' are metaphors that indicates decision-making about direction. The phrase 'my steps' and 'my footsteps' are metonymy for 'me' with nuance toward the poet's pattern of living. Ultimately, it is the poet himself who lives in God's ways. The 'paths' - like its occurrence in verse 4, is a metaphor regarding patterns of decisions about direction in life. But in verse 4, it was the path of the lawless and here it is that of God. Not contrary to this, the phrase 'your paths' can be seen as metonymy for 'You', that is God, with nuance toward His prescribed pattern for living by which people may draw near to Himself. Ultimately, it is in fellowship with God Himself that the poet has lived. Line two means exactly the same as line one. It is simply rhyming the meanings as is common in the Psalms. You may observe that the technique the poet here uses in rhyming the meanings is to negate the opposite. The opposite of 'persisted' (in line one) is 'faltered' (in line two). And this is preceded by the word 'not' (in line two): 'NOT faltered'. So line two is a negated opposite in comparison to line one, so the meanings ultimately rhyme: I HAVE PERSISTED. I HAVE NOT FAULTERED.

Ultimately, David is saying, God you already know that I am genuine in my faith and I demonstrate this because I am rigorous to live in your ways. I'm walking on the road you want me on. This is not true of my mortal enemies. So please favor me in this conflict.

## SLIDE #7

While the poem began with an air of desperation, it now shows hints of peace and confidence.

So at verse 6, David says this:

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6 I
   call
           upon you
           for you
   will answer
me
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On this slide you can see the symmetrical pattern that the words form. This is part of the artistry of Hebrew poetry.

## SLIDE #8

Verse six then continues...

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O God   incline your ear to me!   and
        hear my words!
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On this slide you can see how line two rhymes its meaning to line one. A nice thing about the poetry of the Old Testament is that it is not based on the rhyming of sounds, but of meanings. As a result, the poet's artistry is not lost when it is translated into other languages, such as English. But in order to protect that artistry, it is helpful if the word sequence of the Hebrew text is preserved when translated to English, as we are doing with these slides.

Also, on the present slide you can see the word 'ear' is that of God, so it is anthropomorphism. It is also a common metonymy for hearing. And line two can be understood as resolving these figures by plainly saying 'hear my words'.

The phrase 'my words' of line two is literally true to the context, but can also be understood as metonymy for 'me'. Ultimately, the poet wants God to have regard for the poet himself.

## SLIDE #9

At verse seven, David continues...

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7 wondrously show your trustworthy love!  
O you who saves those who take refuge in you  
from those who rise up against them  
by your right hand
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Isn't that beautiful? (Read it a second time)

And you can see how the verse can be presented on four lines where line one and line four correspond to each other while line two corresponds to line three.

The entirety of line two is a description of God that the poet is using as if it was a name. This happens from time to time in the Psalms – always in reference to God. It is called antonomasia. The entirety of line two is being spoken as if it was a name for God. This is a rhetorical device called 'antonomasia'.

Also, the phrase 'those who take refuge in you' is literally true to this context, but it can also be understood as metonymy for 'the true people of God'. And since we're TALKING about that, the book of Psalms uses quite a few metonymies by which the true people of God are indicated. It is helpful to be aware of this, because when you encounter references to such persons, you might be wondering 'who is this talking about?'

When the Psalms speak of 'those who wait for God' or 'those who hope in God', 'those who fear God', 'those who trust in God', 'those who seek God' or 'those who keep God's word' – all of these are metonymy for the true people of God. In addition – especially in Psalms written by David, references to 'the poor', 'the afflicted' and 'the needy' are always metonymy for the true people of God. In David's poetry, especially, I have found no

exceptions to this, but maybe a couple of exceptions in Psalms not written by David.

Incidentally, that may be partly what is going on in the Beatitudes of Matthew chapter 5. When Jesus issues eight pronouncements of blessing upon persons of various descriptions, it seems to me that He is not talking about eight groups of people, but one group of people which may be seen in eight different ways. Once again, that group of people in the beatitudes is US. The true people of God who trust Him and who live for Him. Yes, some of these eight beatitudes may be especially descriptive of some of us while others of the eight beatitudes may be especially descriptive of others. But broadly speaking, I think they are eight descriptions for one group of people.

Coming back to our slide, line three is literally true to the context, but it can also be understood as metonymy for 'the wicked'. That is, everyone who lives in spiritual darkness and rises up against the people of God. It could also be understood as metonymy for hostile Gentile nations who rise up against Israel.

On line four of our slide, it is referring to the 'right hand' of God. So it is anthropomorphism. In addition, throughout the Psalms the 'right hand' is metonymy for priority, favor and / or decisive action, depending in part on whose right hand is meant. If it is the right hand of a mortal, it indicates DEPENDENCE and priority. So when David says in Psalm 16:8 that God is at his right hand, he means that he consciously and deliberately depends on God as a matter of personal priority.

But here on line four, it is the right hand of GOD. And it is fitting to the context to regard the words 'right hand' as metonymy for favor, priority and decisive action. Thus, God 'saves' those who take refuge in Him as a matter of priority and decisive action because He favors them. And of course we NOW see WHAT a priority it is and HOW decisive that action was because it was FOR THIS that God sent His Son to the cross.

**SLIDE #10**

The Psalm continues at verse 8, where David reveals a little of the intimate nature of his relationship with God. He says,

8 keep me  
as the pupil of your eye!  
under the shadow of your wings  
hide me

The 'eye' (on line two) is that of God and so it is anthropomorphism. The 'wings' are those of God and so it is zoomorphism – speaking of God as if He had attributes of an animal or bird.

Regarding line two: the 'pupil of your eye' – some major translations say 'apple', but the word 'apple' is not in the Hebrew text'. It is the word 'pupil'.

It is well known that when a person looks at something desirable the pupil of the eye dilates. This could be a hungry person looking at appetizing food or a couple in love looking at each other. When he says, 'keep me as the pupil of your eye', he is invoking another metonymy whose meaning is 'desire'. David is saying to God, 'Desire me.'

The reference to the shadow of God's wings is asking God to protect him as a bird such as a mother hen would do for her chicks.

If we step back and look at the panorama of this poem for a moment, we may observe how unique such as this is in human history. Think history's great leaders, generals and kings. In their writings they boast of their achievements. Their conquests. Their victories: "See how much I have done!" Even American presidents do this when they build presidential libraries.

But David, who is a hero of Israel and Israel's greatest king – he is the opposite. In his writings he presents himself as lowly and dependent. And when God saves him, he gives glory to God, rather than claiming it for himself. This harmonizes with 1 Samuel 2:30, where God says, '...those who honor Me I will honor'.

So it should not surprise us that God is going to cause the throne of David to be the greatest of all thrones. The book of Ezekiel speaks of this in 34:23-24 and 37:24-25. Of course this will be accomplished through the Messiah, the Son of David who will sit on David's throne.

## SLIDE #11

Next David describes his enemies and observe how he points to their being on the wrong path. He says,

(`save me...)

9 from the wicked                      who oppress        me  
from my enemies ravenous        who surround     me

10 in the fat of self-obsession        they are covered  
with their mouth                        they speak pridefully

The phrase 'the fat of self-obsession', presents these enemies as repugnant because they are ruled by their lusts. The phrase implies that these persons already have plenty, but they never regard it as enough. These persons are the exact opposite of what it says in 1 Timothy 6:6, 'godliness with contentment is great gain'.

These mortal enemies of David are neither godly nor content.

Observe line four of our slide. We previously said that David's references to his words as not being deceptive was ultimately a metonymy pointing to overall righteousness. Here, the words of the wicked are described as 'prideful', which is literally true, but may also be understood as pointing ultimately to their overall unrighteousness. Of course prideful boasts are repugnant to God, for 'God is opposed to the proud but gives grace to the humble'. (per 1 Peter 5:5).

## SLIDE #12

The Psalm continues...

11 in our steps

they have now surrounded us  
their eyes they have set

to cast us to the ground

12 like a lion

eager to tear

and

as a young lion lurking in secret places

In this slide, the phrase 'in our steps' is metonymy for proximity and immanence. The enemy is near and the danger is now. They 'eyes' of line three is metonymy for desire. The enemy's desire is to destroy David and his men. The 'cast us to the ground' is literally true, but is also metonymy for the imposition of death by violence.

The 'lion' and the 'young lion' are illustrations. Just as a lion rips apart its prey, so these enemies desire to do to David and his men.

## SLIDE #13

Then, David says with godly confidence and climactic intensity...

13 arise!

O Yahweh

confront him!

cast him down!

deliver my soul

from the wicked

with your sword!

14 from men

with your hand

O Yahweh

from men of the world

When he describes the enemy as 'wicked' and 'men of the world' he is saying they are on the corrupt and ungodly road. They live only for the things of this life. They do not know what it is to fear God.

On line five, the phrase 'your sword' is interesting, because it is David's sword. This is a rhetorical device called 'idem' I-D-E-M. When God enters into a relationship with a human or group of humans so that the interests of one become the interests of the other or the actions of one become understood as the actions of the other or that the enemies of one are understood as the enemies of the other, it is called 'idem'.



Here, God has so condescended as to intertwine His interests with those of David so David's 'sword' and the 'swords of his men' are presented as those of God Himself. Of course, the 'sword' itself is metonymy for combat and the 'hand' on the line just below it is metonymy for 'activity' or 'power'.

While God will surely use the actions and power of David and his men in this battle, our inspired poet insists it is ultimately the activity and power of God. So it is YOUR sword. YOUR hand. Of course in order to invoke this, David must be completely surrendered to God so that David cares about nothing except the interests of God.

## SLIDE #14

The intensity of the previous verse now subsides and David concludes his poem with the serenity of wisdom. Still speaking about his enemies he says:

their portion	is in this life	and
	with your treasure	
you fill their womb		
they are satisfied	with children	and
they leave the balance	to their offspring	

David is saying this is ALL they have and it is ALL they desire. Things that are only of this present life.

But Jesus said, 'what good is it to gain the whole world but lose your own soul?'

These enemies, like my friend Todd, may have good things for the brief years of this life as they live independently from God and with indifference toward His ways. But these persons are mortal. And they are not rich toward God.

## SLIDE #15

