

Every now and then my late wife, Nancy, would call one of the kids “the apple of my eye.” When Amy and Judy were visiting, we found an old video of their mom and got to comparing notes. Turns out they didn’t know the other was also called the apple their mom’s eye, and each was a little miffed. Since I never metaphor I didn’t like, I was like, “What do you think that even *means*?” Judy said, “We had that apple tree and mom told me it meant of all the apples on the tree, you’re the one that caught my eye.”

The events of recent days and the rising anguish of so many people close to me, and my own distress, drew me to Psalm 17 this week. And lo and behold this is where that image comes from. But it’s in a different context than we might expect: a prayer to God in the face of enemies, and by “enemies” they don’t mean some fake war on Christmas they hear about on cable news. They mean real enemies, mortal ones, implacably hostile and dangerous. Here it is:

***Display your faithfulness in wondrous deeds, You who deliver with your right hand those who seek refuge from assailants. Guard me like the apple of Your eye; hide me in the shadows of Your wings, from the wicked who despoil me, my mortal enemies who encircle me (17:7–9)***

To give this image its emotional impact, let’s set in context.

The psalm opens with a pray-er who has plenty of moxie before God, no groveling pretense: ***Hear, O Lord, what is just; heed my cry, give ear to my prayer, uttered without guile (17:1)***. The tone is unapologetic, insistent, even bossy. It’s a tone you might use when you’re mad or afraid or both and some of your frustration is aimed at God and you mean business.

This assertive tone continues: ***My vindication will come from You; Your eyes will behold what is right. You have visited me at night, probed my mind, You have tested me and found nothing amiss; I determined that my mouth should not transgress. As for man’s dealings, in accord with the commands of your lips, I have kept in view the fate of the lawless. My feet have held to your paths; my legs have not given way. I call on You; You will answer me, God; turn Your ear to me, hear what I say (17: 2-6)***.

Some distorted versions of Christianity seem to think playing the abject sinner is a form of piety. “Oh Lord I am not worthy to sit at your table! I’m lower than the lowest skunk in hell, but you haven’t struck me down yet, so here goes...” (Maybe that’s an exaggeration, but you get the gist.) Still, this psalm, and many others, assert innocence before God, not guilt. The “I’m guilty” psalms are the exception not the rule and they have to do with acts of wickedness not everyday sin, like King David using his power to take Bathsheba and kill her husband.

But this psalmist has been surrounded by enemies—think the Ukrainian people assaulted by Putin. And enemies of this sort always resort to a stream of propaganda—lies—to justify their atrocities and deaden the conscience of their enablers and supporters. When that, or something on that threat continuum, especially involving hostile forces of some kind [doesn't have to be an army, but your alarm system is activated] it's no time to get scrupulous before God as if you are seven year old preparing for her first communion going to confession.

You're in a battle with powerful propaganda (lies) that wicked enemies use in their hostility—that's your time, before God, to assert your innocence, not focus on your petty failings.

Using the *Jewish Publication Translation* as we come to our apple metaphor: ***Display your faithfulness in wondrous deeds, You who deliver with your right hand those who seek refuge from assailants. Guard me like the apple of Your eye; hide me in the shadows of Your wings, from the wicked who despoil me, my mortal enemies who encircle me. Their hearts are closed to pity; they mouth arrogance; now they hem in our feet at every side; they set their eyes roaming over the land. He is like a lion eager for prey, a king of beasts lying in wait (17: 7-12).***

Hold on the eye apple image for little longer till we finish the context, which is the experience of threat that has someone praying like this. We know less than we'd like to about the history of ancient Israel. We don't know if the book of Exodus is historical or not, for example. At least there's no corroborating evidence. There is some for the time of the Kings and the first temple. More still for the Assyrian invasion of Israel, even more for the Babylonian invasion, destruction of the first temple, and deportation of the Jewish elites into Babylon. And that's where these psalms come from—the people who experienced the Babylonian trauma, with collective memory of the Assyrian trauma. So were talking the kind of trauma from the Greenwood Massacre in Tulsa, Oklahoma, or the Trail of Tears or the abuse that led Stonewall uprising in 1969. It's not like all that hate evaporated. This is the sort of experience that gave rise to this collection of prayers we call the Book of Psalms. And what we now know about trauma, is that many other forms of violence, hostility and threat are part of the experience.

You see all that reflected in the language here. And that's what prompts this prayer:

***“Guard me like the apple of Your eye”***

According to Robert Alter, the scholar of ancient Hebrew, the apple of the eye was the pupil—the very center of the eye.

Play with Grace, age 6, and young athlete that she became, Grace fired at tennis ball at me that hit me in the apple of my eye, followed by a flash of light, and searing pain. I was afraid to open my eye when the pain finally ebbed because I thought I might have lost my vision in that eye.

The ancients didn't have glasses or protective eyewear. They didn't have sunglasses for the blazing sun of the Judean wilderness. They didn't have cataract surgery for the elderly. (Elderly Isaac in Genesis can barely see, probably from thick cataracts that allow Jacob to steal Esau's blessing.) If the apple of our eye is vulnerable, the apple of the eye of these people was even more vulnerable, and they understood the urgency of guarding the apple of their eye.

To the ancients, the eye was the window to the soul! Extended eye contact was viewed as a threat—the person staring at you is trying to invade or steal your soul. Extended eye contact, as we understand today, is an act of intimacy for a few beloved people, and not strangers.

To the ancients the eye was also the lamp of the body, counterintuitive to us (a window lets light in, a lamp shines it out) ... but if it's dark inside our heads when we close our eyes and light when we open them, then the eye is like a lamp shining light into our interior room.

All to say, ***Guard me like the apple, the center, the pupil, of Your eye*** means guard me like you would guard something as vulnerable, and as important, as the apple of your own eye. That's why it's in this psalm about dealing with the hostile threats of enemies, because that kind of threat makes us feel our vulnerability most acutely. But let's pay attention to whose eye it is.

Guard me [the vulnerable person is speaking to God] like the apple of Your eye. My Jewish Publication Society translation capitalizes Your, meaning the apple, the pupil of God's eye.

Christians like to pretend that Christianity is an “embodied religion” whereas Judaism is something other than that. That self-serving comparison, goes like this: Judaism doesn't want to imagine God having a body, so it's not incarnational (God in flesh appearing) BOO-HONKEY! Yes, ancient Judaism has an issue with using images in worship, but that's because in ancient Judaism, embodied humans are the image of God; Judaism want to keep that focus. And yes, Judaism, like Christianity doesn't think God—who is Spirit—has a literal body. But ancient Judaism is every bit as “embodied” as Christianity (and for many centuries has been more body positive than much Christianity) and we see that reflected in this psalm. ***“Your eyes will behold what it right!”*** (vs. ) Whose eyes? God's eyes? ***“The commands of your lips?”*** (vs. ) Whose lips? God's lips! Now ***“Guard me like the apple of your eye”*** whose eye? God's eye!

Jesus identifies with the vulnerable, we like to brag, as if that's his unique contribution. But its not his unique contribution. Jesus is walking out Israel's vocation to image the God who identifies with the most vulnerable and opposes their oppressors. When the risen Jesus rebukes Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus saying, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? (When Paul was harassing some Jesus followers) the risen Jesus was signaling, “Whatever else I am I'm still a Jewish rabbi! And you should keep your Jewish credentials too Saul!” When the risen Jesus appears to Thomas and shows Thomas his scars, he's driving home this same very Jewish understanding of a God who shares,

carries, identifies, has experienced our vulnerability. Signaling that our suffering, our wounds, our injuries in this world are not a source of shame, and in fact, will have honor and meaning in the world to come.

To come back to this prayer when we feel under threat. We need two prayers when we feel under threat from hostile forces and we have both in this psalm. One prayer is to vent and to channel our anger. If the psalms model one thing, they model that anger can be vented and channeled in prayer. Yes, Jesus taught us to pray for our enemies but that did not mean we are to pray for our enemies to succeed in their plots to harm us! It meant don't let our enemies drag us down into hatred—praying for our enemies is a way to rise about their hostility. So this is a prayer for our enemies, the ones threatening us in vs. 13, using the Robert Alter translation,

***He is like a lion eager for prey, a king of beasts lying in wait. Rise up Lord, head him off, bring him down!*** (17: 13) Write that on prayer card and put in your pocket: ***Rise up Lord, head him off, bring him down!***

But the other prayer in the face of threat, our focus today, is a prayer to vent to channel our vulnerability in the face of threat, ***Guard me like the apple of Your eye*** Guard me God like you guard the apple of your own eye.

It's a prayer we can pray insistently, assertively, the emotional tone, the posture of this whole psalm. ***Guard me like the apple of your eye, hide me under the shadow of your wings***

### **QUIET REFLECTION**

Let's take this to a time of meditation, about a minute. Here's a suggestion if you'd like a focus for this time. We'll start in a moment with some deep breaths, in through the nose, out through the mouth, then turn our attention to the words of this prayer: ***Guard me God like the apple of Your eye.*** A simple way to meditate is just to keep your focus on those words as though the words were a mantra, or as though you were committing them to memory.

So let's begin by getting comfortable, and then draw in a nice deep breath as though it were a breath of God, and breath out a little tension in your body... Do that for three or four nice deep breaths ... and now shift your focus to the words of this prayer, Guard me God like the apple of Your eye, Guard me God like the apple of Your eye. Go ahead.