

Bible Study Lesson: When You Need God to Listen

Scripture: Psalm 86:1–10 (NIV)

Theme: We can approach God with confidence because He is compassionate, forgiving, faithful, and unmatched in power.

Key verse: Psalm 86:5

Estimated teaching time: 40–45 minutes

Lesson objectives

By the end of this lesson, participants should understand:

1. Why acknowledging our need is an expression of faith, not weakness.
2. How David based his prayers on the character of God.
3. Why persistent prayer requires both confidence and humility.
4. What it means to recognize God as the only true God.
5. How God’s past faithfulness strengthens us during present trouble.

1. Opening discussion — 5 minutes

Begin by asking:

“When trouble comes, who is the first person you call?”

We usually call someone based on two considerations:

- Does this person care about me?
- Does this person have the ability to help me?

Someone may care deeply but lack the resources to change our situation. Another person may have plenty of resources but show no concern for us.

Psalm 86 assures us that God has both the compassion and the power to help. He cares about His people, and nothing exceeds His ability.

Psalm 86 is identified as “A prayer of David.” David was a king, warrior, musician, and national leader. Yet he did not approach God by emphasizing his position, accomplishments, or authority. He approached God as a needy servant.

In these ten verses, David moves through three stages:

- He presents his need.

- He remembers God's character.
- He declares God's greatness.

Have someone read Psalm 86:1–10 aloud from the NIV.

2. A humble cry for help — Psalm 86:1–2 — 7 minutes

David begins:

“Hear me, Lord, and answer me, for I am poor and needy.”

David's first words reveal humility. Although he was a king, he described himself as poor and needy.

This was not necessarily a statement about his financial condition. David recognized his spiritual and personal dependence upon God. His position could not protect him from every enemy, solve every problem, heal every wound, or answer every question.

The danger of self-sufficiency

One of the greatest obstacles to prayer is the illusion that we can handle everything ourselves.

We may believe:

- “I am intelligent enough to solve this.”
- “I have enough money to fix this.”
- “I know the right people.”
- “I have overcome difficult things before.”
- “I don't want anyone to know that I'm struggling.”

Self-sufficiency says, “I can manage without God.” Faith says, “Without God, I can do nothing of lasting value.”

David's need did not disqualify him from approaching God. His need became the reason he approached God.

“Hear me and answer me”

David did not merely want God to hear the sound of his voice. He asked God to respond.

This request shows that biblical prayer is more than expressing our feelings. Prayer is a conversation with the living God. We speak because we believe that God hears, cares, and acts.

“Guard my life”

In verse 2, David asks God to preserve or protect his life. David apparently faced a genuine threat. He did not pretend the danger was insignificant. He placed the danger before God.

Prayer does not require us to deny reality. Faith honestly names the problem while trusting that the problem is not greater than God.

“I am faithful to you”

David was not claiming sinless perfection. He was describing himself as someone who belonged to God and remained committed to Him.

David also called himself God’s servant. He was a king before the people, but a servant before God.

That is an important spiritual principle:

No matter how high we rise in human authority, we always remain servants under God’s authority.

Discussion questions

1. Why is it sometimes difficult to admit that we are needy?
2. What is the difference between humility and low self-esteem?
3. How can our strengths, positions, or resources become obstacles to prayer?

3. A persistent appeal for mercy — Psalm 86:3–4 — 6 minutes

David continues:

“Have mercy on me, Lord, for I call to you all day long.”

David did not demand that God give him what he deserved. He asked for mercy.

What is mercy?

Mercy is God’s compassionate response to human misery and need. Grace gives us blessings we have not earned. Mercy withholds judgment we deserve and meets us in our distress.

David understood that his relationship with God was not based on personal merit. Even though he was devoted to God, he still depended upon divine mercy.

We never outgrow our need for mercy.

- New believers need mercy.
- Mature believers need mercy.
- Church members need mercy.
- Ministers need mercy.
- Community leaders need mercy.
- Families need mercy.

“I call to you all day long”

David’s prayer was persistent. He did not pray once, see no immediate change, and conclude that prayer did not work.

Persistent prayer does not mean that God is reluctant and must be worn down. It means that we continue trusting God while waiting for His answer.

Persistence changes us. It teaches patience, deepens dependence, purifies our motives, and keeps our hearts directed toward God.

Some prayers are answered immediately. Others are answered gradually. Some are answered differently from what we expected. Certain prayers may not be fully answered until eternity.

Our responsibility is to keep praying and keep trusting.

“Bring joy to your servant”

In verse 4, David asks God to bring him joy. This suggests that his circumstances had drained his emotional strength.

David did not ask merely for survival. He asked for restored joy.

God is concerned about more than our outward circumstances. He also cares about the condition of our hearts.

The phrase “I put my trust in you” can also carry the idea of lifting one’s soul to God. David deliberately directed his inner life toward the Lord.

When discouragement pulls us down, prayer lifts our souls toward God.

Discussion questions

1. What causes people to stop praying about a situation?
2. How can persistent prayer change us even before our circumstances change?
3. What is the difference between happiness based on circumstances and joy rooted in God?

4. Prayer based upon God's character — Psalm 86:5 — 7 minutes

Verse 5 is one of the central declarations of the passage:

“You, Lord, are forgiving and good, abounding in love to all who call to you.”

David's confidence did not rest upon the quality of his prayer. It rested upon the character of the God to whom he prayed.

David identifies three qualities of God.

God is forgiving

David knew this truth personally. He had committed serious sins, but he had also experienced God's forgiveness.

God's willingness to forgive does not make sin insignificant. Forgiveness is costly. Ultimately, our forgiveness was secured through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

When we confess our sins, we do not have to persuade God to become merciful. We approach a God whose nature is forgiving.

Some people believe God has forgiven others but struggle to accept His forgiveness personally. They repeatedly punish themselves for sins they have confessed.

Genuine repentance includes agreeing with God about our sin. Faith also requires agreeing with God about His forgiveness.

If God has forgiven us, we should not continue acting as though Christ's sacrifice was insufficient.

God is good

God does not merely perform good actions. Goodness is part of His nature.

Because God is good:

- His motives are pure.

- His commands are right.
- His timing is wise.
- His correction has a loving purpose.
- His answers can be trusted.

We may not always understand what God allows, but we can trust who God is.

God abounds in love

God does not possess a limited supply of love that eventually runs out. He is “abounding” in love.

This refers to God’s faithful, covenant love—love that remains steadfast even when circumstances change.

Human love can be inconsistent. People sometimes withdraw love when disappointed. God’s faithful love rests upon His character, not our changing emotions.

David says this love is extended “to all who call” upon God. The invitation is broad. God does not reserve mercy for one nationality, social class, age group, or background.

Anyone who sincerely calls upon the Lord can experience His mercy.

Discussion questions

1. Which attribute in verse 5—God’s forgiveness, goodness, or love—do you most need to remember today?
2. Why is it important to base prayer on God’s character rather than our feelings?
3. How should receiving God’s forgiveness affect the way we treat others?

5. Confidence during trouble — Psalm 86:6–7 — 5 minutes

David repeats his request:

“Hear my prayer, Lord; listen to my cry for mercy.”

Repetition in prayer is not necessarily a sign of unbelief. Sometimes repetition reveals the depth of our dependence.

Jesus warned against meaningless repetition—words spoken without thought or faith. But Scripture repeatedly encourages persistent, sincere prayer.

David says:

“When I am in distress, I call to you, because you answer me.”

Notice that David says “when,” not “if.”

Faithful people still experience trouble. Following God does not exempt us from grief, illness, opposition, disappointment, or uncertainty.

David’s confidence came from experience. He could remember previous occasions when God answered him.

The value of remembering

When present trouble makes us question God, we should remember:

- Prayers God has answered.
- Doors God has opened.
- Dangers from which God protected us.
- Strength God supplied.
- People God sent to help us.
- Peace God provided during confusion.
- Forgiveness God extended after failure.

Yesterday’s testimony can provide strength for today’s trial.

This does not mean God will answer every prayer in exactly the same way. It means that the God who was faithful then remains faithful now.

Discussion question

Can you remember a previous situation in which God answered your prayer or carried you through difficulty? How does that memory help you now?

Allow one or two brief testimonies, while keeping the lesson within the allotted time.

6. There is no one like God — Psalm 86:8–10 — 7 minutes

David’s attention now shifts from his trouble to God’s greatness:

“Among the gods there is none like you, Lord; no deeds can compare with yours.”

The surrounding nations worshiped many supposed gods. David was not acknowledging these idols as genuine deities. He was declaring that nothing people worship can compare with the Lord.

Modern idols may not be statues. An idol is anything that takes the place in our lives that belongs to God.

Possible modern idols include:

- Money
- Political power
- Social status
- Careers
- Relationships
- Physical appearance
- Technology
- Pleasure
- National identity
- Even religious traditions

These things may promise security, meaning, or satisfaction, but none can do what God does.

Money can purchase medicine, but it cannot guarantee healing.

Influence can open doors, but it cannot cleanse a guilty conscience.

Popularity can attract crowds, but it cannot give eternal life.

Government can pass laws, but it cannot transform the human heart.

Religion can establish routines, but only God can save.

“All the nations you have made”

David looked forward to the day when all nations would worship and glorify God.

This vision is especially powerful because David lived in a world divided by tribes, kingdoms, languages, and conflicts. Yet he understood that every nation belonged to the Creator.

God did not create one race and merely tolerate the others. He made every nation.

This truth confronts racism, ethnic pride, and every belief that assigns greater human value to one group over another. Every person bears God-given dignity, and God’s redemptive purpose reaches across every human boundary.

The church should provide the world with a picture of people from different backgrounds united in worship of the same Lord.

“You are great and do marvelous deeds”

David began the psalm by describing himself as poor and needy. He concludes this section by describing God as great and powerful.

That is the proper relationship:

- We are needy; God is sufficient.
- We are limited; God is unlimited.
- We are troubled; God is faithful.
- We are sinners; God is forgiving.
- We are weak; God performs marvelous deeds.

“You alone are God”

This is David’s ultimate confession.

God is not merely one helpful option among many. He alone is God. Therefore, He alone deserves our highest loyalty, complete trust, and wholehearted worship.

Discussion questions

1. What are some modern substitutes people trust instead of God?
2. How should verse 9 shape the church’s attitude toward race, nationality, and culture?
3. What is the difference between saying God is great and living as though God is great?

7. Practical application — 5 minutes

Psalm 86:1–10 gives us a pattern for prayer.

1. Admit your need

David did not hide his weakness. He told God that he was poor, needy, and distressed.

We can bring our real condition to God. We do not need polished language or a religious performance.

2. Ask specifically

David asked God to:

- Hear him.
- Answer him.
- Guard his life.
- Save him.
- Show mercy.
- Restore his joy.

Specific prayer helps us recognize specific answers.

3. Pray persistently

David called upon God throughout the day. We should continue praying even when the answer is delayed.

4. Remember who God is

David called God forgiving, good, loving, responsive, great, and powerful.

When fear focuses our attention on the size of the problem, worship redirects our attention toward the greatness of God.

5. Trust God's answer

Prayer is not an attempt to control God. It is an act of surrender to God.

Sometimes God says yes. Sometimes He says no. Sometimes He says wait. Sometimes He gives something better than what we requested.

Whatever the answer, we can trust the character of the One answering.

6. Turn your trouble into worship

David began with distress but moved toward worship.

Prayer does not always change our circumstances immediately, but genuine prayer should change our perspective. We begin by looking at the trouble and end by looking at God.

Closing reflection

Ask participants to answer silently:

1. What need have I been trying to handle without God?

2. What specific request do I need to place before Him?
3. Have I allowed a delayed answer to weaken my prayer life?
4. Which truth about God's character do I need to remember?
5. Is anything competing with God for first place in my life?
6. How can I demonstrate God's love across racial, cultural, or social boundaries?

Conclusion

Psalm 86 teaches us that prayer begins with an honest acknowledgment:

“Lord, I need You.”

David was not ashamed to admit his need because he knew the character of his God.

He knew that God was:

- Willing to listen.
- Ready to forgive.
- Abounding in love.
- Faithful in trouble.
- Unmatched in power.
- Worthy of universal worship.

David's circumstances may have made him feel small, but prayer reminded him that his God was great.

When we are overwhelmed, we do not need to pretend that we are strong. We need to remember that God is strong.

When we have sinned, we do not need to hide. We need to remember that God is forgiving.

When we feel abandoned, we need to remember that God abounds in faithful love.

When trouble surrounds us, we need to remember that God answers prayer.

When the world offers countless substitutes, we must declare with David:

“You alone are God.”

Closing prayer

Lord, hear our prayer and answer us, because we are poor and needy without You. Guard our lives and teach us to trust You completely. Have mercy upon us and restore the joy that trouble, disappointment, and sin have taken away. Thank You for being forgiving, good, and abounding in faithful love.

Help us to call upon You persistently and to remember the ways You have answered us before. Remove every idol that competes for first place in our hearts. Unite people from every nation, race, and background in the worship of Your name.

You are great, Your works are marvelous, and You alone are God. In Jesus' name, amen.