

This is an unusual “save me” psalm because the crisis facing the people of God and provoking the psalm is the absence of God. With the blows of a sledgehammer the psalmist pounds out his depressing and unequivocal message. God has spurned them and broken them. God has unleashed his anger against them. The need of the hour is deliverance, but unexpectedly, the deliverance is not from personal sin or an evil bully or a corrupt culture or arrogant foes. The people of God need deliverance from God, but God alone is their one, true, and only deliverer.

If the superscription is accurate, the back story in the Samuel narrative requires reading between the lines (2 Sam 8:1-14). The historical account attributes a series of decisive military victories to David. He expanded Israel’s territory by conquering the Philistines, the Moabites, the Arameans, and the Edomites. The tenor of the report is summed up in the line: “The Lord gave David victory wherever he went” (2 Sam 8:6). What is missing is the anguish of Psalm 60. Apparently as David was fighting the king of Zobah who was intent on reestablishing Aramean control in the region of northern Iraq, the Edomites in the south waged a campaign that threatened Jerusalem. This opened up a two front war and David responded by sending his commander Joab and his brother Abishai to fight the Edomites (1 Chron 18:12-13).¹

Psalm 60 was inspired in that critical moment when David learned that the Edomites were marshaling thousands of troops on the southern, central border of Israel. The psalm must have been in his heart and on his lips during those anxious days as Joab and his division raced south to defend Israel’s heartland. The Israelites prevailed over the Edomites in the battle of the Valley of Salt making good on the promise prayed: “With God we will gain the victory, and he will trample down our enemies” (Ps 60:12).

Rejected by God

*You have rejected us, God, and burst upon us;
you have been angry – now restore us!
You have shaken the land and torn it open;
mend its fractures, for it is quaking.
You have shown your people desperate times;
you have given us wine that makes us stagger.*

Psalm 60:1-3

David sounds like Job in Psalm 60, only in this case, it is the collective experience of the people of God as a whole that identifies with Job’s anguish. The psalmist makes no attempt to get behind the cause of the suffering and discover the reasons for God’s anger. Nor does the psalmist attribute their hardship and upheaval to evil powers. The danger Israel faced was attributed exclusively to God. The psalmist accepts the fact that the people of God are on trial yet like Job he refuses to put God on trial.

On behalf of Israel, he cries out to God. But unlike Job, he does not proclaim Israel’s innocence

¹ Wilcock, Psalms, 215; Kidner, Psalms, 215.

nor defend the people; he simply states the fact that God is against them. It is fair to say, that without Job knowing the big picture of God's mean battle with Satan, Job felt betrayed. But the psalmist doesn't appear to feel betrayed as much as weak, vulnerable, and exposed. He is disinterested in secondary causes. He traces these "desperate times" "not merely to some intermediate point in the chain of causation" but to God. He "sees the chaotic picture as, in principle, intelligible and under a single ultimate control."² The advantage of attributing defeat, in whatever form it might take, to the will of God, instead of to the enemy or to personal agency, is to free the worshiper to concentrate exclusively on the sovereign God. It is neither "they have done this" or "we have done that," but to God the psalmist says, "You have. . . You have. . . You have. . . You have. . . You have." In that moment of awful realization when rejection and upheaval break upon the people of God, it is sometimes best to simply cry out to God, "You have been angry – now restore us!" (Ps 60:1).

Beloved by God

*But for those who fear you, you have raised a banner
to be unfurled against the bow.
Save us and help us with your right hand,
that those you love may be delivered.
Psalm 60:4-5*

In the middle of David's victorious campaign he is vividly reminded of Israel's complete dependence upon the mighty hand of God. David the warrior-king re-discovers under pressure his need of the Savior. Israel's very existence is impossible apart from God. Only with God can Israel succeed. David's initial shock (Ps 60:1-3) yields to a confident hope in the midst of the conflict. The fear-of-the-Lord, that bound phrase that defines the people of God, is outwardly signified by a battlefield banner. The banner of the Lord is lifted high and carried into battle. The psalmist intentionally contrasts the five "You have" – hammer blows with a contrasting sixth note filled with praise: "You have raised a banner to be unfurled against the bow."

The people of God are challenged "to be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go" (Josh 1:9). They are reminded that "the battle is not [theirs], but God's" (2 Chron 20:15). The banner is a metaphor for the identity and mission of God's people. They are not asked to unfurl a white flag of surrender but to lift high the banner of truth.

Psalm 60 reminds us that our hope is in the Lord and not in ourselves. We take our lead from the Lord Jesus who said, "By myself I can do nothing" (John 5:30). When Jesus disputed the Pharisees, he clarified the source of his power and authority. He said, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me" (John 8:28). For the Son of David and his followers to pray Psalm 60 is to acknowledge that apart from Christ we can do nothing. We share in the apostle Paul's conviction, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Phil 4:13 KJV). We see a corresponding link between Psalm 60 and the apostle Paul's experience when the Lord said

² Kidner, Psalms, 216.

to him, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9).

The psalmist gives us the words to pray when the bottom falls out of our world. Instead of itemizing a myriad of requests, David offers a simple prayer: “Save us and help us with your right hand, that those you love may be delivered” (Ps 60:5). The complexity of a two-front multi-national military conflict comes down to a simple cry for help. The right hand of God is more than able to handle the threat and the ground for appeal is the identity of the beloved. Everything that needs to be prayed is contained in that simple sentence. We are reminded that no matter how complex and chaotic our situation may be it comes down to this simple prayer for help.

Ruled by God

*God has spoken from his sanctuary:
“In triumph I will parcel out Shechem
and measure off the Valley of Sukkoth.
Gilead is mine, and Manasseh is mine;
Ephraim is my helmet,
Judah is my scepter.
Moab is my washbasin,
on Edom I toss my sandal;
over Philistia I shout in triumph.”
Psalm 60:6-9*

In spite of how things might seem in the moment there is a kingdom strategy at work. The word of God has spoken and the land belongs to the Lord. Ross writes, “By selecting these representative sections, the psalmist was recalling the ancient allotments of the land by the Lord in order to reiterate the fact that the land belonged to the Lord.”³ David’s prayer for deliverance rests on the revealed promises of God. The land does not belong to various people groups; it belongs to the Lord. “In a few bold strokes the early history and distinctive areas of Israel are called to mind, and the chief agents of defense and rule (helmet and scepter) are named.”⁴ Kidner draws special attention to the repeated “mine” and “my” to underscore that everything belongs to the Lord and this emphasis on God’s possessiveness only serves to affirm the lasting inheritance of the land to the people of God.

With the coming of Christ, the true and lasting Son of David, there is a new inheritance that is described as imperishable, undefiled, and unfading (1 Pet 1:4). This inheritance fulfills and transcends the covenant promises given to Israel. It is no longer tied to the land or political autonomy. “The notion of a holy land is superseded by that of a holy community (1 Peter 2:4-10).⁵ The boundaries of the Promised Land have been effectively shifted to the global reach of the gospel: “Go and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19). The people of God are drawn from “every nation, tribe, people and language” (Rev 7:9). The messianic community is no longer ethnically and geographically limited to Jews and Israel. There is an open invitation to

³ Ross, Psalms, 342.

⁴ Kidner, Psalms, 217.

⁵ Elliott, 1 Peter, 336.

Jews and Gentiles, religious and secular alike, to come home to Jesus Christ. Our new home is anywhere Jesus is, whether in Ulan Bator, Mongolia or in Butte, Montana.

Led by God

*Who will bring me to the fortified city?
Who will lead me to Edom?
Is it not you, God, you who have now rejected us
and no longer go with our armies?
Give us aid against the enemy,
for human help is worthless.
With God we will gain the victory,
and he will trample down our enemies.*

Psalm 60:9-12

David's four-part conclusion is in the true character of a godly leader. The king asks a critical question, makes a painful observation, issues a desperate plea, and offers a confident hope. The question is asked by David, not the Lord: "Who will bring me to the fortified city?" The rhetorical question highlights the need of the hour and states the obvious – no human leader can accomplish this victory. Edom is on the verge of attacking Israel and all of Israel is praying that Joab and Abishai will arrive from the northern campaign in time to defend Israel. But to David's point, Israel's destiny does not lie in the hands of the army, but in God.

There is no hint of triumphalism in David's question, "Who will lead me to Edom?" He may have been a conquering king fresh from a series of military victories, but he does not presume upon God's mercy. The Edomite threat has humbled David to his core and he wants all to know that he bows low before the sovereign Lord of Israel. David knows that he and his people are completely dependent upon the Lord to lead them. He stands in need of the Lord's rule and reign and he wants all to know that "human help is worthless" (Ps 60:11).

For the Christian, "the fortified city" points forward to "the great city" described in the Book of Revelation. It represents the power of evil arrayed against the people of God. No human leader is sufficient for the challenge; no army can achieve the victory. This line from Psalm 60 takes on special significance in the light of the incarnation of God. The author of Hebrews speaks of Jesus who "suffered outside the city gate" in order "to make the people holy through his own blood" (Heb 13:12). The citizens of the New Jerusalem have been washed in the blood of the Lamb who suffered outside the city gate. God goes outside the city to die on the cross in order to lead us into the City of God.

The fortified city of Edom continues to symbolize the world's opposition to Christ and his kingdom. Down through the centuries the Edomites opposed the people of God and sought their destruction. The fifth century BC prophet Obadiah prophesied against Edom. In spite of Edom's physical elevation and nearly impenetrable natural fortress, the descendants of Esau were destined for shame and judgment, because she had shown "violence against your brother Jacob" (Obadiah 1:10). Obadiah insisted that Edom was part of a bigger picture. He declared, "The day

of the Lord is near for all nations. As you have done, it will be done to you; your deeds will return upon your head” (Obadiah 1:15). The house of Jacob will possess its inheritance and the house of Joseph will set on fire the house of Esau and it will be consumed (Obadiah 1:17-18). Obadiah prophesied that Edom as Edom would be no more: “There will be no survivors from the house of Esau” (Obadiah 1:18). But this is not the last word on the descendants of Esau. Under the rule of God, Edom has a future. In the future, the mountains of Esau will be populated by the people of God. “Deliverers will go up on Mount Zion to govern the mountains of Esau. And the kingdom’s will be the Lord’s” (Obadiah 1:21). Obadiah envisions the future Kingdom of God embracing the land of the Philistines, Samaritans, Phoenicians, and Edomites.

Mount Zion and the mountains of Esau will be ruled by God’s justice. David’s strategy of conquest will become the Son of David’s strategy of redemption. “The last line of the prophecy takes a giant step out of the centuries of hate and rivalry and invective,” writes Eugene Peterson. “Israel, so often a victim of Edomite aggression through the centuries, is suddenly revealed to be saved from the injustices of the past and taking up a position of rule over their ancient enemies the Edomites. But instead of doing to others what had been done to them and continuing the cycle of violence that they had been caught in, they were presented as taking over the reins of government and administering God’s justice justly. They find themselves in a new context—God’s kingdom—and realize that they have a new vocation—to represent God’s rule.”⁶

Psalm 60 ends on a powerful note: apart from God we are helpless and lost, but with God “we will gain the victory” and God, not us, “will trample down our enemies” (Ps 60:12).

⁶ Peterson, *The Message*, 494.