

The final collection of David psalms recalls a dynamic state of struggle and hope (Ps 138-144) that is reminiscent of the Psalter's opening survival prayers (Psalms 3-7). It is fair to say that David majored in spiritual realism. He never shied away from wrestling with evil nor celebrating God's goodness in the midst of it. He refused to edit the psalms of disturbing and disheartening elements that might discourage the naive or the superficial. His storm-tested faith took on the full range of evil. This is why if we embrace the psalms and make them our guide to prayer we will never be totally blind-sided by evil. We may be surprised, but we will not be unprepared. The Psalms guide believers in an in-depth theology of evil that is comprehensive and pastoral. One of the special features of the psalms that is often missing in our worship today is how the psalms deal with reality of evil – the persistent, insidious form of “insider evil” that robs the Christian community of its joy.

Psalm 140 ends on a hopeful note, but not before describing the violent attack of evildoers. David is not preoccupied with Israel's archenemies the Philistines; he's under siege by fellow Israelites. He is dodging “friendly fire.” The very people who should be honoring the Lord's Anointed and supporting his leadership are devising “evil plans in their hearts” and plotting his downfall. They are “slanderers in the land,” who “stir up war every day.” Either Psalm 140 is an exercise in royal paranoia or it is an archetypal description of the ongoing reality that confronts and prepares God's people for spiritual warfare. We may be lesser targets than David, but his example of turning to the Lord for deliverance inspires our dependence on the Lord. His analysis of evil alerts us to the threat of deception and causes us to be aware of the vulnerability of faithfulness. His willingness to let evil run its course, “whereby evil wrecks its own nemesis,” strengthens our patience and resolve.¹ And finally, David's unshakeable confidence in the Lord's justice and in the vindication of the upright inspires our perseverance and hope.

We do not live the Christian life for very long before we discover the hidden violence of those who feel it is their moral duty to oppose us. Binary logic likes a clean division between the wicked and the righteous, but anyone who has worked among the people of God discovers the hidden violence that goes on right under our noses. Honesty requires us to admit that we have not been guiltless in this regard. The apostle Paul warned believers in Galatia to stop biting and devouring one another (Gal 5:15). James said that “no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness” (James 3:8-9).

Rescue Me

*Rescue me, Lord, from evildoers;
protect me from the violent,
who devise evil plans in their hearts
and stir up war every day.
They make their tongue as sharp as a serpent's;
the poison of vipers is on their lips.*

¹ Allen, Psalms, 268.

*Keep me safe, Lord, from the hands of the wicked;
protect me from the violent,
who devise ways to trip my feet.
The arrogant have hidden a snare for me;
they have spread out the cords of their net
and have set traps for me along my path.*
Psalm 140:1-5

David the king instructs us in our desperate, daily need for deliverance. If the king with all of his wealth and power should utter imperatives, not of command but of help, such as “rescue me” and “keep me safe,” we should learn to follow his example. If our problem is to turn everywhere but to the Lord for help, Psalm 140 recalibrates our spirituality and reorients our prayers. The temptation to self-sufficiency is best resolved early in life and early in each episode that threatens us. If we cannot pray, “rescue me,” because we are either too proud or too distracted, we are unwittingly conspiring in our own downfall.

The distinctive form of violence the psalmist finds threatening takes into account the subtle forces of envy and jealousy that constantly threaten human relationships. The violence the psalmist has in mind is not the mugging by a street thug, but a carefully calculated deception devised by a “trusted” colleague and designed to bring about the victim’s diminishment. The planning is hidden in the heart and the weapon of choice is the tongue which strikes with the deadly force of a cobra’s poisonous bite. The enemy is not a wicked foreign entity but an arrogant “brother in Christ” who knows you well enough to trip you up and manipulate what people think of you.

Kathryn Stockett describes this kind of violence in her novel *The Help*. Her character Aibileen, a black nanny, explains that if you cross a white woman she won’t come after with a stick or pull a pistol on you. “No, white womens like to keep they hands clean. They got a shiny little set of tools they use, sharp as witches’ fingernails, tidy and laid out neat, like the picks on a dentist tray. They gone take they time with em.”²

When Jesus prayed Psalm 140, he must have had the religious leaders in mind. How could he not? David’s description of his enemies parallels the daily experience of Jesus, who contended with the teachers of the law who condemned him as a blasphemer, criticized his socializing with the needy, plotted his death, credited him with demonic powers, and tried to trip him up and use his words against him (Mk 2:7,16; 3:6, 22; 11:28). Jesus was under relentless attack by the most respected people in the community. Their antagonism was driven by self-righteous anger, religious pride, and professional envy. They resented Jesus’ growing influence and impact of his ministry. The enemies of Jesus are the ultimate objective correlative to David’s description of his antagonists. Whoever David had in mind, whether Saul or Absalom, the psalm makes the most sense in the light of Jesus Christ.

² Kathryn Stockett, *The Help*, New York: Penguin, 2009, 188.

My Strong Deliverer

*I say to the Lord, 'You are my God.'
Hear, Lord, my cry for mercy.
Sovereign Lord, my strong deliverer,
you shield my head in the day of battle.
Do not grant the wicked their desires, Lord;
do not let their plans succeed.
Those who surround me proudly rear their heads;
may the mischief of their lips engulf them.
May burning coals fall on them;
may they be thrown into the fire, into miry pits, never to rise.
May slanderers not be established in the land;
may disaster hunt down the violent.*

Psalm 140:6-11

The intensity of David's appeal evidences his passion for God and his need for deliverance. In the midst of opposition it is often hard to keep our focus on the Lord. David leads by example and if we are following his lead, we too will say to the Lord, out loud and emphatically, "You are my God!" We must keep turning to the Lord through daily prayer, shared worship, and sought after fellowship with fellow believers. The only way to run the race with perseverance is by "fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith" (Heb 12:1-2). We would be foolish to deny that we need a deliverer and we would be foolish not to earnestly and intensely turn to the Sovereign Lord for his deliverance. David's reference to armor, "you shield my head in the day of battle," is not an allusion to actual combat, but a metaphor for the Lord's strategic protection. The Lord has him covered. He has his back. The Lord protects his head. His feet will not slip. The wicked can't get to him, because of the Lord, and not his strength or ingenuity.

If we follow David's example we will be bold to pray against the desires and plans of the wicked. David was not shy about identifying his enemies and earnestly asking the Lord to thwart their plots and plans. He describes them as surrounding him, "proudly raising their heads." As the religious opposition grew against Jesus, so did his overt condemnation of their hypocrisy. In the tradition of the prophet Isaiah, Jesus explicitly critiqued the teachers of the law and the Pharisees and pronounced seven woes against them (Matthew 23). But coupled with the psalmist's courage to identify and pray against the enemy is the resolve to let evil run its course. The psalmist depends upon the moral law built into the universe by Yahweh. He knows that soon or later, the wicked will receive their just reward. David prays down judgment:

*"May the mischief of their lips engulf them.
May burning coals fall on them;
may they be thrown into the fire, into miry pits, never to rise.
May slanderers not be established in the land;
may disaster hunt down the violent."*

There is hardly anyone who is active in ministry who does not regularly encounter some well-intentioned believer who is intent on bringing down the spiritual leadership. George was one such nemesis of mine. His Christendom model of the church longed for the glory days when the church was the religious home to city officials, prestigious weddings, and state-sponsored funerals; when the pastor was a member of Rotary and the country club and campaign chairman for the United Way. George wanted me “out there” hob knobbing with the urban elite, greeting the Navy ships when they came to port, creating events that would draw crowds and the attention of the media.

Our church was steadily growing. The average age of our members was becoming younger. Lost people were coming to Christ. But George was not satisfied with slow growth. He wanted exponential growth. So he mounted a campaign to undermine my leadership. He called and visited pastors throughout the state culling together facts and figures, quotes and anecdotes, to be used against me. Everything good that was happening elsewhere was an indictment against me because it wasn't happening in our church. George turned several previously supportive elders against me. Eventually these manipulated elders left the church, but not before souring others on my preaching and spiritual leadership. Congregational meetings became George's platform for strengthening his campaign and using surrogates to represent his position. George came to church every Sunday but stopped coming into worship, or if he did, he left before the sermon.

Through it all I had an unusual sense of peace. The prayerful support of many elders and members of the congregation was a great help. Even George's adult daughter explained through tears how sorry she was for what her father was doing to the church and to me. She will never know how much that meant to me. Some of the elders spent literally hours trying to dissuade George from his negative campaign. When pastors, some of them hundreds of miles away, called to inform me of an encounter with George and to share George's libelous accusations against me, I simply didn't feel the need to react. Maybe the criticism was so blatant and the encouragement from others so helpful that it was easy to leave the whole matter in the Lord's hands.

Then one day, I received a call from Joanie, George's wife. Would I come quickly to the hospital ICU, George had collapsed at his computer of a massive stroke. I rushed there, held his hand, and prayed for him, and prayed for the family. George never regained consciousness and the church held his memorial service. Joanie, who was always faithful in worship, became a deacon the next year and was a real blessing to the church and to me.

Eschatological Confidence

*I know that the Lord secures justice for the poor
and upholds the cause of the needy.*

*Surely the righteous will praise your name,
and the upright will live in your presence.*

Psalm 140:12-13

David declares his confidence in the Sovereign Lord at the center and at the end of this psalm. For the present, David is confident that the Lord hears his cry for mercy and that he is his “strong deliverer” (Ps 140:6-7). It is easy to go from the meaning of “you shield my head in the day of battle” to putting on “the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Eph 6:17). And for the future, David rests in the truth that the Lord’s administration will secure justice for the poor and uphold the cause of the needy. He looks forward to that day when the Lord dwells among his people. “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Rev 21:4).