

The struggle to remain faithful is intense. Evildoers appear intent on seducing and entrapping the righteous. They make the beautiful side of evil look inviting – even compelling. For his part David is feeling especially vulnerable. He fears he is prone to say or do something that will jeopardize his relationship with Yahweh. Compromise would be so easy. It would only take a little word from him to be welcomed into the fellowship of evildoers. He is enticed by their delicacies, intrigued by their delights. However, the emphasis in Psalm 141 is more on David's earnest plea for help than a description of the seduction of the soul.

David's early psalms (Psalms 3-7) and his concluding psalms (138-144) alert the earnest believer to the struggle for faithfulness. This struggle stretches from the beginning of the Christian life to the end. There is no let up. We may be pummeled by the ugly side of evil or enthralled by the beautiful side of evil, but either way the threat remains from start to finish. The Psalter's symmetry of spiritual survival testifies to the spiritual realism of the psalms.

### *The Spiritual Defenses*

*I call to you, Lord, come quickly to me;  
hear me when I call to you.  
May my prayer be set before you like incense;  
may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice.  
Set a guard over my mouth, Lord;  
keep watch over the door of my lips.  
Do not let my heart be drawn to what is evil  
so that I take part in wicked deeds  
along with those who are evildoers;  
do not let me eat their delicacies.  
Let a righteous man strike me – that is kindness;  
let him rebuke me – that is oil on my head.  
My head will not refuse it,  
for my prayer will still be against the deeds of evildoers.*

Psalm 141:1-5

The Christian life calls for serious effort. But when our evangelism implies that all it takes to become a follower of Christ is a quick decision for Jesus, we end up not only undermining the biblical message but deceiving naive believers. To minimize the challenges is to put believers at serious risk of succumbing to the compelling attractiveness of evil. The presence of the Holy Spirit does not produce an automatic predisposition and enthusiasm for obedience and faithfulness. Moral transformation and spiritual resilience does not happen automatically. Costly obedience in the face of evil does not become “second nature” without humble dependence upon the Lord and tremendous spiritual, intellectual, and emotional effort. The psalmist dispels any illusion to any form of spirituality and maturity that is not hard-fought and costly.

David's example of what it takes to be "strong in the Lord" and to "stand against the devil's schemes" deserves our careful attention (Eph 6:10-11). From college freshman to corporate officers and from school teachers to plumbers, all Christ's followers ought to practice the spiritual disciplines the way David did.

David leads by example. He makes an impassioned, humble plea for the Lord's help. This is how we begin to defend ourselves against the allure of evil's seduction. We pray. There is nothing complicated about calling on the Lord and asking for his immediate aid, "come quickly to me" (Ps 141:1). David describes the earnestness of his prayers by comparing them to the scent of sweet incense filling the room and by picturing his physical body language. He lifts up his hands in a demonstration of praise and adoration (1 Tim 2:8). This earnest, demonstrative prayer is not for show but for spiritual effect, proving to himself and to others that he needed the Lord's help to remain faithful.

What David prayed for is as important as how he prayed. He asked the Lord to set a guard over his mouth. He was especially concerned that his speech might betray him. Often times it is our words that give us away and lead us down an avenue of compromise and conceit that causes considerable damage. For example the apostle Peter's stunning denials offered to an un-intimidating servant girl ought to be a warning to us all. In the pressure of the moment it is easy for us say the unthinkable and then follow through on our verbal response. How important it is for those of us who are parents to ask the Lord to "keep watch over the door of [our] lips." Even our well-intentioned good advice to our children can come off sounding arrogant and self-serving. Like the father, who is never wrong and always the last word on every matter. Please don't misunderstand me. Parents and grandparents need to offer compelling spiritual direction but before we do, let's pray, "Post a guard at my mouth, God" (Ps 141:3, The Message).

The second thing David prayed for was his heart. If a man after God's own heart felt his acute vulnerability, we can hardly deny the subtlety of our hearts' deception. We may not be tempted by the ugly dark side of evil, with this cruelty and vulgarity, but the seductive, beautiful side of evil, with its emphasis on worldly success, material luxuries, and personal ego is tempting. We are tempted to spiritualize these enticements and ask the Lord to bless us with these very tempting delicacies. David explicitly prays, "Lord, do not let me eat their delicacies."

David's third prayer request was for righteous friends who hold him accountable and stand in his way to prevent him from doing what was wrong. The prophet Nathan was one such person in David's life. The Lord used Nathan to confront David over his horrendous sin against Bathsheba and her husband Uriah (2 Sam 12). The Lord also used Nathan to convey his word to David that prevented him from building the temple (2 Sam 7). We need the righteous, some of whom may be close friends, some not, who will prevent us from doing evil. David likens their blows to acts of kindness and their rebukes to a healing balm. David really meant it: "My head will not refuse it, for my prayer will be against the deeds of evildoers" (Ps 141:5).

Ironically, the way David expressed his heart for righteousness may have given the Pharisees with their twisted logic a psalm to use in their case against Jesus. They condemned Jesus for

blasphemy, because he did not set a guard over his mouth. They found proof that he was drawn to evil by his association with sinners and tax collectors. And when Jesus came before the Sanhedrin, he was struck by religious men who may have claimed their right to do so on the basis of Psalm 141.

C. S. Lewis saw the danger of twisting Psalm 141 to defend “Pharisaism” and self-righteous snobs. He saw the problem of rendering Psalm 141 legalistically. Lewis thought it was wise for Christians to avoid meeting with people who are “bullies, lascivious, cruel, dishonest, spiteful and so forth.” Not because we are “too good for” them but because “we are not good enough.” Lewis wrote, “We are not good enough to cope with all the temptations, nor clever enough to cope with all the problems, which an evening spent in such society produces. The temptation is to condone, to connive at; by our words, looks and laughter, to ‘consent.’ The temptation was never greater than now when we are all (and very rightly) so afraid of priggery or ‘smugness’.”<sup>1</sup>

But the righteousness David prays for in Psalm 141 is not legalistic. It is not smugness. It is not hypocritical. On the contrary it is on the order of the heart righteousness described by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: “For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20). Psalm 141 corresponds with the moral imperative of the Christian life described by the apostle Peter in his letter. Peter wrote, “But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander” (1 Pet 3:15-16).

#### *Vindication & Protection*

*Their rulers will be thrown down from the cliffs,  
and the wicked will learn that my words were well spoken.  
They will say, “As one plows and breaks up the earth,  
so our bones have been scattered at the mouth of the grave.”  
But my eyes are fixed on you, Sovereign Lord;  
in you I take refuge – do not give me over to death.  
Keep me safe from the traps set by evildoers,  
from the snares they had laid for me.  
Let the wicked fall into their own nets,  
while I pass by in safety.*

Psalm 141:6-10

The Sovereign Lord provides refuge and protection to those who call on him and seek his ways. David knows how important it is to keep his eyes fixed on the Lord. The author of Hebrews captured not only David’s phrasing but the moral and ethical challenge of the psalm when he wrote, “Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us

---

<sup>1</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1958, 71-72.

run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith” (Heb 12:1-2). The psalmist believes that evil will run its course and wicked rulers will be metaphorically thrown over the cliff. Those who despise the word of the Lord and reject his commands will eventually come to see that they were wrong and the Lord was right. The obscure reference to bones being scattered at the mouth of the grave may describe the grim fate of those who reject the word of the Lord and fall victim to their own scheming. The danger of trap setting evil doers persists but ultimate vindication is the hope and expectation for those whose trust is in the Lord.

Psalm 141 is a faithful and timely prayer guide for the followers of Christ. We share David’s passion for holy living and keeping a conscience. John Calvin warned, “Peace with God is contrasted with every form of intoxicated security in the flesh.”<sup>2</sup> Jesus was under no illusion that the world would find his way acceptable. He taught his followers to expect trials and tribulation in the world, but he also taught them that the way of Christ will prevail. “I have told you these things,” Jesus said, “so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33).

---

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, 151.