

David's heartfelt cry for mercy corresponds especially well to New Testament themes of justification by faith, beatitude-based belief, and "thorn-in-the-flesh" perseverance. If a psalm was chosen to accompany the apostle's trust in the sufficiency of God's grace in the midst of "weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and difficulties" it would be Psalm 143 (2 Cor 12:10). Led by the Holy Spirit we pray this way today. At the end of this sequence of perilous journey psalms David exemplifies dependence on the faithfulness and righteousness of Christ and a resilient commitment to faithfulness to the end. Even the way David prays for his enemies is consistent with Jesus' instruction in how we should pray for our enemies. The whole psalm from beginning to end is Spirit-inspired spiritual direction for Christ's followers today.

*Mercy, Misery, and Meditation*

*Lord, hear my prayer,  
listen to my cry for mercy;  
in your faithfulness and righteousness  
come to my relief.  
Do not bring your servant into judgment,  
for no one living is righteous before you.  
The enemy pursues me,  
he crushes me to the ground;  
he makes me dwell in the darkness  
like those long dead.  
So my spirit grows faint within me;  
my heart within me is dismayed.  
I remember the days of long ago;  
I meditate on all your works  
and I consider what your hands have done.  
I spread out my hands to you;  
I thirst for you like a parched land.*

Psalm 143:1-6

David's insistence on being heard is a theme running through the psalm. He is bold to ask for God's gracious intervention. His vocal cry and outstretched hands on bended knees "signifies the intensity of the prayer."<sup>1</sup> His prayer foreshadows the confidence believers have "to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus" (Heb 10:19). He prays in faith believing that by the mercy of God he will be heard, not because of any merit on his part, but because of the faithfulness and righteousness of God. In this respect David models for the New Testament believer the canonical truth that the just will live by faith (Habakkuk 2:4; Rom 1:17). Whatever confidence David has in his own faithfulness is based solely on God's faithfulness. Only in God and by God's righteousness can he be found faithful. David's admission is a confession, "Do not bring your servant into judgment, for no one living is righteous before you" (Ps 143:2; see Rom 3:10-11).

<sup>1</sup>Ross, Psalms, 883.

He is not asking God to give him a pass and look the other way (Prov 17:15); he's crying out for the mercy of God. He is dependent on God's covenant love and the redemptive trajectory that begins with God's promise to defeat Satan through Adam's descendant, "he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel" (Gen 3:15) and Abel's sacrifice (Gen 4; Heb 11:4). David prays this way because of the Passover Lamb and the sacrificial system even as we pray this way because of "the blood of Jesus" (Heb 10:19).

David describes his need for God in such a way as to invite our solidarity. We may not face the same issues he did, but we face serious opposition nonetheless. Like David, "we all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23) and our plea for God's relief is based entirely on God's mercy, not our merit. Like David, we can identify with being pursued by an enemy and confronting external circumstances that make life difficult. Whether we feel crushed physically or emotionally we have encountered opposition that threatens our well-being. It would be a mistake for us to distance ourselves from David's graphic description of the enemy as if the problem of opposition only pertains to those who suffer state-sponsored persecution. Suffering is a major concern for most Christians. The "enemy" may be a colleague or a parent or a professor who belittles your faith and seeks ways to humiliate you because of your Christian witness. Or the "enemy" that pursues the believer may be cancer or a chronic disease or a disability that renders her weak and discouraged.

The apostle Peter refers to believers experiencing "grief in all kinds of trials" (1 Pet 1:6) including false accusations (1 Pet 2:12) and malicious slander for their good behavior (1 Pet 3:16). The picture Peter develops of believers living as resident aliens in their home culture is consistent with the psalmist's description of enemy opposition. Peter expresses it this way: "For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do – living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. They are surprised that you do not join them in their reckless, wild living, and they heap abuse on you" (1 Pet 4:3-4). It is inevitable that living for Christ will draw fire because our enemy is free to attack us regardless of the political system or cultural setting. Peter warned, "Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers, throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings" (1 Pet 5:8-9).

The third feature of David's misery involves his internal, emotional state. "So my spirit grows faint within me; my heart within me is dismayed" (Ps 143:4; see 142:3). David encourages us to identify this mental and emotional state *in prayer*. By his example we are encouraged to go beyond the empathy of shared need and honestly express our spiritual, relational, and emotional needs to the Lord in prayer. We are not alone in these needs, but it is one thing to identify them and quite another to say to the Lord, "listen to my cry for mercy." When Jesus's heart was dismayed, he immediately turned to the Father in prayer: "Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour?' No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. 'Father, glorify your name!'" (John 12:27-28). This was true in Gethsemane as well, when his sorrowful and troubled soul drove him to prayer (Matthew 26:35-39). We want to do more than identify our misery, we want to pray. We want to remember what the Lord has done over time.

We want to meditate on his works and consider how the Lord has helped us in the past. Instead of using our weaknesses and afflictions as an excuse to “throw up the conflict in despair,” we want to “rise to him with our hearts amidst all our anxieties.”<sup>2</sup> Psalm 143 guides us in the spiritual discipline of bringing every anxious thought and every situation to the Lord in prayer (Phil 4:6). This is how we are to pray, “for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thess 5:16-18).

### *The Work of the Spirit*

*Answer me quickly, Lord;  
my spirit fails.  
Do not hide your face from me  
or I will be like those who go down to the pit.  
Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love,  
for I have put my trust in you.  
Show me the way I should go,  
for to you I entrust my life.  
Rescue me from my enemies, Lord,  
for I hide myself in you.  
Teach me to do your will,  
for you are my God;  
may your good Spirit  
lead me on level ground.  
For your name’s sake, Lord, preserve my life;  
in your righteousness, bring me out of trouble.  
In your unfailing love, silence my enemies; destroy all my foes,  
for I am your servant.*

Psalm 143:7-12

David delivers ten petitions, ten rapid-fire staccato imperatives, that demand immediate attention. The intensity of his concerns and the ultimacy of his requests imply that his very life depends on the Lord’s answer. His spirit is failing and his life hangs over the pit. Everything is at stake.

His urgent plea for *communion* with the Lord is reflected in the first three petitions. He has no desire for impersonal knowledge. His passionate concern is to know and to be known. He longs to say with the apostle, “Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known (1 Cor 13:12). Although he frames it negatively, “Do not hide your face from me,” every fiber of his being wants a real face to face encounter. His petition echoes Psalm 27, “My heart says, ‘Seek his face!’ Your face, Lord, I will seek” (Ps 27:8). He wants to rise on the wings of the dawn and know the Lord’s unfailing love (Ps 139:9). His desire will be expressed by the prophet who said, “Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness” (Lam 3:22-23).

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<sup>2</sup> Calvin, Psalms, 252.

His urgent plea for *commitment* to the Lord combines his need for direction and his need for deliverance. The two petitions are inseparable and juxtaposed for impact. He needs it all: the way, the truth, and the life. He is desperate for the Lord to save him and to show him the way he should go. His imperatives “show me,” “rescue me,” and “teach me,” are clear and unambiguous. His reasoning has the character of a vowed commitment, “for to you I entrust my life,” “for I hide myself in you,” and “for you are my God.” Each is all encompassing and grandly inclusive of all he is and will be.

The most remarkable petition of all underscores the *commissioning* work of the Holy Spirit, “may your good Spirit lead me on the level ground” (Ps 143:10; Nehemiah 9:20). This seemingly passing reference foreshadows the high impact gift of the Spirit. On the night that Jesus was betrayed, he described the outpouring of the most self-effacing member of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. He said, “When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father – the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father – he will testify about me” (John 15:26). The focus of the Spirit’s advocacy is Jesus Christ. Against the world’s unbelief and hate the Spirit takes the lead in growing Christ’s church, establishing the biblical canon, and proclaiming Christ to every people, tribe, language, and nation. Jesus’ literal, physical departure through death, resurrection, and ascension signals a dramatic new turning point in salvation history (John 16:7-11). The comforting reason given by Jesus for the coming of the Paraclete is the Spirit’s impact on the mission of God.<sup>3</sup>

The promise of the Spirit is not to make us feel better about ourselves or to endow us with deeper spiritual intensity. The Spirit will reveal the shocking truth “that the root wrong in the world is the refusal to believe Jesus.”<sup>4</sup> The Holy Spirit will also prove that Jesus is the best thing going for the world. Of all the things that we might aspire for and hope for, becoming like Jesus is the most right goal we can imagine. He is humanity’s highest hope and greatest good. He alone is our righteousness. The world’s conceptions of righteousness from The Golden Rule to The Will to Power fail to recognize that Christ alone is true righteousness and by his grace he offers us his righteousness. The Holy Spirit will also prove that the world is under judgment and that the crucified and risen Christ has won the victory over the prince of this world. David’s seventh petition foreshadowed far more than he imagined. The apostle expressed it this way, “Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit” (Gal 5:25).

Finally, David’s urgent plea for *salvation* is expressed in a variety of ways: “preserve my life,” “bring me out of trouble,” “silence my enemies,” and “destroy all my foes.” And the ground for this comprehensive salvation rests in one person only, the Lord, who is described by his name, his righteousness, and his unfailing love. David humbly ventures one final mercy-filled reason for invoking the Lord’s saving action on his behalf: “for I am your servant.”

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<sup>3</sup> Webster, *The God Who Comforts*, 128.

<sup>4</sup> Bruner, *John*, 925.