

The psalms consistently discourage us from a rosy optimism and trivial pursuits. Confidence and lament are placed side by side in Psalms 27 and 28. Ecstatic praise and excruciating pain co-exist in life and most certainly belong together in worship. Psalm 27 begins confidently, “the Lord is my light and my salvation,” and then moves deliberately to lament, “Do not reject me or forsake me, God my Savior.” Psalm 28 begins with lament, “Here my cry for mercy,” and then moves decisively to confidence, “Praise be to the Lord, for he has heard my cry for mercy.”

Psalm 28 is a cry for mercy framed by the strength of God that pivots on a call for justice. The chiasmic structure focuses on the psalmist’s fear of guilt-by-association and the perversity of polite evil. A healthy soul requires honesty and this psalm has it. The structure may be illustrated as follows:

A) To you, Lord, I call; you are my Rock, do not turn a deaf ear to me.

For if you remain silent, I will be like those who go down to the pit.

B) Hear my cry for mercy as I call to you for help,
as I lift up my hands toward your Most Holy Place.

C) *Do not drag me away with the wicked, with those who do evil,
who speak cordially with their neighbors but harbor malice in their hearts.
Repay them for their deeds and for their evil work;
repay them for what their hands have done and bring back on them what they deserve.*

C’) *Because they have no regard for the deeds of the Lord
and what his hands have done
he will tear them down and never build them up again.*

B’) Praise be to the Lord, for he has heard my cry for mercy.

A’) The Lord is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and he helps me.

my heart leaps for joy, and with my song I will praise him.

The Lord is the strength of his people, a fortress of salvation for in anointed one.

Save your people and bless your inheritance; be their shepherd and carry them forever.

In worship, David makes a personal plea for mercy, not judgment, because he is certain that God will judge the wicked and he does not want to be included in that judgment. His humble plea is honest and straight-forward. It is not vindictive. His prayer is motivated out of a grave concern that he might be lumped in with all those who have no regard for the will and work of God. He is fearful that his life is indistinguishable from the conventional “Christianity” of his day. David is focused on nice people, who use their niceness as a cover for their malice and evil work.

Plea for Help

*To you, Lord, I call;
you are my Rock, do not turn a deaf ear to me.
For if you remain silent,
I will be like those who go down to the pit.
Hear my cry for mercy as I call to you for help,*

as I lift up my hands toward your Most Holy Place.
Psalm 28:1-2

Worship seeks to hear the voice of God, because, as Martin Luther said, God “does everything through His Word.”¹ The psalmist is not a troubled agnostic but a fervent worshiper who knows how much he needs to hear from God. David prays against a deaf ear and a silent voice, not because God threatens a cold shoulder, but because he longs for communion with God and communication from God. He prays out of a state of grace that acknowledges his utter dependence upon the Lord in keeping with Jesus’ first beatitude, “Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven (Matt 5:3). He is not suggesting that God is silent; he’s declaring that he might as well be dead if God is silent. “If all I get from you is deafening silence, I’d be better off in the Black Hole” (Ps 28:1 MSG).

When we feel that God is silent, more often than not it is not God who has ceased to speak as much as we have ceased to listen. Our delight is not in the word of God and we are not meditating on it day or night (Ps 1:2). We have forgotten how to “cry for help” (Ps 5:2) and “the praise of children and infants” (Ps 8:2) no longer moves us. The indifference of those around us cripples our praying imagination (Ps 10:13) and the religious ritual leaves us empty.

We can be assured that the word of the Lord is not going away. It is “flawless, like silver purified in a crucible, like gold refined seven times” (Ps 12:6), but if we are too distracted and opinionated to truly hear it our worship falls flat. The word washes over us as familiar platitudes rather than the penetrating proclamation of God that it is. The word is a gift given to us to admonish and teach us with all wisdom that we might become mature in Christ Jesus (Col 1:28).

Ironically, Job thought God was terribly silent, but in his experience of divine silence we get the impression that God was intensely interested in Job. God was proud of Job and he his refrain to Satan was, “Have you considered my servant Job.” God was only silent in order for Job’s witness to be heard. At the point of Job’s greatest bondage is when he was most free to bear witness to God’s righteousness. Left to ourselves we make up words for God and our imaginations run wild, but God has never needed ingenious speech writers or spokespersons. The prophet invariably quelled religious god-talk with a simple rebuke, “Listen to what the Lord says,” and then set the record straight, “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8).

The psalmist backs up his direct appeal with a description of his body language. He is like one “standing as before a superior, raising one’s hands in appeal like a child in a classroom seeking to get the teacher’s attention, or opening one’s hands in readiness to receive, and opening one’s eyes to look to God.”² Luther saw the image of hands lifted in worship as testimony to the work of our hands lifted up to God.³ The phrase recalls the description of the true worshiper in Psalm 24: “The one who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not trust in an idol or swear by a false god” (24:4). The psalmist is about to refer to the hands of the wicked. He pleads for God to judge the work of their hands, because they have no regard for the work of the Lord’s hands (Ps 28:4-5).

¹ Luther, Psalms, 128.

² Goldingay, Psalms, 405.

³ Luther, Psalms, 128.

Call for Justice

*Do not drag me away with the wicked,
with those who do evil,
who speak cordially with their neighbors
but harbor malice in their hearts.
Repay them for their deeds
and for their evil work;
repay them for what their hands have done
and bring back on them what they deserve.
Because they have no regard for the deeds of the Lord
and what his hands have done,
he will tear them down
and never build them up again.*

Psalm 28:3-5

The focus of the psalm is a plea for justice and judgment, but the psalmist is especially concerned that he might be lumped in with the wicked. Previous psalms have expressed this fear and give every indication that the psalmist's life was closely intertwined with his enemies. David prayed, "Do not turn me over to the desire of my foes, for false witnesses rise against me, spouting malicious accusations" (Ps 27:12). Clearly, David did not have much of a buffer between himself and the wicked against whom he seeks judgment. "Do not take away my soul along with sinners, my life with those who are bloodthirsty, in whose hands are wicked schemes, whose right hands are full for bribes" (Ps 26:9-10). Guilt by association was his real fear. Apparently he was in such close contact with these evildoers that he feared he might be judged right along with them. He prays that Yahweh will distinguish him from these evildoers and repay them according to their evil deeds. He wants them to get what they deserve.

The argument that this is not a truly Christian prayer does not take into account the nature of the evildoer and the dire consequences for disregarding "the deeds of the Lord and what his hands have done" (Ps 28:5).⁴ Jesus called us to pray for our enemies. He challenged the Church to share the good news with all people. To do this requires distinguishing ourselves from evildoers, identifying our enemies, and praying for God's salvation and judgment. David's prayer is not vindictive nor mean-spirited. It is "the protest of a healthy conscience at the wrongs of the present order, and the conviction that a day of judgment is a moral necessity."⁵ Worship requires real-world discernment and engagement. Honest prayer demands it. "Psalm-prayer," writes Eugene Peterson, "enters into the way-things-are, but finds that the way-things-are is pretty bad. Evil is encountered. Wickedness confronted. . . .The Psalms are full of unsettling enemy talk. God is the primary subject in the Psalms, but enemies are established in solid second place."⁶

Psalm 28 nuances the profile of the enemy in a significant way. It is misleading to defend this prayer on grounds that we want "the Hitlers and Stalins, the Amins and Pol Pots, of history" to face justice.⁷ We certainly want those who commit mass murder and horrible atrocities to face God's judgment, but the enemy the psalmist has in mind is the person who is outwardly cordial but inwardly malicious. David is surrounded by nice people who have a talent for doing others in. Judging from appearances the

⁴ Okorocho, African Bible Commentary: Psalms, 636.

⁵ Kidner, Psalms, 123.

⁶ Peterson, Answering God, 95.

⁷ Wilcock, Psalms, 99.

psalmist is no different from the “good people” who think only of themselves and couldn’t care less about “the deeds of the Lord.” This makes David nervous. He isn’t faking it to make it and he doesn’t want to be judged as if he is. Outwardly, he sees little difference between himself and the person who is a bona fide evil doer. Remember this is coming from a man who was hunted like an animal by King Saul and betrayed by his son and key advisors. David knew first hand the poison of prestigious “friends” who used their niceness as a cover for evil and self-advancement. The enemy in view is not the terrorist or rapist, but the self-indulgent person in the pew.

David identifies the type of evil-doer who was destined to become a major focus of the prophets. The outwardly religious, inwardly evil, and deeply misguided Israelites come under withering review by Isaiah and Jeremiah (see Isaiah 58; Jeremiah 7). In Jesus’ day, the scribes and Pharisees qualify for this category of evil. Jesus entered into the spirit of Psalm 28 when he spoke against the religious leaders: “So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. . . Everything they do is done for people to see.” He called them “hypocrites” and “blind guides. To become like them was to become “a child of hell.” Clearly, talk of judgment is not inimical to the gospel, because Jesus warned the Pharisees, “You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?” (Matt 23:3-5,13-16,33).

If we don’t identify this kind of evil and find ourselves like David praying for mercy, we will be living in a fantasy world. We can imagine faithful Obadiah serving in King Ahab’s court praying this kind of prayer, or Joseph second in command to Pharaoh in pagan Egypt praying, “Do not drag me away with the wicked, with those who do evil. . .” They didn’t have David’s psalm, but Daniel in Nebuchadnezzar’s Babylon did and we can imagine him praying Psalm 28. If we are serious about setting apart Christ as Lord in our hearts we will enter into this call for mercy and justice.

The Danish Christian thinker Søren Kierkegaard was very critical of the Christianity of his day. He was convinced that Christians were assimilated into the culture so completely that there was no real difference between a Christian and a non-Christian. Everyone was a Christian, because no one was a Christian. He lamented that Christianity had become an outward shell of what it was meant to be. “Orthodoxy flourishes in the land,” claimed Kierkegaard, but it was “the orthodoxy which consists in playing the game of Christianity.”⁸ Christ-less Christianity compels us to pray Psalm 28 along with David.

Pivot to Praise

*Praise be to the Lord,
for he has heard my cry for mercy.
The Lord is my strength and my shield;
my heart trusts in him, and he helps me.
My heart leaps for joy,
and with my song I praise him.
The Lord is the strength of his people,
a fortress of salvation for his anointed one.
Save your people and bless your inheritance;
be their shepherd and carry them forever.*
Psalm 28:6-9

⁸ Kierkegaard, *Attack Upon ‘Christendom,’* 28.

“Yahweh be worshiped!” shouts the psalmist. Nothing has changed, except the conviction, that the plea for help and the call for justice has been heard by the Lord who is strong to save and worthy of all trust. David makes his praise personal with a string of seven personal pronouns: “The Lord is *my* strength and *my* shield; *my* heart trusts in him, and he helps *me*. *My* heart leaps for joy, and with *my* song *I* praise him.” But this ecstatic burst of praise expands to take in the people of God. “The Lord is the strength of his people.”

David prays as the Lord’s anointed affirming Yahweh’s power to protect and to shepherd *his people*. By identifying Israel as Yahweh’s own, David is not shirking his responsibility but humbling acknowledging his status as under-shepherd. David knows that “God’s interest in them lay nearer his heart than his own.”⁹ The imagery of *saving*, *blessing*, and *shepherding* is drawn from “the exodus-wilderness story.”¹⁰ Once again we are reminded, even when we are surrounded by outwardly religious, inwardly malicious enemies, that the Lord is our good shepherd who is more than sufficient for all of our needs (Psalm 23; Isaiah 40:11). As the Lord’s anointed David is a type of the Messiah, pointing forward to the coming of Jesus Christ. “Let us therefore remember that David is like a mirror,” Calvin wrote, “in which God sets before us the continual course of his grace. Only we must be careful, that the obedience of our faith may correspond to his fatherly love, that he may acknowledge us for his people and inheritance.”¹¹

⁹ Henry, Psalms, 119.

¹⁰ Goldingay, Psalms, 409.

¹¹ Calvin, Psalms, 474.