

The Psalms help us to worship even when conditions are desperate – when vicious people are out to get us. The sequence of Psalms from Psalms 51-64 explores the necessity of worship when the enemy within and the enemy without seeks to destroy us. David models for us worship under pressure, knowing that God is his only source of refuge. The sequence begins with David’s incriminating honesty. In Psalm 51, he names himself as enemy number one. He is the root cause of life-threatening evil that threatens to destroy him. David repents, “Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight. . .” (Ps 51:4). But after leading with his own personal guilt, he chronicles in subsequent psalms the efforts of his enemies to plot destruction (Ps 52:2) and to devour the righteous (Ps 53:4). Arrogant foes try to kill him (Ps 54:3) and close friends seek to betray him (Ps 55:13).

David’s psalms are honest. Our tendency is to compartmentalize our fears and frustrations and leave them at the door of the sanctuary. David brings all his fears before God. We would sooner express these concerns to a counselor or a therapist than to voice our desperation to God and name our enemies. We are intimidated, threatened, bullied, and despised, but no one would know it from our prayers. Our falsetto piety inhibits true self-expression and renders our worship bland. We hide in worship; the psalmist pleads in worship. We cover-up in worship; the psalmist strips down and bares his soul in worship. The psalms insist on a negativity (a lament) in keeping with the evil we face in daily life. The cry of the psalmist is consistent with the evil that confronts the global Church. David’s honesty challenges us to let our worship catch up to reality. These “save me” psalms line up with our lives in ways that demand our attention.

The Name of Jesus

Save me, O God, by your name;

vindicate me by your might.

Hear my prayer, O God;

listen to the words of my mouth.

Psalm 54:1-2

The clarity of the appeal dissolves all pretense. The brevity of the appeal cuts to the chase. When the first words on our lips are “O God, save me,” we leap from any hint of formality to a “code red” emergency. Distress seeks not to impress but to confess my desperate need for God’s saving intervention. The language conveys in tone and intent earnestness. We pray this way when we are “beyond the reach of human assistance” and we acknowledge our total dependence upon God.¹ The plea of the psalmist for salvation and vindication is in keeping with the promise of the apostle, when he wrote, “. . .the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God” (Rom 8:26-27). In contrast to Psalm 51, David knows he is innocent and he is counting on God to listen very closely to his prayer.

¹ Calvin, Psalms, 322.

Salvation “by your name” is shorthand notation for the fullness of God’s character and actions. Everything that is true about God is subsumed under the name of God. The *Name* “refers to the whole of the divine manifestation, the character of God as revealed in his relationship and dealings with his people.”² In many ancient as well as contemporary cultures, the name of a person represents an individual’s character, family history, and cultural status. As Westerners, however, we tend to use names as arbitrary labels to differentiate people from one another. We are not in the habit of infusing a name with history, memory, and character of a person’s life.

However, within the Old Testament the name of God is used as a powerful expression of God’s character and actions. When God made himself known to Abraham, he identified himself: “I am God Almighty [El-Shaddai]; walk before me and be blameless” (Gen 17:1). Contrary to the gods and myths of Abraham’s culture, God disclosed himself as the powerful one whose presence call for Abraham’s personal loyalty and obedience. God revealed himself according to his own personal prerogative, choosing to define himself in successive stages to the people of Israel by name. This pattern of revelation is especially evident in God’s self-disclosure to Moses: “I am the Lord. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name the Lord [Yahweh] I did not make myself known to them” (Exod 6:2-3).

Out of compassion for the plight of the Israelites, God revealed more of himself. When Moses asked for further identification to support his claim before the people that God had sent him to lend credibility to his mission, he was seeking a description of the meaning of God’s name. In response, God declared his sovereign power (“I Am Who I Am” - Exod 3:14), in the flow of his personal and historical relationship with Israel. Far from being a nameless, impersonal force, the God of creation chose to be known by his covenant relationship with specific individuals who walked before him and obeyed him.

In the highest forms of Buddhist, Hindu, and Taoist thought, God is imagined to be a nameless and undifferentiated spiritual reality beyond personality. The conception of God in Islam is impersonal and deterministic. Allah is associated with power and transcendence. Contrary to these various descriptions, the God of the Old Testament reveals himself through specific acts, propositional teaching, and personal communion. Honoring the name of the Lord God involves an exclusive relationship with him (Exod 20:3-4; Ps 44:20; 79:6; Isa 42:8) and specific obedience to his commands (Lev 18:21; Deut 18:20; 2 Chron 7:14; Amos 2:7). Apart from God’s own initiative, people would be unable to honor his name. He has promised his enablement to all who earnestly seek to honor his name (Exod 20:24). He overrules wickedness and crushes oppression “for the sake of [his] name,” in order to protect his own witness among the nations (Ezek 20:9).

The significance of this Name-theology carries over and deepens with the name of Jesus. Through the Incarnation, God once again took the initiative that is exclusively his to reveal himself more completely. This time the revelation took the form of God’s ultimate medium of communication. As in the past, God’s disclosure of his character was personal and historical; now through the Incarnation it reaches its climax in a single individual, who was born “when the

² Ross, Psalms, 231.

time had fully come” (Gal 4:4). As shocking as it may have seemed to the Jews, the apostles were compelled by the Spirit of God to attribute to Jesus all that was represented by the name of the Lord God. The Jewish notion of monotheistic exclusivity made it virtually impossible for the disciples to invent the theological equation between the name of Jesus and the name of the Lord God. Rather, the disciples took their lead from Jesus. Like the prophets before him, Jesus claimed to come in the name of the Lord, but unlike the prophets his name became synonymous with the name of the Lord God. He challenged his followers to welcome little children in his name, because “whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me” (Mark 9:37). Jesus promised his presence “where two or three come together in my name” (Matt 18:20). When the disciples returned from their preaching and healing ministry, they were excited about the power of Jesus’ name: “Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name” (Luke 10:17).

To pray Psalm 54 today is to acknowledge that there is a striking parallel between the meaning of the Lord God’s name in the Old Testament and the meaning of Jesus’ name in the New Testament. Those who believe and obey are called by his name (Num 6:27; 2 Chron 7:14; Rev 3:12-13; 14:1; 22:4). Only through his name does salvation come (Ps 79:9; Isa 43:1-7; 54:5; 63:16; Joel 2:32; John 20:31; Acts 4:12; Rom 10:13). His name is betrayed by those who claim his name but reject his ways (Jer 14:15; 29:9; Matthew 7:21-23; 24:4-5). His name alone is worthy of all praise and glory (Isa 45:23; Zech 14:9; Phil 2:9-10). When the apostles referred simply to “the Name” (Acts 5:41; 3 John 7), they affirmed the direct relationship between Jesus and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. All that was attributed to the name of God in Israel’s experience was carried over and applied to Jesus in the faith and practice of the early church.³ The apostle Peter boldly preached this truth to the rulers and elders of the people when he said, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

Strangers

*Arrogant foes are attacking me;
ruthless people are trying to kill me –
people without regard for God.*
Psalm 54:4

The peril inspiring David’s urgent appeal for salvation is summed up in three parallel lines. The psalmist’s enemies are literally described as “strangers” or “foreigners,” who are ruthless and violent, and estranged from God. The designation of “strangers” is drawn from the Hebrew and Greek texts, even though some manuscripts have “arrogant foes.” The description is ironic because the superscription ties the psalm to the opposition of the Ziphites who were David’s fellow countrymen from the tribe of Judah (Josh 15:24). The Samuel narrative describes two occasions when the Ziphites took the initiative to prove their loyalty to King Saul by betraying David into his hands (1 Sam 23:19-29; 26:1-25). The Ziphites approached Saul with specific intelligence that David was hiding out at Horesh in the Desert of Ziph and they offered to hand him over to the king. David must have thought that with friends like that who needs enemies. He was being betrayed by his own people.

³ Webster, *A Passion for Christ*, 65-74.

For anyone praying this psalm who has found themselves similarly betrayed by “ friends” will find the exchange between the Ziphites and Saul typical of the decorum that often covers-up ruthlessness. Saul’s thinly veiled contract on David’s life oozes with god-talk: “The Lord bless you for your concern for me. . . Find out where David usually goes and who has seen him there. They tell me he is very crafty. . .” (1 Sam 23:21-22). Conventional wisdom played in Saul’s favor but anyone paying attention to what God was doing in Israel “could not lend himself to be made a tool of Saul’s blind fury.”⁴

Another striking contrast between Psalm 54 and the narrative in Samuel is the “dependency paradox.” In the absence of human assistance the psalmist acknowledges his utter dependence upon the help of God. But in the narrative David spares Saul’s life twice, once when he was in the back of the cave and crept up and cut off a corner of Saul’s robe (1 Sam 24:4), and a second time when he snuck into Saul’s camp at night when everyone was asleep and stole Saul’s spear that was stuck in the ground near his head (1 Sam 26:12). Both times, David refused to “lay a hand on the Lord’s anointed” and he pledged to leave Saul’s future in the Lord’s hands. “But the Lord forbid that I should lay a hand on the Lord’s anointed” (1 Sam 26:11). This puts Psalm 54 in a new light. David had the power to solve his problems. He had plenty of human initiative and assistance, but instead he choose absolute dependence upon the Lord’s deliverance. He refused to take matters into his own hands. He wanted everyone to know that his help came from the Lord. Matthew Henry was right when he said, “This is not a prayer of malice, but a prayer of faith.”⁵

God is my Help

*Surely God is my help;
the Lord is the one who sustains me.
Let evil recoil on those who slander me;
in your faithfulness destroy them.
I will sacrifice a freewill offering to you;
I will praise your name, Lord, for it is good.
You have delivered me from all my troubles,
and my eyes have looked in triumph on my foes.*

Psalm 54:4-7

“Surely” or “Behold” signals a sudden shift from pleading to confidence.⁶ He is certain that he has been heard. The psalmist declares, God is my helper. He knows his life is in the Lord’s hands and he entrusts himself to the Lord’s sustaining grace. He recognizes “that unchecked evil has a way of recoiling on itself.”⁷ He is confident that the Lord will judge evil according to his faithfulness and truth. David “looks beyond the crisis” and makes a vow of thanksgiving for his deliverance.⁸ He combines “Word and Sacrament,” he sacrifices a freewill offering and he lifts his voice in praise.

⁴ Delitzsch, Psalms, 153.

⁵ Matthew Henry, Psalms, 228.

⁶ Ross, Psalms, 233.

⁷ Wilcock, Psalms, 198.

⁸ Goldingay, Psalms, 161.

We can understand this psalm better on the lips of the Son of David than on David himself because Jesus came unto his own but his own did not receive him (John 1:11). He “endured such opposition from sinners” without growing weary and losing heart (Heb 12:3). Jesus could have taken matters into his own hands, but he refused to do so. As he said to Peter, “Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen this way?” (Matthew 26:53-54). Like David, Jesus offered a freewill sacrifice, but unlike David, our Lord sacrificed himself once and for all to do away with sin. The name of Yahweh is on the lips of David to praise for he has been delivered for his name’s sake, for “at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, in heaven and earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:10-11).