

The reason these “save me” psalms don’t make the list of our favorite psalms is because they confront us with our deep need for forgiveness and our pressing need for rescue. We require deliverance, not affirmation, and these psalms prove it. We cannot cope with evil on our own, either the evil within or the evil without. We are lost sinners (Ps 51), oppressed by evil big shots (Ps 52), living in a corrupt culture (Ps 53), attacked by arrogant foes (Ps 54), and betrayed by close friends (Ps 55). Our natural inclination is to avoid the stark honesty of these psalms and wall off the real world from our piety. The psalms challenge true spirituality to the depth of our being.

This sequence of “save me” psalms (Ps 51-64) challenges our naivete and cheerful optimism. We live in the atmosphere of existential nihilism but nothing is so serious that it cannot be laughed off by the late night comedians. Despair is a popular label in our culture, but it is worn like a tuxedo only on special occasions. The rest of the time we are fun-loving party animals. We cope by translating tragedy into escape, giving ourselves to sex, sports, substances, success, and style – anything that gets our mind off our broken relationships and our dark despair. We want something light-hearted and entertaining, but the psalmist isn’t paying attention to the ratings. The consumer has little regard for the psalms, but to the worshiper they are essential. The tension between fear and trust is the focus of this psalm. We are invited to work this out in worship.

### *Hot Pursuit*

*Be merciful to me, my God  
for my enemies are in hot pursuit;  
all day long they press their attack.  
My adversaries pursue me all day long.  
in their pride many are attacking me.  
When I am afraid, I put my trust in you.*

*In God, whose word I praise –  
in God I trust and am not afraid.  
What can mere mortals do to me?*

*All day long they twist my words;  
all their schemes are for my ruin.  
They conspire, they lurk,  
they watch my steps,  
hoping to take my life.  
Because of their wickedness do not let them escape;  
in your anger, God, bring the nations down.*

Psalm 56:1-7

The superscription identifies this psalm with David’s escape to Philistine country, to the region of Gath, to the hometown of Goliath, where David sought refuge from Saul’s hot pursuit.

Presumably, David didn't expect to be recognized by Israel's arch enemy the Philistines. But his reputation preceded him and he was found out. Even a song had been written about him: "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands" (1 Sam 21:11). You can understand why the Philistines weren't dancing to the tune. The "thousands" celebrated in the song referred to the many Philistines who died at the hands of Israel's most famous warrior David.

Psalms 34 and 56 are associated with David's narrow escape from the Philistine king. The beauty of these two psalms stand in sharp relief with David's performance as a madman. In Psalm 34 David memorialized his deliverance from the Philistines and king Achish. In Psalm 56 he works through his theology of trust. Before he describes his enemies, he begins with a plea for mercy, "Be merciful to me, my God." This line is not a pious perquisite, a necessary liturgical preamble, but the essential truth upon which all else depends. Mercy, not merit, is the true worshiper's overture to God. When we pray Psalm 56, we seek not to echo the psalmist's sentiment, but to mean what he meant. His lament is God-centered, juxtaposing fear and trust. His bottom-line, is clear: "When I am afraid, I put my trust in you." Like the psalmist we want to be honest with ourselves about our weaknesses and fears.

Calvin summed up the psalmist's example: First, "he acknowledges his weakness, in so far as he was sensible of fear," but he refuses "to surrender his hope." Second, "he makes no pretensions to the lofty heroism which condemns danger," but he confidently anticipates God's favor.<sup>1</sup> Piety is not putting on a happy face and "faking it to make it." Piety faces the very real dangers of living in an evil world with crooks and cancer, bullies and bombs, predators and plagues. But the faithful remain confident in the Lord's deliverance in the midst of their fears. "Fear and hope may seem opposite and incompatible affections," wrote Calvin. But the vital experience of hope requires "some measure" of fear. "In a tranquil state of the mind, there is no scope of the exercise of hope."<sup>2</sup>

The mix of fear and trust is evident in the psalmist's description of the enemy. "All day long" they press their attack and "all day long" they twist his words. Their "hot pursuit" lasts "all day." They are like a pack of dogs nipping at his heel. The psalmist is being watched day and night. He is subject to constant surveillance. His enemies lurk in the shadows, waiting for the right moment to pounce. Their arrogance gives them the audacity to think their hatred of him is justified and their cause is right. But in the middle of his description of the enemy he breaks off to pledge his trust in God. "In you" have I put my trust. "In God, whose word I praise." Trust in God is rooted in his word and the better we know his word the more resilient will be our trust. Goldingay observes that the reference to God's word comes at the center of the *fear-trust-word-trust-fear* sequence. This implies the key importance of the word of God "to move between fear and trust." Goldingay writes, "It is enthusiasm for God's promising word that makes trust possible. Only in this psalm is God's word the object of praise."<sup>3</sup> If we are not grounded in the word of God we are subject to the whim of our emotions. This is why we need "a ready familiarity" with the word of God, "to hold our emotions up to the clear testimony of God in Scripture."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Calvin, Psalms, 349.

<sup>2</sup> Calvin, Psalms, 350.

<sup>3</sup> Goldingay, Psalms, 185.

<sup>4</sup> Wilson, Psalms, 826.

It is easy to see how Jesus might have identified with Psalm 56 during his public ministry. His enemies did what David's enemies did. They were relentless in their "hot pursuit." We can put David's military battle with the Philistines side-by-side with Jesus' spiritual battle with the religious leaders. Patrick Reardon comments on the five episodes in Mark 2:1-3:6 in which "the enemies of Jesus interrogate and investigate Him, spy on Him and finally reach a sinister resolve: 'Then the Pharisees went out and immediately plotted with the Herodians against Him, how they might destroy Him' (Mark 3:6)."<sup>5</sup> Both David's battle and the Son of David's battle had to do with opposition to the fulfillment of God's covenant promises to the people of God. The parallel between Psalm 56 continues today in the struggle of the Church against arrogant enemies who have convinced themselves that it is "right" and "good" to destroy the people of God.

The apostles identified with the psalmist's theme. They understood the mix of fear and trust and like the psalmist they sought to prepare Christ's followers for conflict with the world that they neither sought nor deserved. Peter warned, "Do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you" (1 Pet 4:12). Even though they sought to show proper respect, keep a clear conscience, and live at peace with everyone, suffering was inevitable. Suffering for the cause of Christ meant "all kinds of trials" (1 Pet 1:6), including, false accusations (1 Pet 2:12), "ignorant talk of foolish people" (1 Pet 2:15), harsh treatment by superiors (1 Pet 2:18), suffering for doing what is right (3:14), and ridicule for a righteous lifestyle (1 Pet 4:4). Peter does not specify the actual circumstances of the "the fiery ordeal," nor does he attempt to explain all the ways, "your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (1 Pet 5:8). Ordinary believers in their ordinary lives are called to take after Jesus in the world and this will inevitably lead to suffering. To think otherwise leads to the kind of blind sided attack that Peter warns believers to guard against. "Don't be surprised! . . . But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed" (1 Pet 4:12-13).<sup>6</sup>

When David asked, "What can mere mortals do to me?" we can be assured that he was not feeling invincible. If anything, he was feeling vulnerable and weak, but in the mix of fear and trust, trust wins out. In this regard, he foreshadows the words of Jesus, "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28). This first stanza ends with David's appeal to God for his righteous judgment. This plea to hold the wicked accountable and "bring the nations down," is in keeping with New Testament truth. Ross acknowledges that "this kind of prayer might make the modern believer uncomfortable" but "it is a righteous prayer."<sup>7</sup> Jesus repeatedly promised that on the day of judgment those who rejected the gospel would suffer a worse fate than Sodom and Gomorrah (Matthew 10:15; 11:21-24; Luke 10:12-15).

*Record my Tears*

*Record my misery;  
list my tears on your scroll*

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<sup>5</sup> Reardon, Christ in the Psalms, 109.

<sup>6</sup> Webster, Outposts of Hope, 132-135.

<sup>7</sup> Ross, Psalms, 270-271.

*are they not in your record?  
Then my enemies will turn back  
when I call for help.  
By this I will know that God is for me.*

*In God, whose word I praise,  
in the Lord, whose word I praise –  
in God I trust and am not afraid.  
What can man do to me?*

*I am under vows to you, my God;  
I will present my thank offerings to you.  
For you have delivered me from death  
and my feet from stumbling,  
that I may walk before God  
in the light of life.*

Psalm 56:8-13

David begins the second stanza of Psalm 56 with a seemingly unusual request. “Record my misery.” He is on the run from Saul and hiding out in the wilderness. He asks that God keep a record of his wanderings as an indication that God really cares about what happens to him. He wants to know that God is paying attention and keeping track of all his close calls and dangerous escapes. He envisions God figuratively writing them down and keeping his account up-to-date. Today, we might ask God to keep track of our chemo treatments or our demeaning encounters with a boss or the mocking comments from a colleague who ridicules the faith. Note, that David does not rehearse all of his wandering and dangerous encounters in prayer; he knows that the Lord knows his misery index and that God is keeping score.

Along this same line, David asks the Lord to keep a record of his tears. In Hebrew, David asks the Lord to collect his tears literally in a wine-skin container. This metaphor has presented a challenge to translators. The NIV reads, “list my tears in your scroll,” and the ESV reads, “put my tears in your bottle.” The point is clear however. The psalmist depends on the knowledge that God knows what he is going through. For some of us it may be hard to imagine that God really cares about us down to the details of our suffering. Yet, Jesus said to his disciples that “even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. . .” (Matthew 10:30).

We have a strange way of imposing our relational limitations on God. We can hardly imagine that God knows each one of us on a first-name basis, that he knows everything about us, and that he knows and cares about us the way he knew Abraham or David. There are no average believers. God knows each and everyone of us better than we know ourselves. Jesus said that the least in the Kingdom of God is greater than John the Baptist (Luke 7:28). If the first will be last and the last first, then there are no generic Christians (Matthew 19:30; 20:16). No one is flying under the radar of God’s personal attention and providential plan.<sup>8</sup> Our tears are recorded; our

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<sup>8</sup> Webster, *Living in Tension*, 1:60.

hairs are numbered. God knows our misery index. “God is faithful,” wrote the apostle Paul; “he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it” (1 Cor 10:13).

As the psalm progresses David’s confidence grows. Earlier he said, “When I am afraid, I will put my trust in you” (Ps 56:3). Now, he says, “When I call for help,” my enemies will turn back (Ps 56:9). He repeats the refrain, “In God, whose word I praise, in the Lord (Yahweh), whose word I praise – in God I trust and am not afraid. What can man do to me?” (Ps 56:10-11). This time he emphasizes the loving, covenant faithfulness of *Yahweh*, and repeats his confidence in God’s word.

The psalmist boldly declares his deliverance as if it had already taken place. And maybe it had. Kidner believes that the explicit point of the psalm is a celebration of answered prayer. The psalmist is looking back in gratitude. He longs to fulfill the vows he made in the midst of his adversity and offer his thank offerings.<sup>9</sup> But maybe his deliverance hasn’t come, and he is looking forward in anticipation. Faith and faithfulness meet in the ambiguity of the prophetic present and the future hope. Either way, the psalmist is walking by faith in the presence of God. He is not wandering around in confusion and fear. He is not lost in the dark; he’s living in the light, in the realm “where Yhwh’s [Yahweh’s] face shines on people.”<sup>10</sup> The Lord Jesus said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12).

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<sup>9</sup> Kidner, *Psalms*, 205.

<sup>10</sup> Goldingay, *Psalms*, 189. See Numbers 6:24-26.