

Praying the “save me” psalms reassure us that the tense standoff between danger and devotion is not abnormal. Turmoil and trust are thrown together in a range of emotions that is hard to put into words. Fear and faith are co-mingled in circumstances beyond our control. True, we may not be on the run from a violent and narcissistic king as David was, but many of our brothers and sisters in Christ can identify readily with this psalm because they are victims of state-sponsored persecution. We need to learn to pray Psalm 57 on their behalf and our own.

Psychologists compare pictures drawn by children who have experienced war with pictures drawn by children who experience divorce. The remarkable similarity of these pictures indicates that the emotional toll on children of divorce compares to the ravages of war. Without minimizing the extreme suffering experienced by the persecuted church, it is important to understand that western believers can enter into the experience of Psalm 57 along with their fellow persecuted believers. We may not be living in hot zones of life-threatening persecution but believers in the west are often socially ostracized and ridiculed for their faith in Christ. They face the daily pressure to conceal their faith, compromise their ethics, and conform their conduct to the spirit of the times.

The superscription attributes the back story to when David and his small band of men hid from Saul and his army of three thousand “able young men from all Israel” (1 Sam 24:2). As it happened, Saul picked the same cave that David and his men were hiding in to relieve himself. It’s not surprising that David’s men saw this twist of fate as a God-given opportunity to strike: “This is the day the Lord spoke of when he said to you, ‘I will give your enemy into your hands for you to deal with as you wish.’” And for a moment David must have thought so himself, because he crept forward within striking distance and cut off a corner of Saul’s robe. But no sooner had he made his move, but he regretted it, saying, “The Lord forbid that I should do such a thing to my master, the Lord’s anointed, or lay my hand on him; for he is the anointed of the Lord” (1 Sam 24:4-6).

In that dark cave David’s soul caught up to his destiny. As tempting as it was to take matters into his own hands, David was convinced that he must not usurp the will of God and strike the Lord’s anointed. Willed passivity is the intentional and disciplined surrender of our will to the active will of God. By submitting to the Lord, David demonstrated a faith that flew in the face of worldly reason and human impulse. He was content to let God’s promises work out according to God’s will. In that moment of surrender, David was fully alive to God. Later, when David composed the psalm, he translated the darkness of the cave into a sunrise doxology. Whatever pain he felt was swept up into praise, so much so that Psalm 57:7-11 is quoted in Psalm 108:1-5 as pure praise.

The Sending, Saving God

*Have mercy on me, my God, have mercy on me,
for in you I take refuge.*

*I will take refuge in the shadow of your wings
until the disaster has passed.
I cry out to God Most High,
to God, who vindicates me.
He sends from heaven and saves me,
rebuking those who hotly pursue me –
God sends forth his love and his faithfulness.
I am in the midst of lions;
I am forced to dwell among ravenous beasts –
men whose teeth are spears and arrows,
whose tongues are sharp swords.
Be exalted, O God, above the heavens;
let your glory be over all the earth.*

Psalm 57:1-5

In Psalm 57 the saving action of God overshadows the lament from beginning. While the psalmist's cry for mercy is intense and necessary, he cannot express his anguish without extolling the sufficiency of God's salvation. The weight of his testimony falls on the provision and protection of the Lord's steadfast love. Praise has the upper-hand, even though the psalmist's acutely felt need for refuge is clearly understood. The poet intensifies his appeal for mercy by repetition and then directs his appeal to "my God." Implied in David's definitive statement is his exclusive commitment to God. He has no one else to turn to, because he doesn't want to turn to anyone else. Only God Most High is able to shelter him under his wings until the disaster passes and only God is able to vindicate him.¹

David knows that his salvation is dependent on the action of God, but there is never any doubt in his mind that God will intervene to save him, rebuke his enemies, and send forth his love and faithfulness. The psalmist is not informing God of what needs to be done as much as he is describing what God is already doing. He transposes his need into testimony and his plea turns to witness.

Jesus and his followers pray Psalm 57 with an explicit and personal understanding of the relationship between "sending" and "saving." Like the psalmist, we need "God not to be confined to the heavens but to become involved in events here on earth."² We echo the psalmist's plea, "Send me your light and your faithful care, let them lead me" (Ps 43:3). But imagine the psalmist's surprise when he learned that God showed his love for us by coming in person. The apostle Paul wrote, "But when the set time had fully come, God *sent* his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. Because you are his sons, God *sent* the Spirit of his Son into our hearts. . . ." (Gal 4:4-6). John wrote, "He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:9-10). Jesus' prayer in

¹ Ross, Psalms, 283. Ross: "Trusting in the shadow of God's wings not only looks ahead to protection under the current difficulty, but looks back to the foundation of the faith" (see also Pss. 17:8; 36:7; 61:4 and Matt 23:37).

² Goldingay, Psalms, 195.

John 17 underscores this exact truth: “Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent”(John 17:3). Salvation is defined very specifically. It is to know the one, true and living God and to honor Jesus Christ whom he sent – “God’s Autobiography to the world.”³ God’s love and faithfulness came in the person of God’s one and only Son. In his high priestly prayer Jesus emphasized that the *sending, saving* credibility of the gospel depended on the disciples knowing that Jesus was the *sent one*. “Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you *sent me*” (John 17:7-8).

Moreover the *sending strategy* of the triune God continues today in the Body of Christ. Jesus prayed, “Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you *sent me* into the world, I have *sent* them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified” (John 17:17-19). Jesus’ atoning sacrifice is the means by which we are “taken up into his perfect consecration to the Father and *sent* into the world to continue, not only by verbal proclamation but also by common life which embodies the same consecration, his total consecration of love and obedience to the Father.”⁴

Jesus expected his followers to prove to the world that he was the sent one by their oneness. He prayed, “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have *sent me*” (John 17:20-21). He emphasized that the credibility of the gospel depended on this unity. He prayed, “I have given the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one – I in them and you in me – so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you *sent me* and have loved them even as you have loved me” (John 17:22-23).

As incredible as it may seem, we are the answer to Jesus’ prayer for the world. The mission of the Church is to convince the world of the exclusive truth claim of Jesus Christ (“That you sent me”). Dale Bruner writes, “When people believe that *God* (and no one else) sent *Jesus* (and no one else) in *the* mission of salvation — then people are finally at home with life’s central reality. The Church does everything she can – from faithful preaching and praying to loving outreach and service – to seek this faith in a deceived and uncentered world.”⁵ When we pray Psalm 57 today, we cannot help but hear Jesus’ prayer: “Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them” (John 17:25-26).⁶

The psalmist likens his enemies to a pride of ravenous lions who are ready to devour him. Their sharp tongues and teeth are like sharp spears and arrows. The psalmist draws his metaphors from a lion attack and hand-to-hand combat for the purpose of illustrating the verbal assault of his

³ Bruner, *John*, 967.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 233.

⁵ Bruner, *John*, 1008. (Emphasis his).

⁶ Webster, *Outposts of Hope*

enemies (see Ps 56:5). His image fits the persecution faced by the early church and by today's church. The apostle Peter said that believers were suffering "grief in all kinds of trials" (1 Pet 1:6). He challenged them to bear up under false accusations (2:12), unjust suffering (2:19), threats (3:13), slanderous ridicule (3:16), and abuse (4:4).

The psalmist paints a grim picture of grave danger only to throw the whole scene in sharp contrast with a glimpse of heaven's glory. David breaks into doxology: "Be exalted, O God, above the heavens; let your glory be over all the earth" (Ps 57:5). His refrain, repeated twice, overshadows doom and gloom with grace and glory. "The imperative 'be exalted' is a prayer for God to reveal himself in his majesty and his glory in the exercise of his dominion in heaven and earth (see, e.g., Isa 6:1).⁷

Resilient

*They spread a net for my feet –
I was bowed down in distress.
They dug a pit in my path –
but they have fallen into it themselves.
My heart, O God, is steadfast,
my heart is steadfast;
I will sing and make music.
Awake, my soul!
Awake, harp and lyre!
I will awaken the dawn.
I will praise you, Lord, among the nations;
I will sing of you among the peoples.
For great is your love, reaching to the heavens;
your faithfulness reaches to the skies.
Be exalted, O God, above the heavens;
let your glory be over all the earth.*

Psalm 57:6-11

A theology of trust and a psychology of confidence converge in Psalm 57 to form the resilient saint. This is not necessarily the only recipe for true spirituality, because those who pray the psalms are well acquainted with angst of raw lament unmitigated by exuberant praise. Students of the psalms quickly learn that there is a full emotional range available to those who worship in spirit and in truth. But there is something to be said for the emotional relief of a steadfast heart and a melody of praise. After the honest dirge, the psalmist breaks out in songs of praise. It is wrong to dismiss this genuine expression of hope and confidence in the name of realism. The psalmist knows the danger of the well-laid trap; he has experienced depression from distress, but that's not the full story. Those whose "tongues are sharp swords" and who "have dug a pit in my path" invariably cut themselves up and fall into their own trap. Evil boomerangs. The perpetrator of evil falls victim to his own devices.

⁷Ross, Psalms, 286.

The experience and expectation of deliverance releases within the soul of the psalmist the spiritual endorphins of praise. David's exuberance can hardly be contained. He is still "in the midst of lions" and in danger of entrapment, but here and now, in this moment, his steadfast heart will "sing and make music."⁸ The dark cave of desperation and depression gives way to a new day. Instead of a cry for help, the psalmist shouts, "Awake, my soul!" Peterson's paraphrase reads, "I'm ready, God, so ready, ready from head to toe, ready to sing, ready to raise a tune: 'Wake up, soul! Wake up, harp! Wake up, lute! Wake up, you sleepyhead sun!'" (Ps 57:8, *The Message*).

As we discussed earlier (Psalm 42-43), the preferred name for God in Book II is Elohim, the plural form of El (the plural of intensity) emphasizing that Israel's God is the God above all gods. The psalmist confesses that Elohim is not Israel's tribal deity but in fact the God of all the nations, the God for all peoples. But in his crescendo of praise, the psalmist uses "Yahweh," the more personal name for Israel's covenant-keeping, covenant-loving Lord, to emphasize that Yahweh is the Lord of the nations and that all the peoples "are supposed to be brought to the knowledge of God."⁹ The apostle Paul argues in Romans that Christ fulfilled the promises made to the patriarchs when he made it possible for the Gentiles to glorify God for his mercy. He quotes from the psalms: "Therefore, I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing the praises of your name" (Rom 15:9; Ps 57:9; Ps 18:49).

The psalmist takes it even further, the Lord of the nations is the Lord of the universe. There is a "cosmos-wide reach of God's commitment and truthfulness" and a "cosmos-wide manifestation of God's splendor."¹⁰ No matter how personal the psalms may be we are encouraged to never lose sight of the universal scope of God's glory.¹¹ Delitzsch writes, "Here we perceive the self-consciousness of a comprehensive mission, which accompanied David from the beginning to the end of his royal career." And this mission extends not only to the nations but to the universe. "Heaven and earth have a mutually involved history, and the blessed, glorious end of this history is the sunrise of the divine doxa over both, here prayed for."¹² Jesus echoes the scope of this psalm in his high priestly prayer when he prays, "Father, glorify me in our presence with the glory I had with you before the world began The glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world" (John 17:5, 24).

⁸ Ross, *Psalms*, 288. Ross: "The word 'steadfast' means established, fixed, firm, secure; and the fact that it is heart that is steadfast means that he is firmly established in his faith so that his affections and actions are loyal to God. This quality of steadfastness is what the penitent prayed for in Psalm 51:10, a steadfast spirit, for without it he would waver in his faith and make the wrong choices."

⁹ Calvin, *Psalms*, 366.

¹⁰ Goldingay, *Psalms*, 199.

¹¹ Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 112.

¹² Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 2:178.