

Under constant threat, David cries out for deliverance, “My God, save me!” This sequence of “save me” psalms explores the forces of evil arrayed against the psalmist. The threat spectrum begins with himself, the repentant sinner and his passionate plea for forgiveness, “Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin” (Ps 51:2). The spectrum continues with the big bully who loves evil rather than good and falsehood over truth (Ps 52:3), followed by the fool who devours the people of God like bread (Ps 53:4) and a gang of arrogant and ruthless foes who want to kill him (Ps 54:3). Even his beloved friend and companion betrays him (Ps 55:13) and his adversaries twist his words all day long (Ps 56:5-6). The psalmist repeatedly finds himself in the midst of ravenous lions (Ps 57:4), surrounded by cobras ready to strike (Ps 58:4). Taken together these psalms drive out whatever naivete we might have had about the on-going struggle with evil. The psalmist believes that faithfulness to God is a dangerous calling. Obedience and devotion provoke the rulers of this age to conspire against the righteous.

Under Attack

*Deliver me from my enemies, O God;
 be my fortress against those who are attacking me.
 Deliver me from evildoers
 and save me from those who are after my blood.
 See how they lie in wait for me!
 Fierce men conspire against me
 for no offense or sin of mine, Lord.
 I have done no wrong, yet they are ready to attack me.
 Arise to help me; look on my plight!
 You, Lord God Almighty,
 you who are the God of Israel,
 rouse yourself to punish all the nations;
 show no mercy to wicked traitors.
 They return at evening,
 snarling like dogs, and prowl about the city.
 See what they spew from their mouths –
 the words from their lips are sharp as swords,
 and they think, “Who can hear us?”
 But you laugh at them, Lord;
 you scoff at all those nations.
 You are my strength, I watch for you;
 you, God, are my fortress,
 my God on whom I can rely.*

Psalm 59:1-10a

The superscription lines up Psalm 59 with David’s narrow escape from King Saul’s hit squad. This was the fifth attempt on David’s life. The first was when in a fit of rage Saul hurled his spear at David as he was playing the lyre (1 Sam 18:10-11). The second attempt was ordering

David to the front line to fight the battle of the Lord. Saul said to himself, “I will not raise a hand against him. Let the Philistines do that!” (1 Sam 18:17). The third attempt involved the bride price for Saul’s daughter Michal. Saul wanted a hundred Philistine foreskins in exchange for his daughter in marriage (1 Sam 18:24). The fourth attempt was like the first. David was playing the lyre for Saul when “an evil spirit from the Lord came on Saul” and he tried to pin David to the wall, but David escaped (1 Sam 19:9-10). In a fifth attempt Saul ordered men to watch David’s house and kill him in the morning. But Michal warned David and helped him escape through a window (1 Sam 19:12).

This particular occasion may have inspired the psalm, but David enlarges on the problem of evil to include the nations (Ps 59:5, 8). This suggests that the particular existential threat experienced by David at the hands of Saul is only a symptom of a much larger concern among all peoples for justice and judgment. The emotional intensity of David’s deeply personal prayer for deliverance is held in tension with David’s confidence in the Lord’s ultimate protection of the righteous and the definitive judgment of the wicked. There is an “artistic mixture of imagery and factual statement” that produces “a positively eerie scenario of hostile intimidation” and an impressive description of God’s complete command of David’s situation and Yahweh’s complete sovereignty of the nations.¹

Striking contrasts are woven into the fabric of this psalm. The psalmist describes his desperate situation and the security of God’s impenetrable defenses. While his fierce attackers are many, the psalmist is alone and outnumbered. His singular plight is emphasized by the repetition of “me” and “my” and the enemy’s plurality morphs into an impersonal collective of unbelief – the nations. Wicked traitors spew their curses while the Lord laughs at their opposition. The psalmist gloats over those who slander him. Immediate rescue is the psalmist’s plea, but he requests a slow, revealing judgment for those who are caught in their pride. The dark night terror yields to morning songs of praise. Howling dogs are drowned out by love songs to Yahweh. The hungry howl and those who look to the Lord sing.

The psalmist claims his innocence. He has done nothing wrong to deserve this wicked opposition. If original sin allows no room for common grace and relative innocence, then there is no point in adjudicating justice on this side of eternity. We become like Job’s counselors, always finding fault in the person who suffers. Job cried out to his would-be comforters, “Search out my faults and probe after my sin – though you know that I am not guilty. . .” (Job 10:6-7). The psalmist’s innocence echoes Psalm 7: “Lord my God, if I have done this and there is guilt on my hands – if I have repaid my ally with evil or without cause have robbed my foe – then let my enemy pursue and overtake me; let him trample my life to the ground and make me sleep in the dust” (Ps 7:3-5).

Psalm 59 corresponds to Christ’s “sacred Passion” because he was hounded by evil people who conspired against him even though he was completely innocent (2 Cor 5:21). It is true that only Jesus was able to provide an unblemished sacrifice for our sins. But we need not challenge the

¹Goldingay, *Psalms*, 213. Quoting from Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 2, 85.

psalmist's claim to innocence or say that only Christ could make this claim of innocence.² Christ's righteousness and our righteousness in Christ come together in the believer's experience of Psalm 59. It is scandalous that one who healed the sick, loved the outcast, and transformed the sinner should die a hideously cruel death by Roman crucifixion. What kind of world do we live in that sentences holy and compassionate men and women to die? Jesus exposes the fact that the political and religious authorities are not always on the side of righteousness. Greed, pride, and hate often control the power brokers of society. Jesus became a victim because he was righteous and those who follow him can expect the same treatment. Those who seek to live first for the kingdom of Christ will suffer various forms of persecution. They will not be ostracized simply because they are committed to what the world considers to be an offensive idea. They will be resisted for taking seriously Jesus' path to obedience.³

To pray for deliverance is to pray for judgment. The two acts of divine mercy are inseparable. This is why the psalmist pleads to the Lord God Almighty, "Arise to help me; look on my plight!" and "Rouse yourself to punish all the nations; show no mercy to wicked traitors." Throughout Scripture salvation and judgment are brought together as they are in this psalm by God's action. Two groups are held together in the same vision: those who have thrown themselves on the mercy of God and those who have persisted long and hard in resisting God's will. The Book of Revelation pictures the saints inside the city gates. Their robes are washed in the blood of the Savior. But outside are the dogs:

'Look, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what they have done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.

Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city. Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.

I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star.'" Revelation 22:12-16

I cannot bring myself to say that this psalm "is not a truly Christian one."⁴ We find too many New Testament passages in the Gospels and Epistles calling for eternal judgment to set aside this important truth. If we edit this out of the psalms we disable our understanding of evil. We toy with spiritual malpractice by withholding a necessary diagnosis against evil that needs to be prayed and believed in our worship services. With that said, we join Jesus in praying for our enemies and those who persecute us. We pray for their salvation. We pray that the gospel will have an impact in their lives as it has in ours.

² Reardon, Christ in the Psalms, 115.

³ Webster, A Passion for Christ, 160-161.

⁴ Cyril Okorochoa & Francis Foulkes, Psalms, African Bible Commentary, 664.

The psalmist likens his enemies to a pack of snarling stray dogs scavenging the city. He is not picturing our domestic pets and “man’s best friend.” These dogs are mean. Spurgeon described them as “unowned, loathsome, degraded, lean, and hungry.”⁵ King Saul has let loose his assassins, with orders to kill David in the morning, but the psalmist uses the threat of physical violence as a metaphor for the verbal violence perpetrated against the righteous. Not many believers feel the threat of a hit squad out to kill them (although some believers live under such a threat). But many believers identify with the pain caused by the sharp sword of verbal abuse, slander, ridicule, false testimony, gossip, and deception.

We glibly say, “Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” But we know that to be false. Like a modern researcher the psalmist links the threat of physical violence with verbal violence. Lisa Barrett, writing in the New York Times, reports, “Words can have a powerful effect on your nervous system. Certain types of adversity, even those involving no physical contact, can make you sick, alter your brain – even kill neurons – and shorten your life.”⁶ The psalmist takes seriously the full range of opposition from state sponsored persecution to malicious gossip and slander. His response is to pray. Instead of responding to his enemies’ hate speech with his own version of vitriolic rhetoric he prays and in his prayer he hears the Lord’s laughter and scorn.

The apostle Peter addressed the problem of hate speech in his epistle and challenged believers to repay insult, abuse, and reviling with blessing.⁷ In the midst of an antagonistic and abusive honor-and-shame culture Peter emphasized “Jesus’ non-retaliatory stance.”⁸

But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. 1 Peter 8:15-16

The get-even strategies that fight fire with fire are eliminated. To curse or retaliate are not options for believers who have been called to bless. They lay down the weapons of deception, slander, pride and hate, in order to pick up the weapons of truth, prayer, compassion and kindness.⁹ The self-control required to bless your accusers and slanderers is evidence of “a supernatural fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:23).” Karen Jobes continues,

“For it is exactly when we are insulted and treated with malicious intent that we are most tempted to respond in kind by gossip, exaggerating the extent of the fault, or with outright slander. Those who are able not simply to clench their teeth

⁵ Spurgeon, Psalm 59, Treasury of David.

⁶ Lisa Feldman Barrett, “When Is Speech Violence?” New York Times, July 15, 2017

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/14/opinion/sunday/when-is-speech-violence.html?smid=nytcore-iphone-share&smprod=nytcore-iphone>

⁷ Webster, Outposts of Hope, 105-106.

⁸ Elliott, *1 Peter*, 607.

⁹ Harink, *1 Peter*, 92.

and remain silent but to maintain an inner attitude that allows one to pray sincerely for the well-being of one's adversaries, are truly a witness to the life-changing power of a new identity in Christ."¹⁰

The psalmist paints a frightful picture: enemies attacking, evildoers out for blood, assassins lying in wait like a pack of hungry dogs, and a constant barrage of violent threats. To all of this he gives the Lord's response: "But you laugh at them, Lord; you scoff at all those nations" (Ps 59:8; see Ps 2:4). By faith, the psalmist takes on the perspective of his God. He ends the first half of the psalm with a powerful burst of confidence: "You are my strength, I watch for you; you, God, are my fortress, my God on whom I can rely" (Ps 59:9-10a).

Songs of Praise

*God will go before me
and will let me gloat over those who slander me.
But do not kill them, Lord, our shield,
or my people will forget.
In your might uproot them
and bring them down.
For the sins of their mouths,
for the words of their lips,
let them be caught in their pride.
For the curses and lies they utter,
consume them in your wrath,
consume them til they are no more.
Then it will be known to the ends of the earth
that God rules over Jacob.*

*They return at evening,
snarling like dogs, and prowl about the city.
They wander about for food
and howl if not satisfied.
But I will sing of your strength,
in the morning I will sing of your love;
for you are my fortress,
my refuge in times of trouble.
You are my strength, I sing praises to you;
you, God, are my fortress,
my God on whom I can rely.*

Psalm 59:10b-17

A confident David (a gloating David!) calls for judgment, but his plea for a qualified judgment foreshadows the apostle Paul's description of judgment in Romans one. Instead of killing the wicked off in one fell swoop, he wants their slow demise to be an object lesson warning people

¹⁰Jobs, 1 Peter, 218.

of the consequences of evil. If God gives them up to their sinful desires and evil ways, they will be caught in their pride and consumed (slowly) by God's wrath (Rom 1:24, 26, 28) and the just and holy judgment of the God of Jacob will become "known to the ends of the earth" (Ps 59:13).

The return of the snarling dogs for a second time indicates that the danger persists. Nothing has changed. The night terror continues, but the psalmist's solid confidence in God is renewed. "You are my strength; you are my fortress; you are my God on whom I can rely." Like the devil, the dogs wander around looking for what they can devour (1 Pet 5:8) and they howl "if not satisfied." But their nocturnal howling is met with songs of praise in the morning. Spurgeon wrote, "The greater our present trials the louder will our future songs be, and the more intense our joyful gratitude."¹¹

Throughout the Samuel narrative we read that David played the lyre (a stringed instrument that can be compared to a small harp or guitar). Twice, while David was playing for Saul, the king in a fit of rage hurled his spear at him (1 Sam 18:10-11; 19:9-10). One can only imagine the trauma of playing a soothing stringed instrument one moment and in the next dodging a spear and fleeing for one's life. But whatever traumatic association between music and violence David might have had, he found music the best way to express his confidence and praise. "I will sing of your strength, in the morning I will sing of your love" (Ps 59:16).

¹¹ Spurgeon, Psalm 59, Treasury of Psalms