

Psalm 64 brings this sequence of deliverance psalms (51-64) to a climax. The psalmist has examined evil from a variety of angles for the purpose of pleading passionately for God's deliverance. David embeds his theology of evil in the rhythm of worship and praise, right where it belongs. Instead of leaving evil to journalists and the media to report, the psalmist assumes the burden of naming and describing evil. He does this without using scare tactics and leveraging fear. His purpose is not to describe how bad the world is, but to describe how total our dependence upon God's deliverance is. He leads us in prayer to embolden true worshipers against evil and fear.

By contrast our worship services tend to avoid the mention of evil except in the most bland generalities. Evil is sanitized, spiritualized, and suburbanized in an innocuous religious vernacular that promotes indifference, not comfort and hope. We have not learned from the psalmist how to talk about evil. We neglect the psalms because we cannot bring ourselves to pray the way David prayed. The psalms sound like a foreign language emanating out of a violent age that has no relationship to our own, but night after night we witness the carnage of terrorist attacks and bombings. We track the opioid addiction crisis, teenage suicides, and the inner city murder rate. We are surrounded by violence, but instead of facing the menace of evil in worship we edit the psalms of enemy talk. We use our up-beat worship to bolster our self-confidence and optimism, and in doing so we reinforce our shallow view of the world. If we let the Psalms guide our theology of evil we would throw ourselves on the mercy of God. The Psalms go deep into danger and deliverance and we should follow.

Lament

*Hear me, my God, as I voice my complaint;
protect my life from the threat of the enemy.
Hide me from the conspiracy of the wicked,
from the plots of evildoers.
They sharpen their tongues like swords
and aim cruel words like deadly arrows.
They shout from ambush at the innocent;
they shoot suddenly, without fear.
They encourage each other in evil plans,
they talk about hiding their snares;
they say, "Who will see it?"
They plot injustice and say,
"We have devised a perfect plan!"
Surely the human mind and heart are cunning.*

Psalm 64:1-6

God is first and foremost our principal ally in the fight against terror. Prayer is not a pious cop-out but an essential first step in steeling the soul against the forces of evil in high places and in hidden terror cells. Law enforcement's chief weapon against terrorism is intelligence. The ability

to identify and track terrorists is crucial. The goal is to expose the secret cells, intercept their communications, and disrupt their plots before they can carry out their vicious attack against innocent civilians. Intelligence is to the security services what prayer is to the worshiper. Without prayer, we lose perspective. We become paralyzed by fear, easily distraught, and susceptible to the enemy's intimidation. The psalmist turns to God, not in an abdication of responsibility or as a last resort, but for the wisdom necessary to face the enemy. God is his protector and deliverer. God supplies the intelligence and the insight required to understand and persevere against evildoers. Prayer unmasks the terrorist's hate-filled cause as a hoax perpetrated by the devil that will end in judgment. Whatever invincibility or just cause the terrorist projects is an illusion exposed in dialogue with God.

The psalmist prays against the believer's number one enemy, fear. The dread of what the enemy might do can intimidate and render the righteous powerless. This is why the psalmist prays first to be guarded against the fear and dread of the enemy. Hatred invokes fear in the hated and unless that fear is conquered in the minds and hearts of the people of God it will lead to a host of contradictory symptoms: anguish, anger, resentment, vitriolic rhetoric, anxiety, timidity, acquiescence, and passivity. We are prone to these sinful reactions, but we should pray, "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me" (Ps 23:4). We embrace the wisdom of Proverbs: "Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe" (Prov 29:25). We acknowledge that the divine imperative for the Israelite applies equally well to the Christian: "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you" (Deut 31:6). We agree with the apostle Paul's spiritual direction: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil 4:6-7).

In the upper room on the night that Jesus was betrayed he prayed that his disciples would experience the full measure of his joy even though the world hated them because of the gospel. When Jesus set complete joy and the world's hate in striking juxtaposition, he drove the truth home that the disciple's joy and fearlessness did not rest on worldly circumstances. "In this world you will have trouble," is an absolute fact that cannot be ignored or circumvented. But the fact that Jesus has overcome the world ought to bring out the best in his disciples (John 16:33).

Prayerful recognition of evil is the first step in dealing with the enemy. Jesus does not conceal the fact that the gospel draws enemy fire. By naming the enemy, Jesus lays bare the harsh realities confronting the people of God. The example of his real prayer is an antidote to boring, placid prayers. All this enemy talk triggers our adrenaline. We are in a spiritual combat zone, but we are not alone and we are under orders.¹ "So we say with confidence," wrote the author of Hebrews, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?" (Heb 13:6).

In Psalm 63 the psalmist describes his yearning for God. He earnestly seek, thirsts, and longs for God. But in Psalm 64 the action belongs to the terrorist who conspires, plots, slanders, deceives,

¹ Webster, *The God Who Prays*, 98.

ambushes, and strategizes. Good and evil are placed side-by-side in a comparison that matches devotion to God with its polar and demonic opposite. By its very nature goodness is aboveboard and communal; wickedness is conspiratorial and secretive. Evil doers plot; the righteous serve.

The psalmist paints a picture that is surprisingly modern. Violence is invariably rooted in the ideology of hate. The psalmist frames his description of terror with reference to hate speech and a cunning and crafty mind and heart (Ps 64:6). This is the reason “cruel words” are deadly. It is because diabolical reasoning gives a twisted rationale to violence. Words – hate filled, abusive, dehumanizing, manipulative, slanderous words evolve into weapons of mass destruction. Without words there would be no racism or sexism or bigotry or betrayal or jihad. The psalmist knows the power of words to incite violence and inspire the weak to hate. Words are a catalyst for evil. They are like swords or grenades or Molotov cocktails or IEDs. They are like arrows, video clips shot half way around the world and posted on YouTube, meant to inspire angry men to drive a van into a crowd of pedestrians, killing and maiming the innocent.

The devil has us right where he wants us. Democratic republics have replaced strong man dictatorial regimes with human rights and the rule of law. Centuries of tyranny and oppression have given way to personal liberties. People are free to live and work and travel without punitive restrictions and fear of persecution. But radical Islamists use these rights and liberties to plant hidden terror cells. Urban gangs engage in turf battles shooting to death children on their front porch. The drug trade enslaves millions of Americans in a downward spiral of addiction and destruction. And those employed to enforce the laws are so fearful for their lives that they are on a hair-trigger, ready to kill with the slightest provocation.

In this psalm and in society evil appears to be in the ascendency. Under the cover of liberty and freedom anarchists, jihadists, white supremacists, abortionists, and power brokers of all kinds, “encourage each other in evil plans” and “plot injustice and say, ‘We have devised a perfect plan!’” (Ps 64:5-6). And God says, “Not so fast.”

Quick Reversal

*But God will shoot them with his arrows;
they will suddenly be struck down.
He will turn their own tongues against them and bring them to ruin;
all who see them will shake their heads in scorn.
All people will fear;
they will proclaim the works of God
and ponder what he has done.
The righteous will rejoice in the Lord
and take refuge in him;
all the upright in heart will glory in him!*

Psalm 64:7-10

The psalmist is confident that the elaborate strategies of the wicked will come to nothing *suddenly*. God’s arrow will burst their bubble. All their plotting and networking and hating will

be shot down suddenly with a single arrow. Before the wicked know it, it will all be over. “The brevity of God’s countermeasures, after the elaborate scheming of the wicked, tells its own decisive tale.”² The frightful havoc that the terrorists have caused on a human plane is neither minimized nor trivialized but the psalmist is confident that it will be easily squelched by God. This is due to the fact that God has engineered evil to be self-destructive. God will turn their own rhetoric and propaganda against them. Hate will consume them. “The shooters will be shot; those who planned to destroy the innocent will be destroyed – by one powerful word from God.”³ God gives people up to their sinful desires and their shameful lusts and their evil plans (Rom 1).

The popular reaction to God’s judgment of the wicked and their sudden downfall is sobering. “All people will fear; they will proclaim the works of God and ponder what he has done.” Justice is awe inspiring. When goodness prevails and evil is put down even the cynical are forced to take note and talk about it. Goldingay writes, “A speech act with positive significance replaces all the speech acts designed to have malicious effect.”⁴

The faithful react with joy. David’s carefully crafted lament has been heard and answered by the Lord (Yahweh) whose mighty judgment delivers and vindicates the upright in heart. The beauty of the psalm itself reflects the joy and safety experienced by the people of God. The symmetry and balance of Psalm 64, observes Wilcock, exudes a settled confidence in the Lord of the universe and the hope of the world.

In God, protection (v. 1);
secret conspiracy (v. 2);
tongues, arrows, sudden shooting (vv. 3-4);
hidden cunning (vv. 5-6);
sudden shooting, arrows, tongues (vv. 7-8);
public proclamation (v. 9);
in the Lord, refuge (v. 10).⁵

² Kidner, Psalms, 227.

³ Ross, Psalms, 402.

⁴ Goldingay, Psalms, 270.

⁵ Wilcock, Psalms, 224.