

Christians read Psalms 1 and 2 messianically. These two introductory psalms form a binocular vision of the incarnation and exaltation of the Lord Jesus Christ. This preface is followed by a five psalm sequence that comprises King David's passion narrative. Psalms 3-7 correspond to Absalom's conspiracy and the rebellious reaction of Saul's ancestors from the tribe of Benjamin (2 Samuel 13-20). The arrangement of these psalms at the beginning of the psalter focuses on the humiliation and vulnerability of Israel's Servant King. David cannot save himself. He is in desperate need of Yahweh's deliverance. He calls out to Yahweh, "Arise, Lord! Deliver me, my God!" (Ps 3:7), knowing "that the Lord has set apart his faithful servant for himself" (Ps 4:3). David confidently depends on the covenant love of Yahweh, "But I, by your great love, can come into your house" (Ps 5:7). Each psalm offers an urgent, soul-searching plea for deliverance: "My soul is in deep anguish" (Ps 6:3), and a strong, resilient song of praise: "I will give thanks to the Lord because of his righteousness; I will sing the praises of the name of the Lord Most High" (Ps 7:17).

The raw God-dependent spirituality of these five psalms with their underlying theme of sanctified willed passivity foreshadow Jesus' Gethsemane prayers. They resonate with Job's experience and may have inspired Jeremiah's prayers. King David is a prototype of Isaiah's Suffering Servant and a mentor to the apostle Paul's passion narrative (Acts 21-28). David bears the burden of faithful obedience "with a spirit of patient submission to the will and providence of God."<sup>1</sup> As we have seen in our earlier expositions these psalms map the soul's trajectory through enemy territory. David finds himself in the cross-hairs of his enemies' slander and malice, a victim of their deception and duplicity. His only safe zone is in the refuge Yahweh provides. "For you alone, Lord make me dwell in safety" (Ps 4:8). Only those "who take refuge in you. . . sing for joy" (Ps 5:11).

### *Vulnerability*

*Lord my God, I take refuge in you;  
save and deliver me from all who pursue me,  
or they will tear me apart like a lion and rip me to pieces  
with no one to rescue me.  
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.*

Psalm 7:1-5

Psalm 7 brings this sequence of deliverance psalms to a climax on several levels. The psalmist's vulnerability has reached its limit. The evils of the tongue (slander, betrayal, accusations, lies) have escalated to life-threatening violence. His ferocious enemies are like lions ready to pounce

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<sup>1</sup> Calvin, *The Psalms*, 90.

and tear him apart and rip him to pieces. All five psalms reference the dark night of soul. The double sequence of morning and evening prayers makes the reader conscious of a daily cycle and the psalmist's desire for rest in the midst of the trial. But now the psalmist weeps all night and floods his bed with his tears (Ps 6:6), and in Psalm 7 he fears being trampled to death and made to "sleep in the dust" (Ps 7:5). The danger escalates and David's prayers intensify. He calls out to the Lord (Ps 3:4), saying, "Have mercy on me and hear my prayer" (Ps 4:1). His pleas become more desperate, "Listen to my words, Lord, consider my lament. Hear my cry for help, my King and my God, for to you I pray" (Ps 5:1). He is compelled to examine his soul and plead for mercy, "Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath" (Ps 6:1).

Finally, he makes his ultimate appeal based on his own innocence and righteousness – an innocence based entirely on the grace of Yahweh's righteousness. David is confident that his prayers have been answered: "Lead me, Lord, in your righteousness because of my enemies make my way straight before me" (Ps 5:8). Like Job before him he argues his case before God the righteous judge (Job 31). He does not defend himself before those who have turned his glory into shame (Ps 3:2) or leveled slanderous accusations against him (Ps 5:9). He does not respond to those who have conducted a smear campaign against him. He comes before God's bar of justice with boldness, not by means of his own merit, but by the mercy of God (Ps 6:9). Three if-clauses make his case: If he has committed evil; if he has betrayed his friends; if he has ripped off his enemies; then he deserves to be pursued by his enemy, overtaken and trampled. But the psalmist is confident that his integrity is true and flows from his covenant relationship with Yahweh.

#### *Decree Justice*

*Arise, Lord, in your anger;  
rise up against the rage of my enemies.  
Awake, my God; decree justice.  
Let the assembled peoples gather around you,  
while you sit enthroned over them on high.  
Let the Lord judge the peoples.*

Psalm 7:6-8a

David, the defendant, rests his case. He boldly appeals to the Lord for justice. Psalms 3:7 and 7:6 form a striking parallel, an *inclusio* that binds the sequence of psalms together:

Arise, Lord!	Arise, Lord, in your anger;
Deliver me, my God!	rise up against the rage of my enemies.
Strike all my enemies on the jaw;	Awake, my God, decree justice (7:6).
break the teeth of the wicked (3:7).	

Altogether these psalms shed considerable light on David's response to Absalom's rebellion, Shimei's slander, Ahithophel's defection, and Joab's insubordination. These psalms underscore David's dependence upon God to bring about justice. He is intent on letting God resolve the crisis and bring about justice. King David is a model of willed passivity in passionate determination and holy dependence upon the Lord. David envisions the exercise of God's

judgment in the full view of the “assembled peoples.” Everything is transparent – subject to public witness. Everything is under the absolute authority of the one who sits enthroned over them on high. All the Lord has to do is “decree justice.”

*Vindication*

*Vindicate me, Lord, according to my righteousness,  
according to my integrity, O Most High.  
Bring to an end the violence of the wicked  
and make the righteous secure – you, the righteous God  
who probes minds and hearts.*

*My shield is God Most High,  
who saves the upright in heart.  
God is a righteous judge,  
a God who displays his wrath every day.*

*If he does not relent,  
he will sharpen his sword;  
he will bend and string his bow.  
He has prepared his deadly weapons;  
he makes ready his flaming arrows.*

*Whoever is pregnant with evil conceives trouble and gives  
birth to disillusionment.  
Whoever digs a hole and scoops it out falls into the pit they have made.  
The trouble they cause recoils on them;  
their violence comes down on their own heads.*

*I will give thanks to the Lord because of his righteousness;  
I will sing the praises of the name of the Lord Most High.*

Psalm 7:8b-17

The plea for vindication is in full public view of the assembled peoples who are gathered around the throne of the Lord who judges all the nations. The scene envisions the future judgment of God when the Son of Man comes in his glory and “all the nations are gathered before him, and he will separate the people from one from another as a shepherd separates sheep from goats” (Matt 25:31-32; see Rev 20:11-15). For David the vindication is personal: “Vindicate me.” He looks to “my righteous God” (Ps 4:1), “my King and my God” (Ps 5:2), and the “Lord my God” (Ps 7:1, 3) for lasting justice. Vindication is “according to my righteousness, according to my integrity” (Ps 7:8). Like Job before him, David claims to abide in the wisdom of God’s law. His reference to “my righteousness” and “my integrity” is not an attempt to merit God’s favor or justify his ways to God. He knows he is a sinner saved by God’s grace. But he is also honest with the benefits of obeying the will of God, even when it comes to dealing with his sin. His integrity conveys a sense of wholeness, completeness, and soundness rather than sinless perfection. In the

New Testament, Paul aims for a similar conviction when he strives with all his energy to present believers “fully mature in Christ” (Col 1:28). David’s confidence is in keeping with Jesus’ challenge to “seek first his kingdom and his righteousness” (Matt 6:33). David knew that we would never feel secure in our own righteousness. It is only when the righteous God, who probes minds and hearts, makes the righteous secure that we experience God’s deliverance (Ps 7:9). Righteousness is received by faith in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ (Rom 3:24).

True vindication, the kind sought by David, requires an end of evil. Righteousness cannot exist alongside violence. Salvation is impossible apart from the wrath of God. We cannot defeat evil, but God can. “My shield is God Most High” is the third reference to “shield” in this sequence of psalms (Ps 3:3; 5:12; 7:10). Martin Luther insisted that those who pray, “Hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, they will be done,” must also pray: “Curses, maledictions and disgrace upon every other name and every other kingdom. May they be ruined and torn apart and may all their schemes and wisdom and plans run aground.”<sup>2</sup>

David’s militancy against evil called for prayer and willed passivity. He was dependent upon God to act on behalf of himself and the people. Jesus-style militancy is consistent with this willed passivity and is marked by the cross. The apostolic commitment to combat readiness is intentional, but instead of being armed with the “weapons of the world” (2 Cor 10:4), the apostle Peter called for a Christ-like mind-set that was willing to suffer for the good (1 Pet 2:21; 3:17-18). Karl Barth describes the believer’s militancy:

“The militant revolt demanded of Christians — and this distinguishes it from all kinds of other revolts — is not directed *against* people: not even against the host of unbelievers, false believers, and the superstitious. . . nor even. . . against the wicked. . . In terms of their commission — even though they will sometimes clash with all kinds of people in discharging it — they rebel and fight *for* all men, even, and in the last resort precisely, for those with whom they may clash.”<sup>3</sup>

God the righteous judge is a militant warrior who saves the upright in heart. Metaphorically, God sharpens his sword, strings his bow, readies his deadly weapons, and lights his flaming arrows. The psalmist’s description of evil reflects the historical back story to these psalms. The intentional, pre-meditated evil of Absalom and Ahithophel was destined from the beginning to end in tragedy. The progression of evil from concept to finished product will always end in disaster. James captured the psalmist’s thought well when he wrote, “after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death” (James 1:15). Romans 1 conveys a similar message. Those who suppress the truth of God in wickedness are given over to their sinful desires. They receive in themselves the due penalty for their sin. They conceive evil and give birth to depravity. They fall into the trap they dug. “Their violence comes down on their own heads” (Ps 7:16). “Mischief backfires; violence boomerangs” (Ps 7:16 MSG).

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1956), 21:101. Quoted in Brian Webster and David R. Beach, *The Essential Bible Companion to the Psalms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 43.

<sup>3</sup> Harink, *1 Peter*, 127. Karl Barth, *The Christian Life: Church Dogmatics*, vol. 4/4: Lecture Fragments, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 210 (emphasis original).

David's passion narrative ends on a strong note of praise. The psalmist declares, "I will give thanks to the Lord because of his righteousness." This righteousness includes the Lord's faithfulness to us in the midst of a fallen and broken world. God "makes good to his servants in defending and preserving their lives."<sup>4</sup> But the Lord's righteousness goes beyond our protection and deliverance from evil people and includes our final vindication and everlasting deliverance. We need a shield and a refuge to protect us from the ultimate accuser. David's passion narrative is a type, pointing to the passion narrative of the Righteous One who took on our sin "so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:21). John Newton, the converted slave trader wrote, "Be Thou my Shield and hiding Place, that, sheltered by Thy side, I may my fierce accuser face, and tell him Thou has died!"<sup>5</sup>

The Lord Most High is a title for God rarely used outside the Psalms. "Canaanite religion gave a similar title to Baal, but Abram (Gen 14:18ff), as David does here, claimed it explicitly and only for the Lord."<sup>6</sup> The title may signify to all people, especially to those who do not know Yahweh, "my righteous God," that the Lord is far superior to all would-be competitors. There is no god or ideology or power or religion that can come close to God Most High, and the Lord's marque distinction is righteousness. The apostle Peter declared this same truth 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).

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<sup>4</sup> Calvin, *The Psalms*, 92.

<sup>5</sup> John Newton, "Approach, My Soul, the Mercy Seat," *Olney Hymns* (London: W. Oliver, 1779), number 12, available at <http://www.hymntime.com/tch/htm/a/p/p/approach.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> Kidner, *The Psalms*, 65.