

PSALM 56

It seems by this, and many other psalms, that even in times of the greatest trouble and distress David never hung his harp upon the willow-trees, never unstrung it or laid it by; but that when his dangers and fears were greatest he was still in tune for singing God's praises. He was in imminent peril when he penned this psalm, at least when he meditated it; yet even then his meditation of God was sweet.

I. He complains of the malice of his enemies, and begs mercy for himself and justice against them (v. 1, 2, 5-7).

II. He confides in God, being assured that he took his part, comforting himself with this, that therefore he was safe and should be victorious, and that while he lived he should praise God (v. 3, 4, 8-13). How pleasantly may a good Christian, in singing this psalm, rejoice in God, and praise him for what he will do, as well as for what he has done.

~~150~~ PSALM 56:1-7

PRAYER FOR HELP UNDER OPPRESSION

To the chief musician upon Jonath-elem- rechokim, Michtam of David, when the Philistines took him in Gath.

David, in this psalm, by his faith throws himself into the hands of God, even when he had by his fear and folly thrown himself into the hands of the Philistines; it was when they took him in Gath, whither he fled for fear of Saul, forgetting the quarrel they had with him for killing Goliath; but they soon put him in mid of it, ~~150~~ 1 Samuel 21:10, 11. Upon that occasion he changed his behaviour, but with so little ruffle to his temper that then he penned both this psalm and the 34th. This is called *Michtam* — a *golden psalm*. So some other psalms are entitled, but this has something peculiar in the title; it is upon *Jonath-elem-rechokim*, which signifies *the silent dove afar off*. Some apply this to David himself, who wished for the wings of a dove on which to fly away. He was innocent and inoffensive, mild and patient, as a dove, was at this time driven from his nest, from the

sanctuary (^{480B}Psalm 84:3), was forced to wander afar off, to seek for shelter in distant countries; there he was like the doves of the valleys, mourning and melancholy; but silent, neither murmuring against God nor railing at the instruments of his trouble; herein a type of Christ, who was as a sheep, dumb before the shearers, and a pattern to Christians, who, wherever they are and whatever injuries are done them, ought to be as silent doves. In this former part of the psalm,

I. He complains to God of the malice and wickedness of his enemies, to show what reason he had to fear them, and what cause, what need, there was that God should appear against them (v. 1): *Be merciful unto me, O God!* That petition includes all the good we come to the throne of grace for; if we obtain mercy there, we obtain all we can desire, and need no more to make us happy. It implies likewise our best plea, not our merit, but God's mercy, his free rich mercy. He prays that he might find mercy with God, for with men he could find no mercy. When he fled from the cruel hands of Saul he fell into the cruel hands of the Philistines. "Lord" (says he), "be thou merciful to me now, or I am undone." The mercy of God is what we may flee to and trust to, and in faith pray for, when we are surrounded on all sides with difficulties and dangers. He complains,

1. That his enemies were very numerous (v. 2): "*They are many that fight against me, and think to overpower me with numbers; take notice of this, O thou Most High!* and make it to appear that wherein they deal proudly thou art above them." It is a point of honour to come in to the help of one against many. And, if God be on our side, how many soever they are that fight against us, we may, upon good grounds, boast that there are more with us; for (as that great general said) "How many do we reckon him for?"

2. That they were very barbarous: they would *swallow him up*, v. 1 and again v. 2. They sought to devour him; no less would serve; they came upon him with the utmost fury, like beasts of prey, to eat up his flesh, ^{497D}Psalm 27:2. *Man* would swallow him up, those of his own kind, from whom he might have expected humanity. The ravenous beasts prey not upon those of their own species; yet a bad man would devour a good man if he could. "They are men, weak and frail; make them to know that they are so," ^{499D}Psalm 9:20.

- 3.** That they were very unanimous (v. 6): *They gather themselves together*; though they were many, and of different interests among themselves, yet they united and combined against David, as Herod and Pilate against the Son of David.
- 4.** That they were very powerful, quite too hard for him if God did not help him: *“They fight against me (v. 2); they oppress me, v. 1. I am almost overcome and borne down by them, and reduced to the last extremity.”*
- 5.** That they were very subtle and crafty (v. 6): *“They hide themselves; they industriously cover their designs, that they may the more effectually prosecute and pursue them. They hide themselves as a lion in his den, that they may mark my steps;”* that is, “they observe every thing I say and do with a critical eye, that they may have something to accuse me of” (thus Christ's enemies watched him, ~~20:20~~ Luke 20:20), or “they have an eye upon all my motions, that they may gain an opportunity to do me a mischief, and may lay their snares for me.”
- 6.** That they were very spiteful and malicious. They put invidious constructions upon every thing he said, though ever so honestly meant and prudently expressed (v. 5): *“They wrest my words, put them upon the rack, to extort that out of them which was never in them;”* and so they made him an offender for a word (~~29:21~~ Isaiah 29:21), misrepresenting it to Saul, and aggravating it, to incense him yet more against him. They made it their whole business to ruin David; all their thoughts were against him for evil, which put evil interpretations upon all his words.
- 7.** That they were very restless and unwearied. They continually waited for his soul; it was the life, the precious life, they hunted for; it was his death they longed for, v. 6. They fought daily against him (v. 1), and would daily swallow him up (v. 2), and every day they wrested his words, v. 5. Their malice would not admit the least cessation of arms, or the acts of hostility, but they were continually pushing at him. Such as this is the enmity of Satan and his agents against the kingdom of Christ and the interests of his holy religion, which if we cordially espouse, we must not think it strange to meet with such treatment as this, as though some strange thing happened to us. Our betters have been thus used. So persecuted they the prophets.

II. He encourages himself in God, and in his promises, power, and providence, v. 3, 4. In the midst of his complaints, and before he has said what he has to say of his enemies, he triumphs in the divine protection.

1. He resolves to make God his confidence, then when dangers were most threatening and all other confidences failed: “*What time I am afraid*, in the day of my fear, when I am most terrified from without and most timorous within, then *I will trust in thee*, and thereby my fears shall be silenced.” Note, There are some times which are, in a special manner, times of fear with God's people; in these times it is their duty and interest to trust in God as their God, and to know whom they have trusted. This will fix the heart and keep it in peace.

2. He resolves to make God's promises the matter of his praises, and so we have reason to make them (v. 4): “*In God I will praise*, not only his work which he has done, but *his word* which he has spoken; I will give him thanks for a promise, though not yet performed. *In God* (in his strength and by his assistance) I will both glory in his word and give him the glory of it.” Some understand by *his word* his providences, every event that he orders and appoints: “When I speak well of God I will with him speak well of every thing that he does.”

3. Thus supported, he will bid defiance to all adverse powers: “*When in God I have put my trust*, I am safe, I am easy, and *I will not fear what flesh can do unto me*; it is but flesh, and cannot do much; nay, it can do nothing but by divine permission.” As we must not trust to an arm of flesh when it is engaged for us, so we must not be afraid of an arm of flesh when it is stretched out against us.

III. He foresees and foretels the fall of those that fought against him, and of all others that think to establish themselves in and by any wicked practices (v. 7): *Shall they escape by iniquity?* They hope to escape God's judgments, as they escape men's, by violence and fraud, and the arts of injustice and treachery; but shall they escape? No, certainly they shall not. The sin of sinners will never be their security, nor will either their impudence or their hypocrisy bring them off at God's bar; God will in his anger cast down and cast out such people, ^{ROM} Romans 2:3. None are raised so high, or settled so firmly, but that the justice of God can bring them down, both from their dignities and from their confidences. *Who knows*

the power of God's anger, how high it can reach, and how forcibly it can strike?

~~1518~~ PSALM 56:8-13

CONFIDENCE IN GOD

Several things David here comforts himself with in the day of his distress and fear.

I. That God took particular notice of all his grievances and all his griefs, v. 8.

1. Of all the inconveniences of his state: *Thou tellest my wanderings, my flittings*, so the old translation. David was now but a young (under thirty) and yet he had had many removes, from his father's house to the court, thence to the camp, and now driven out to sojourn where he could find a place, but not allowed to rest any where; he was hunted like a partridge upon the mountains; continual terrors and toils attended him; but this comforted him, that God kept a particular account of all his motions, and numbered all the weary steps he took, by night or by day. Note, God takes cognizance of all the afflictions of his people; and he does not cast out from his care and love those whom men have cast out from their acquaintance and converse.

2. Of all the impressions thus made upon his spirit. When he was wandering he was often weeping, and therefore prays, "*Put thou my tears into thy bottle*, to be preserved and looked upon; nay, I know they are *in thy book*, the book of thy remembrance." God has a bottle and a book for his people's tears, both those for their sins and those for their afflictions. This intimates,

(1.) That he observes them with compassion and tender concern; he is afflicted in their afflictions, and knows their souls in adversity. As the blood of his saints, and their deaths, are precious in the sight of the Lord, so are their tears, not one of them shall fall to the ground. *I have seen thy tears*, ~~1215~~ 2 Kings 20:5. *I have heard Ephraim bemoaning himself*, ~~2118~~ Jeremiah 31:18.

(2.) That he will remember them and review them, as we do the accounts we have booked. Paul was mindful of Timothy's tears (⁵¹⁰⁴2 Timothy 1:4), and God will not forget the sorrows of his people. The tears of God's persecuted people are bottled up and sealed among God's treasures; and, when these books come to be opened, they will be found vials of wrath, which will be poured out upon their persecutors, whom God will surely reckon with for all the tears they have forced from his people's eyes; and they will be breasts of consolation to God's mourners, whose sackcloth will be turned into garments of praise. God will comfort his people according to the time wherein he has afflicted them, and give to those to reap in joy who sowed in tears. What was sown a tear will come up a pearl.

II. That his prayers would be powerful for the defeat and discomfiture of his enemies, as well as for his own support and encouragement (v. 9): *"When I cry unto thee, then shall my enemies turn back; I need no other weapons than prayers and tears; this I know, for God is for me, to plead my cause, to protect and deliver me; and, if God be for me, who can be against me so as to prevail?"* The saints have God for them; they may know it; and to him they must cry when they are surrounded with enemies; and, if they do this in faith, they shall find a divine power exerted and engaged for them; their enemies shall be made to turn back, their spiritual enemies, against whom we fight best upon our knees, ⁴⁹⁸⁵Ephesians 6:18.

III. That his faith in God would set him above the fear of man, v. 10, 11. Here he repeats, with a strong pathos, what he had said (v. 4), *"In God will I praise his word; that is, I will firmly depend upon the promise for the sake of him that made it, who is true and faithful, and has wisdom, power, and goodness enough to make it good."* When we give credit to a man's bill we honour him that drew it; so when we do, and suffer, for God, in a dependence upon his promise, not staggering at it, we give glory to God, we praise his word, and so give praise to him. Having thus put his trust in God, he looks with a holy contempt upon the threatening power of man: *"In God have I put my trust, and in him only, and therefore I will not be afraid what man can do unto me* (v. 11), though I know very well what he would do if he could," v. 1, 2. This triumphant word, so expressive of a holy magnanimity, the apostle puts into the mouth of every true believer, whom he makes a Christian hero, ⁵⁸¹⁶Hebrews 13:6. We may each of us boldly say, *The Lord is my helper, and then I will not fear what*

man shall do unto me; for he has no power but what he has given him from above.

IV. That he was in bonds to God (v. 12): *“Thy vows are upon me, O God!* — not upon me as a burden which I am loaded with, but as a badge which I glory in, as that by which I am known to be thy menial servant — not upon me as fetters that hamper me (such are superstitious vows), but upon me as a bridle that restrains me from what would be hurtful to me, and directs me in the way of my duty. Thy vows are upon me, the vows I have made to thee, to which thou art not only a witness, but a party, and which thou hast commanded and encouraged me to make.” It is probably that he means especially those vows which he had made to God in the day of his trouble and distress, which he would retain the remembrance of, and acknowledge the obligations of, when his fright was over. Note, It ought to be the matter of our consideration and joy that *the vows of God are upon us* — our baptismal vows renewed at the Lord's table, our occasional vows under convictions, under corrections, by these we are bound to live to God.

V. That he should still have more and more occasion to praise him: *I will render praises unto thee.* This is part of the performance of his vows; for vows of thankfulness properly accompany prayers for mercy, and when the mercy is received must be made good. When we study what we shall render this is the least we can resolve upon, to render praises to God — poor returns for rich receivings! Two things he will praise God for: —

1. For what he had done for him (v. 13): *“Thou has delivered my soul, my life, from death,* which was just ready to seize me.” If God have delivered us from sin, either from the commission of it by preventing grace or from the punishment of it by pardoning mercy, we have reason to own that he has thereby delivered our souls from death, which is the wages of sin. If we, who were by nature dead in sin, are quickened together with Christ, and are made spiritually alive, we have reason to own that God has delivered our souls from death.

2. For what he would do for him: *“Thou hast delivered my soul from death,* and so hast given me a new life, and thereby hast given me an earnest of further mercy, that thou wilt *deliver my feet from falling;* thou hast done the greater, and therefore thou wilt do the less; thou hast begun a good work, and therefore thou wilt carry it on and perfect it.” This may be

taken either as the matter of his prayer, pleading his experience, or as the matter of his praise, raising his expectations; and those that know how to praise in faith will give God thanks for mercies in promise and prospect, as well as in possession. See here,

(1.) What David hopes for, that God would deliver his feet from falling either into sin, which would wound his conscience, or into the appearance of sin, from which his enemies would take occasion to wound his good name. Those that think the stand must take heed lest they fall, because the best stand no longer than God is pleased to uphold them. We are weak, our way is slippery, many stumbling-blocks are in it, our spiritual enemies are industrious to thrust us down, and therefore we are concerned by faith and prayer to commit ourselves to his care who *keeps the feet of his saints*.

(2.) What he builds this hope upon: “*Thou hast delivered my soul from death, and therein hast magnified thy power and goodness, and put me into a capacity of receiving further mercy from thee; and now wilt thou not secure and crown thy own work?*” God never brought his people out of Egypt to slay them in the wilderness. He that in conversion delivers the soul from so great a death as sin is will not fail *to preserve it to his heavenly kingdom*.

(3.) What he designs in these hopes: *That I may walk before God in the light of the living*, that is,

[1.] “That I may get to heaven, the only land of light and life; for in this world darkness and death reign.”

[2.] “That I may do my duty while this life lasts.” Note, This we should aim at, in all our desires and expectations of deliverance both from sin and trouble, that we may do God so much the better service — *that, being delivered out of the hands of our enemies, we may serve him without fear*.