

Psalm 56: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 21 November 2020

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[0 : 00] Psalm 56 To the choir master, according to the dove on far-off Terebince, a mictam of David, when the Philistines seized him in Gath. Be gracious to me, O God, for man tramples on me. All day long an attacker oppresses me.

My enemies trample on me all day long, for many attack me proudly. When I am afraid, I put my trust in you, in God whose word I praise. In God I trust, I shall not be afraid.

What can flesh do to me? All day long they injure my cause. All their thoughts are against me for evil. They stir up strife, they lurk, they watch my steps, as they have waited for my life.

For their crime will they escape? In wrath cast down the peoples, O God. You have kept count of my tossings, put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your book?

Then my enemies will turn back, in the day when I call. This I know, that God is for me. In God whose word I praise. In the Lord whose word I praise. In God I trust, I shall not be afraid.

[1 : 08] What can man do to me? I must perform my vows to you, O God. I will render thank-offerings to you. For you have delivered my soul from death, yes, my feet from falling, that I may walk before God in the light of life. Psalm 56 is a psalm of trust, from a psalmist encompassed by great danger.

The superscription of the psalm sets it in the context of the events of 1 Samuel chapter 21, verses 10 to 13. And David rose and fled that day from Saul, and went to Achish, the king of Gath.

And the servants of Achish said to him, Is not this David the king of the land? Did they not sing to one another of him in dances? Saul has struck down his thousands, and David his ten thousands. And David took these words to heart, and was much afraid of Achish, the king of Gath. So he changed his behaviour before them, and pretended to be insane in their hands, and made marks on the doors of the gate, and let his spittle run down his beard. Like other such superscriptions, the effect is to present David, not merely as the author of the psalm, but as paradigmatic in his struggles. David is effectively exiled from the land and surrounded by his enemies, and the worshipper is invited to compare his own situation with that of David, conforming himself to the anointed one, much as the Christian should look to Christ, and model himself after him. The psalmist calls out to God for help in his great trouble. But the predominant note of the psalm is one of trust and confidence. The psalm opens with a familiar petition to God to be gracious, a request made from a position of immediate danger.

The psalmist is surrounded by enemies who are in the ascendancy, and persistent in their assaults upon him. Verses 3-4 present a movement of the psalmist's soul, beginning with fear, and ending with the resolution of that state in not being afraid. The movement is a there and back again, or chiastic structure, moving from fear, to trust, to praise, then back to trust, and then to not being afraid. The psalmist's response to fear is to trust, which leads him to God, whom he praises.

With the confidence in God aroused by praise, he is moved to a firmer trust, and his fears are dispelled. The more that he reflects upon God, the more the superiority of the one that he trusts in over his enemies becomes plain. They are but frail flesh, and what can flesh and its mortality and weakness ultimately do to him, when he is supported by the eternal God? From this declaration of confidence in the Lord, the psalmist returns to describing his enemies and their actions against him. His enemies are relentless. Their assaults are continuous all day long. They are preoccupied with doing him harm.

[3 : 56] They lie in wait for him at every opportunity. The enemies described here might be different from those described in verses 1 and 2. At this juncture, he turns from description of his enemies to petition to God. He asks the rhetorical question, for their crime will they escape? The answer must surely be no. He calls upon God to cast his enemies down. David is confident that God is neither unaware nor unmindful of his distress. Every tear he has shed, every restless night, is intimately known by God.

God has gathered the psalmist's tears in a bottle and recorded all of his wanderings or his tossings and turnings. All of his sorrow and struggle has, as it were, been written down by God himself.

The psalmist can approach God as one who is not unfeeling to his servant, but as the one who diligently preserves testimonies of the suffering of his faithful ones, so that they might always be brought to mind. When he calls to the Lord in the midst of deep peril, his enemies will be defeated, as God is for him and will act in his cause. In a reaffirmation of the theme of the psalm, David returns to a slightly modified reprise of his statement of verse 4.

In God whose word I praise, in the Lord whose word I praise, in God I trust, I shall not be afraid. What can man do to me? God's word is his promise. It's the rope to which David doggedly clings in the depths of his troubles. The words of David here might remind the Christian of the words of Paul in Romans chapter 8 verse 31. If God is for us, who can be against us? Confident in God's deliverance, David vows to render thanks offerings to him. Like one espying a cloud heavy with rain on the horizon in a land of deep drought, anticipation of deliverance is itself a foretaste of the awaited relief.