

Psalm 59: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Psalm 59. To the choir master, according to Do Not Destroy, a mictam of David, when Saul sent men to watch his house in order to kill him. Deliver me from my enemies, O my God. Protect me from those who rise up against me. Deliver me from those who work evil, and save me from bloodthirsty men.

For behold, they lie in wait for my life. Fierce men stir up strife against me. For no transgression or sin of mine, O Lord. For no fault of mine, they run and make ready.

Awake, come to meet me and see. You, Lord God of hosts, are God of Israel. Rouse yourself to punish all the nations. Spare none of those who treacherously plot evil.

Each evening they come back, howling like dogs and prowling about the city. There they are, bellowing with their mouths, with swords in their lips. For who, they think, will hear us? But you, O Lord, laugh at them. You hold all the nations in derision.

O my strength, I will watch for you. For you, O God, are my fortress. My God in his steadfast love will meet me. God will let me look in triumph on my enemies. Kill them not, lest my people forget. Make them totter by your power, and bring them down.

[1 : 1 7] O Lord, are shield. For the sin of their mouths, the words of their lips, let them be trapped in their pride. For the cursing and lies that they utter, consume them in wrath. Consume them till they are no more.

That they may know that God rules over Jacob, to the ends of the earth. Each evening they come back, howling like dogs and prowling about the city. They wander about for food and growl if they do not get their fill.

But I will sing of your strength. I will sing aloud of your steadfast love in the morning. For you have been to me a fortress and a refuge in the day of my distress. O my strength, I will sing praises to you. For you, O God, are my fortress.

The God who shows me steadfast love. Psalm 59 is the cry of an individual in distress for help. The superscription associates it with the events of 1 Samuel chapter 19, verses 11 to 18.

Saul sent messengers to David's house to watch him, that he might kill him in the morning. But Michael, David's wife, told him, If you do not escape with your life tonight, tomorrow you will be killed.

[2 : 2 5] So Michael let David down through the window, and he fled away and escaped. Michael took an image and laid it on the bed, and put a pillow of goat's hair at its head, and covered it with the clothes.

And when Saul sent messengers to take David, she said, He is sick. Then Saul sent the messengers to see David, saying, Bring him up to me in the bed, that I may kill him. And when the messengers came in, behold, the image was in the bed, with the pillow of goat's hair at its head.

Saul said to Michael, Why have you deceived me thus, and let my enemy go, so that he has escaped? And Michael answered Saul, He said to me, Let me go, why should I kill you?

Now David fled and escaped, and he came to Samuel at Ramah, and told him all that Saul had done to him. And he and Samuel went to live at Naath. When reading such superscriptions, we should bear in mind that they are not part of the psalms themselves, but most likely later editions.

The majority of the psalms have superscriptions of some kind. Only 34 have none. The superscriptions generally give us a number of pieces of information. First of all, the collection to which they belong, the author who wrote them.

- [3 : 34] Some contain information for their performance. Others have details about the genre to which they belong, a mictam or a mascal or something like that. And then a few others have historical superscriptions, presenting specific historical events as the background for the psalm.

The Septuagint halves the number of the psalms without superscripts. In Habakkuk chapter 3 verses 2-19, we find an example of a sort of psalm outside of the book of psalms.

That composition has both a superscription and a postscript, addressing it to the choir master with stringed instruments. Psalm 72 has both a superscription and a postscript, the postscript closing out the second book of the Psalter.

There is a debate over whether some of the material within the superscriptions of various psalms actually belongs as postscript for the preceding psalm, even though they have come down to us as superscriptions.

Historical superscriptions, such as we have here, are clustered in the second book of the Psalter and overwhelmingly relate psalms to events in David's life prior to his becoming king.

- [4 : 38] Of the 13 instances, 8 are found in Psalms 51-63. There are reasonable grounds to question whether the superscriptions are inspired. They might be better considered as lying in a sort of penumbral realm.

We shouldn't put over much weight upon them and their accuracy, but nor should we dismiss them. Even if they were completely uninspired, we should not presume thereby that they convey no true information, even less that they are theologically misleading or inaccurate, nor that their content is useless to the interpreter of the psalms.

Part of what they involve is a tentative correspondence between Psalms of David and the story of David, between the books of Samuel and the Psalter, strengthening the bond between the Psalter and the rest of the canon.

They underline the interrelatedness of the canon. The superscriptions more generally help us to discern greater order and structure within the Psalter. They illumine the sort of considerations that guided the arrangers of the Psalter, as Gordon Wenham has argued, among others.

They overwhelmingly present David in weakness, suffering and crisis, mostly during his pursuit by Saul, but also after Nathan's confrontation with him after his sin concerning Bathsheba, in Psalm 51, and during the coup of Absalom.

- [5 : 54] These historical settings contrast with the portrait of the glorious exalted king found in royal psalms such as Psalm 110. They offer exemplary instances in which such a psalm could be sung.

The David of the historical superscriptions is a David in distress. He serves as the paradigmatic worshipper, inviting the worshipper to identify with the king in their own distress.

Whether or not these are historically accurate in a strictly literal manner, they are very instructive indications of how the Psalms were supposed to be read in a more theological manner.

It is entirely possible that the compilers of the Psalms were reading the inspired words of the Psalms back into the story of the suffering David, in a not dissimilar manner to the way that Christians read them forward into the story of the suffering son of David, the Lord Jesus Christ.

In the historical superscriptions then, we might find an invitation and precedent for engaging in messianic reading of the Psalms. This Psalm opens with a series of petitions, two requests for deliverance from evil enemies, paralleled with petitions to be set on high in protection from those who are rising up against him and to be saved.

[7 : 05] The Psalmist describes his adversaries. Apart from any wrong that he has committed, they are stirring up conflict and setting traps for him. In these verses, a fuller picture of the enemies introduced at the beginning of verse 1 of the Psalm is gradually emerging.

He calls upon the Lord to act, addressing him as the God of Israel and of the nations, as the God who has committed himself to act on behalf of his people. The Psalmist petitions God to rouse himself and to execute his judgments upon the nations and their evildoers.

Verse 6 is a sort of refrain to which we will return in verse 14. It characterises the Psalmist enemies. They are like packs of menacing dogs who prowl and howl.

Their destructive power is in their speech and they do not think that anyone will be able to act against them. This portrayal of them is powerful and unflattering. The enemies of the Psalmist are like bands of unclean scavengers.

The packs of dogs may growl, but the Lord scoffs at them. The unruly pack of the nations is an object of ridicule for him. They are unable to threaten his power or ultimately to destroy those who take refuge in him.

[8 : 15] The hearer of the Psalm might be reminded of Psalm 2 verse 4. He who sits in the heavens laughs. The Lord holds them in derision. In verses 9 to 10, the Psalmist watches for God.

God is his strength. He trusts in him as a fortress. He is confident that God will act in his defence and deliverance, bringing him triumph over his enemies. In looking to God, he rests in God's character and power.

God is mighty and a secure refuge to those who look to him for shelter. He is a God of steadfast love who will not abandon his servants. He will return to these themes at the end of the Psalm.

The Psalmist seeks God's judgement against those who have risen up against him. He desires that they would be made an example of. He doesn't want them to be killed outright. Rather, he prays that they would be made to totter and to stagger, being destroyed more gradually over a period of time, rendering them a more powerful and cautionary example in the minds of the people of Israel and in the eyes of the nations.

When they face this destruction, they will be suffering for the sins of their mouths. This is one of several instances of an imprecatory psalm, a psalm calling God to destroy stubbornly recalcitrant enemies of his rule and his people.

[9 : 30] In such psalms, the psalmist puts his vindication in the hands of the Lord and petitions him to act in terms of his covenant. The enemies are marked by persistent evil and sinfulness and persecution and oppression, and calling for God to bring destruction upon them is a petition for God's judgement to be enacted, vindicating and delivering the righteous while bringing down the wicked.

Various writers have written helpfully on the imprecatory psalms, which often cause Christians some discomfort. However, used carefully and appropriately, they have a place in the life, the prayers and the worship of the church.

John Day's *Crying for Justice* is an example of a useful book on the subject, and more recently, Trevor Lawrence has been doing research on the issue. The conclusion of the psalm returns to the description of the enemies as prowling dogs, repeating verse 6.

This time, however, they are described as growling and wandering about for food if they aren't satisfied. The dogs come in the evening, but in the morning the psalmist sings of God's steadfast love, which has preserved him through the night.

The contrast between the night and the day becomes a metaphor for the contrast between the distress of the psalmist when he is stalked by his enemies and he must wait for deliverance and the relief of the morning, when the prowling dogs slink back to their dens.

[10 : 48] The action of God is the answer to the threatenings of the wicked. The description of the dogs in verses 6-7 was answered by the psalmist's confidence in awaiting God as he looked to him for deliverance in verses 8-10.

The same pattern recurs at the end of the psalm. The dogs come out again in verses 14-15 and in verses 16-17 the psalmist looks to God's deliverance.

However, now he looks to it, not as something awaited in the future, but as something that has been realised. Verses 9-10 read, O my strength, I will watch for you, for you, O God, are my fortress.

My God in his steadfast love will meet me. God will let me look in triumph on my enemies. Verse 17, by contrast, reads, O my strength, I will sing praises to you, for you, O God, are my fortress, the God who shows me steadfast love.

The latter is the statement of one whose watching for God has been rewarded by sight, whose waiting for him has been met with deliverance. A question to consider.

[11 : 55] What are some examples of New Testament passages that figure the story of Christ into the Psalms?