



Psalm 140 - Prayer for Deliverance from Enemies

To the leader. A Psalm of David.

Introduction

This individual lament serves the needs of people under threat from ungodly people who intend serious harm. The psalm does not clarify whether these ungodly people are Israelites, but this is the most likely identification in a psalm of David. This psalm, in praying for protection and expressing trust, also prays for the defeat of these enemies and looks forward to God's display of his justice.

The psalm has a familiar theme to many of David's other Psalms, where he cried out to God in a time of trouble. This trouble seems to be slander against him, perhaps when he was a fugitive escaping from Saul's court.

The leader or chief musician is thought by some to be the Lord God himself, and others suppose him to be a leader of choirs or musicians in David's time, such as Heman the singer or Asaph; refer to 1 Chronicles 6:33, 16:17, and 25:6. Charles Spurgeon remarked, "The writer wished this experimental hymn to be under the care of the chief master of song, that it might neither be left unsung, nor chanted in a slovenly manner."

Psalm 140:1-5 - Deliver Me from the Plots of the Wicked!

The basic request is clear from the verbs deliver (v.1), preserve (v.1 and v.4), and guard (v.4). The threat is from evil men, who are further defined as violent men and the arrogant, who plan evil things. These enemies prefer wickedness to godliness, and they pose a serious danger to the faithful.

- ¹ Deliver me, O Lord, from evildoers;
protect me from those who are violent,

- ² who plan evil things in their minds
and stir up wars continually.
- ³ They make their tongue sharp as a snake's,
and under their lips is the venom of vipers. Selah

Psalm 140:1-3

Deliver me, O Lord, from evildoers. Many times in David's life he suffered under the presence and pressure of evil and violent men. This desperate song came from such a time, and shows its urgency by having no prelude of praise or contemplation. David went straight to his plea. Spurgeon commented, "The persecuted man turns to God in prayer; he could not do a wiser thing. Who can meet the evil man and defeat him save Jehovah himself, whose infinite goodness is more than a match for all the evil in the universe?"

Who plan evil things in their minds. Those evil men were known by the evil things in their hearts: <<*No one brings suit justly, no one goes to law honestly; they rely on empty pleas, they speak lies, conceiving mischief and begetting iniquity*>> (Isaiah 59:4), and: <<*It was I who trained and strengthened their arms, yet they plot evil against me*>> (Hosea 7:15). Their evil actions were not accidents unconnected from their true nature, shown in that they were always ready for conflict and war. Spurgeon added, "It is an awful thing to have such a heart-disease as this. When the imagination gloats over doing harm to others, it is a sure sign that the entire nature is far gone in wickedness."

For the connection of evil or wickedness with violence, refer to Psalm 11:5, Proverbs 4:17, 10:6, and 10:11.

Under their lips is the venom of vipers. The desire for war and evil things is often expressed in sharp and poisonous words. David felt both the sting and the poison of such men and their words. In Romans 3:13 Paul uses this phrase as part of his argument that Jews and Greeks are alike under sin. In principle, Paul expanded the idea beyond David's original sense and applied the concept to all humanity in its fallen condition. The word rendered viper is *achsub* and occurs only here; it is therefore impossible to determine what species of snake is intended.

Selah, used 71 times in the Book of Psalms and three times in Habakkuk, has never been fully understood because the Hebrew root word is undefined. Many take it to be an instruction related to either the music, such as an interlude, or the cadence of the song, e.g. stop and reflect. Selah is repeated three times in Psalm 140, and here indicates that the deep sinfulness of man is worthy of careful consideration. People often think too little of God's greatness and too little of man's sinfulness. Derek Kidner observed, "What emerges clearly from this passage is the evil that

can arise, not from any pressure of circumstances but from a love of violence, cruelty and intrigue for their own sake.”

⁴ Guard me, O Lord, from the hands of the wicked;
protect me from the violent
who have planned my downfall.

⁵ The arrogant have hidden a trap for me,
and with cords they have spread a net;
along the road they have set snares for me. Selah

Psalm 140:4-5

Guard me, O Lord, from the hands of the wicked. In the first portion of Psalm 140 David acknowledged the presence of wicked and violent men. With such a realistic view, he then asked God, “Protect me from the violent.”

The arrogant have hidden a trap for me. They hoped to make David trip over a series of hidden snares and cords and nets and traps, many of which are expressed in their poisonous words (v.3). David was not blind to the traps, but he had not lost hope in God’s help to avoid them. Adam Clarke commented, “They hunted David as they would a dangerous wild beast: one while striving to pierce him with the spear; another to entangle him in their snares, so as to take and sacrifice him before the people, on pretence of his being an enemy to the state.” Spurgeon added, “David’s enemies wished to snare him in his path of service, the usual way of his life. Saul laid many snares for David, but the Lord preserved him.” And again, “If a godly man can be cajoled, or bribed, or cowed, or made angry, the wicked will make the attempt. Ready are they to twist his words, misread his intentions, and misdirect his efforts; ready to fawn, and lie, and make themselves mean to the last degree so that they may accomplish their abominable purpose.”

Selah. When David considered the danger coming from those who opposed him, it prompted a thoughtful pause.

Psalm 140:6-8 - O Lord, My Strength, Hear Me!

The right response to such danger is to reaffirm trust in God, and to ask him for help. Specifically, the singer asks God not to allow the wicked to have their desires.

⁶ I say to the Lord, ‘You are my God;
give ear, O Lord, to the voice of my supplications.’

⁷ O Lord, my Lord, my strong deliverer,

you have covered my head in the day of battle.

⁸ Do not grant, O Lord, the desires of the wicked;
do not further their evil plot. Selah

Psalm 140:6-8

You are my God. The Lord is the covenant God of Israel, but with these words the faithful worshipper affirms that he has personally laid hold of God's love. This was a reason for David's hope and trust in Yahweh. He would worship no other god; his allegiance was to Yahweh alone. This devotion gave him confidence that God would hear the voice of his supplications. God does not just hear to the words of the cry, but the voice of the cry. It is distinctive and meaningful to him.

O Lord, my Lord, my strong deliverer. David cried out to Yahweh (O Lord) his Master *adonai* (my Lord), recognising him as the Lord of his life, and no other god. The true God could actually help David, being the strength of his salvation. My strong deliverer is also translated as 'the strength of my salvation.' Refer to the comment made on Psalm 3:2.

You have covered my head in the day of battle. David knew many literal battles, but he also lived through many battles with lying and slanderous men. David testified that God had been his protection, his shield, his armour in those battles. Spurgeon commented, "That is to say, God had been David's Armour-bearer. The Lord had borne a shield before him; instead of the harness in which warriors put their confidence, God had covered David with a coat of mail through which no sword of the enemy could possibly cut its way."

Do not grant, O Lord, the desires of the wicked. In recognising the supremacy of Yahweh, David realised that if God were to help the wicked, then they would be exalted. He prayed for God to work for his people and against the desires of the wicked.

Selah. When David considered the need for the wicked to be stopped in their evil plotting, it prompted a thoughtful pause.

Psalm 140:9-11 - Let Their Schemes Recoil on Them!

These verses pray that the evil schemes would recoil on the heads of those who plot them; refer to the comment made on Psalm 94:23. On the nature of these curses, refer to the comments made on Psalm 5:10, 35:4-8, and 109:6-20. The success of such people would defile the land.

⁹ Those who surround me lift up their heads;
let the mischief of their lips overwhelm them!

- 10 Let burning coals fall on them!
Let them be flung into pits, no more to rise!
- 11 Do not let the slanderer be established in the land;
let evil speedily hunt down the violent!

Psalm 140:9-11

Those who surround me lift up their heads. Since the exact occasion in David's life for this prayer remains unknown, it is not known who exactly he meant. It could have been Saul, who was David's long and persistent enemy. It could have been Doeg the Edomite, who was an evil, violent man who bore a false report against David; refer to 1 Samuel Chapters 21-22. The most likely source of David's trouble was Saul. If so, this prayer is another significant example of how David would not violently strike against Saul as the Lord's anointed king, even when he had the opportunity; refer to 1 Samuel 18:11, 19:9-10, 24:1-7 and 26:7-11. David would not touch Saul because for all his sins and faults, he was God's anointed king. When David was attacked by Saul, he would pour out his heart in prayer to the Lord, entrusting Saul's punishment to God in heaven, not taking it in his own hands.

Let the mischief of their lips overwhelm them! David prayed for simple justice with regard to his enemies. He prayed they would be covered with the same evil they had spoken against others. Under the New Covenant Christians are told not return evil for evil: <<***Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all***>> (Romans 12:17), but they can sympathise with David's cry for justice.

Let burning coals fall on them! David prayed that the same fire that wicked men poured out on others would be poured out on them. He prayed that this would destroy the wicked, and that they would be hunted by evil until they were overthrown. Kidner observed, "The burning coals and pits are probably metaphorical, the former for the searing words which they have loved to use (but those that come back to them will be more deadly, because unanswerable; on 120:3f.), the latter for the traps and pitfalls they have made for others." Spurgeon added, "The psalmist doubtless had before his mind's eye the picture of Sodom, where burning coals fell on the guilty cities, and where men stumbled into the fire, and when they tried to escape, fell into the deep slime pits, and perished."

The term burning coals also appears in this context in: <<***If your enemies are hungry, give them bread to eat; and if they are thirsty, give them water to drink; for you will heap coals of fire on their heads, and the Lord will reward you***>> (Proverbs 25:21-22), which Paul quotes in Romans 12:20. Refer to the comments made there.

Let them be flung into pits. Alexander Maclaren explained, “The noun in Psalm 140:10c is found only here, and is by some rendered ‘pits,’ by others ‘floods,’ and by others is corrected into ‘nets.’ If ‘floods’ is taken as the meaning, destruction by water is set by the side of that by fire, as if the antagonistic elements forgot their opposition and joined in strange amity to sweep the wicked from the earth.”

Let evil speedily hunt down the violent! These evil men hunted David (vv.4-5). David prayed that the same would be returned to them, that the hunters would be hunted by their very evil. Spurgeon remarked, “Men of false and cruel tongues are of most use when they go to fatten the soil in which they rot as carcasses: while they are alive they are the terror of the good, and the torment of the poor.”

Psalm 140:12-13 - I Am Confident that the Lord Will Protect Me.

The psalm closes, as many laments do, by expressing confidence in the Lord and by guiding the faithful in what they can expect.

- ¹² I know that the Lord maintains the cause of the needy,
and executes justice for the poor.
- ¹³ Surely the righteous shall give thanks to your name;
the upright shall live in your presence.

Psalm 140:12-13

I know that the Lord maintains the cause of the needy. David remained confident that God would defend his afflicted people. This would mean **justice for the poor** and others who suffer from the words and works of wicked men. Spurgeon noted, “Many talk as if the poor had no rights worth noticing, but they will sooner or later find out their mistake when the judge of all the earth begins to plead with them.” Clarke added, “Every person who is persecuted for righteousness’ sake has God for his peculiar help and refuge; and the persecutor has the same God for his especial enemy.”

Surely the righteous shall give thanks to your name. Psalm 140 ends on a note of confidence. Although assaulted by the wicked, David put his trust in the Lord, and gave all his desire for retribution unto him. David believed that in the end the righteous would be thankful and **the upright shall live in your presence** - the best reward of all. Kidner concluded, “The last line is wholly positive. His heart is free to find its true home, and his last words match the climax to which the whole of Scripture moves: ‘His servants shall serve him: and they shall see his face.’”