



Psalm 141 - Prayer for Preservation from Evil

A Psalm of David.

Introduction

This is an individual lament, geared to a situation much like that of Psalm 140. The particular contribution of this psalm is its earnest prayer for God to protect the faithful person against all insincerity and compromise amid such dangers. It shows David as a man of tender conscience who asked God to deal with his own sin and weakness before addressing the wicked men who fought against him. It shows that David was even more concerned about evil inside him than he was about evil from others.

Derek Kidner commented, "The colourful Hebrew of the middle verses is difficult, but the thrust of the psalm is plain: a prayer against insincerity and compromise, and a plea for survival under the savage attacks which such an attitude has invited."

Psalm 141:1-2 - O Lord, Hear My Prayer.

The singer earnestly asks God to give ear to his voice when he calls out to Lord. The prayer that he offers, which is sung in corporate worship, is likened to sacrificial acts that are also performed in worship, such as the incense: *<<and when Aaron sets up the lamps in the evening he shall offer it, a regular incense-offering before the Lord throughout your generations>>* (Exodus 30:8), and: *<<Now at the time of the incense-offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside>>* (Luke 1:10), the image: *<<When he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell before the Lamb, each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints>>* (Revelation 5:8), and the evening sacrifice: *<<And the other lamb you shall offer in the evening, and shall offer with it a grain-offering and its drink-offering, as in the morning, for a pleasing odour, an offering by fire to the Lord>>* (Exodus 29:41).

- 1 I call upon you, O Lord; come quickly to me;
give ear to my voice when I call to you.
- 2 Let my prayer be counted as incense before you,
and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice.

Psalm 141:1-2

I call upon you, O Lord; come quickly to me. David's need was urgent, so he directed his prayer to the true God (Yahweh, the Lord) and begged him to help with haste. Spurgeon too cried out to the Lord, "I have cried unto thee, I still cry to thee, and I always mean to cry to thee. To whom else could I go? What else can I do? Others trust to themselves, but I cry unto thee."

Give ear to my voice when I call to you. When a child cries out to a parent, the parent hears not only the words by the voice of the cry. The Lord can hear the voice of his people when they cry out to him, and it moves him to action.

It is comforting for the Christian to know that when they cry out to God he not only hears their words but knows their voice, just as they should know his: <<My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me>> (John 10:27).

Let my prayer be counted as incense before you. David used the smoke and smell of incense as a representation of his prayer to God. His posture of prayer, i.e. the lifting up of my hands, was a gift to God even as the evening sacrifice. As noted above, Revelation 5:8 says that the prayers of God's people are like incense, and Hebrews 13:15 describes praise to be like a sacrifice unto God. It follows that:

- Prayer rises to heaven even as the smoke of incense.
- Prayer pleases God even as incense has a pleasing smell.
- Prayer needs some fire to be effective, and incense is activated with fire.

The lifting up of hands in worship was a common posture for the psalmists, just as it is in many church gatherings today: <<*Hear the voice of my supplication, as I cry to you for help, as I lift up my hands towards your most holy sanctuary*>> (Psalm 28:2), <<*So I will bless you as long as I live; I will lift up my hands and call on your name*>> (Psalm 63:4), <<*I revere your commandments, which I love, and I will meditate on your statutes*>> (Psalm 119:48), and: <<*Lift up your hands to the holy place, and bless the Lord*>> (Psalm 134:2).

If David wrote this psalm while a fugitive from King Saul, then the ideas of incense and the evening sacrifice held special meaning, because he was not free to publically go to the tabernacle and share in these acts of worship. When necessity kept him from the tabernacle, prayer would replace the offering of incense and sacrifice. Adam Clarke commented, "Incense was offered every

morning and evening before the Lord, on the golden altar, before the veil of the sanctuary. Exodus 29:39, and Numbers 28:4.”

Incense connected with the tabernacle and temple rituals needed to be pure and it needed to be prepared. David intended to offer pure and prepared prayers unto God.

Psalm 141:3-5 - Keep Me from Taking Part in Their Evil.

The singer may be inclined to avoid danger by joining the men who work iniquity, and this section asks God to help him avoid all such temptation. The request of v.3, <<**set a guard over my mouth, O Lord**>>, is probably to be taken in that light: it is a prayer that God would protect the faithful from playing along with schemers in speech who betray the Lord and his godly ones. While the faithful person will accept correction from others of the faithful, his prayer is continually against the evil deeds of the schemers. This prayer reveals great insight into how a person in these circumstances would actually feel.

- ³ Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord;
keep watch over the door of my lips.
- ⁴ Do not turn my heart to any evil,
to busy myself with wicked deeds
in company with those who work iniquity;
do not let me eat of their delicacies.

Psalm 141:3-4

Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord. David did not want the same mouth that prayed as incense to be used for lies or any evil thing. He asked God to keep watch over the door of my lips, so that he would not say evil or foolish things. Derek Kidner added, “If the house of God needed its guards and doorkeepers, how much more the man of God!” This is in keeping with the views of James: <<**Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell**>> (James 3:4-6).

Do not turn my heart to any evil. David knew that it was more than his lips that needed protection; his heart could also be affected by some evil thing, resulting in wicked works. This was David’s way of praying what Jesus later taught: <<**And**

lead us not into temptation>> (Matthew 6:13a NIV). Spurgeon observed, “The way the heart inclines the life soon tends: evil things desired bring forth wicked things practised. Unless the fountain of life is kept pure the streams of life will soon be polluted.” Alexander Maclaren commented, “The psalmist is not suffering from the hostility of the workers of iniquity, but dreads becoming infected with their sin.”

Do not let me eat of their delicacies. David did not want to walk in the ways of those who work iniquity, so he did not want to eat at their table either. This may have been a literal situation for David, but the principle of not enjoying all the luxuries that the wicked partake of is always relevant to God’s people. David had a similar view to that of the Korahites: <<*I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness*>> (Psalm 84:10b).

⁵ Let the righteous strike me;
let the faithful correct me.
Never let the oil of the wicked anoint my head,
for my prayer is continually against their wicked deeds.

Psalm 141:5

Let the righteous strike me; let the faithful correct me. David rejected the delicacies of the wicked, but embraced the correction that came from the righteous. He recognised that it would be a kindness (*hesed*) to him: <<*Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Well meant are the wounds a friend inflicts, but profuse are the kisses of an enemy*>> (Proverbs 27:5-6).

Spurgeon commented, “When the ungodly smile upon us their flattery is cruel; when the righteous smite us their faithfulness is kind.” And again, “Depend upon it, the man who will tell you your faults is your best friend. It may not be a pleasant thing for him to do it, and he knows that he is running the risk of losing your friendship; but he is a true and sincere friend, therefore thank him for his reproof, and learn how you may improve by what he tells you.”

For my prayer is continually against their wicked deeds. The previous lines described David as grateful for correction from the righteous. Still, he prayed for God’s work against the deeds of the wicked.

This section of Psalm 141 is a great challenge for the translator and the interpreter. Alexander Maclaren wrote of the phrase, my prayer is continually against their wicked deeds: “But what is the meaning and bearing of the last clause of Psalms 141:5? No wholly satisfactory answer has been given.”

Psalm 141:6-7 - Judgement Shall Overtake Them at Last.

The Hebrew of these verses presents some difficulties also. The main point is that eventually God will bring his judgement upon the judges, apparently the leaders among the ungodly schemers; then the faithful person will be vindicated, and the unfaithful might even learn wisdom from the words of the faithful psalmist.

- ⁶ When they are given over to those who shall condemn them,
then they shall learn that my words were pleasant.
- ⁷ Like a rock that one breaks apart and shatters on the land,
so shall their bones be strewn at the mouth of Sheol.

Psalm 141:6-7

When they are given over to those who shall condemn them. This is a difficult passage in the Hebrew and the translation is uncertain. Some commentators believe that David meant King Saul, his chief enemy and judge, yet would not name him out of a desire to not attack God's anointed king: <<**He said to his men, 'The Lord forbid that I should do this thing to my lord, the Lord's anointed, to raise my hand against him; for he is the Lord's anointed'**>> (1 Samuel 24:6).

So shall their bones be strewn at the mouth of Sheol. This is another phrase difficult to understand from the original. Perhaps David used this word picture to describe how ruined he felt he and his righteous companions were at the hands of the wicked. Those so ruined could only cry out to God for help. Maclaren observed, "The point of the figure lies in the resemblance of the bones strewn at the mouth of Sheol to broken clods turned up by a plough. Sheol seems here to waver between the meanings of the unseen world of souls and the grave."

Psalm 141:8-10 - I Trust You to Keep Me Safe.

In the meanwhile, the faithful keep the eyes of their hearts looking toward God in trust. Verses 9-10 reveal that the evildoers introduced in v.4 are laying schemes to harm the faithful, setting traps, snares, and nets to catch them. The prayer that God would keep David from falling prey to their schemes becomes a prayer that the wicked would fall into their own nets: <<**Those who surround me lift up their heads; let the mischief of their lips overwhelm them! Let burning coals fall on them! Let them be flung into pits, no more to rise! Do not let the slanderer be established in the land; let evil speedily hunt down the violent!**>> (Psalm 140:9-11). Refer to the associated comment to those verses.

- ⁸ But my eyes are turned towards you, O God, my Lord;
in you I seek refuge; do not leave me defenceless.

9 Keep me from the trap that they have laid for me,
and from the snares of evildoers.

10 Let the wicked fall into their own nets,
while I alone escape.

Psalm 141:8-10

But my eyes are turned towards you, O God, my Lord. Even in such a terrible condition, as described in the previous lines, David deliberately set his **eyes** upon the Lord. Because God himself was his refuge, David prayed do not leave me defenceless. Without God's protection, he was at the mercy of his wicked enemies. Clarke commented, "In all times, in all places, on all occasions, I will cleave unto the Lord, and put my whole confidence in him."

Remember what David said to Saul: <<*Now therefore let my lord the king hear the words of his servant. If it is the Lord who has stirred you up against me, may he accept an offering; but if it is mortals, may they be cursed before the Lord, for they have driven me out today from my share in the heritage of the Lord, saying, "Go, serve other gods"*>> (1 Samuel 26:19). This shows that David knew that the many others lied about him to Saul, hoping to slay him with their slander. It also shows that when David was a fugitive, his enemies hoped to entice him to idolatry saying, "Go, serve other gods." David would not; in the Lord alone he took refuge.

Keep me from the trap that they have laid for me, and from the snares of evildoers. The enemies of David were determined to destroy him, and so they set many snares, traps, and nets for him. David's prayer was that they would fall into their own nets, even as he would escape safely. David's trust in God was repeatedly vindicated as those who sought to destroy him were themselves destroyed. Spurgeon commented, "It is hard to keep out of snares which you cannot see, and to escape gins which you cannot discover. Well might the much-hunted psalmist cry, 'Keep me.'" And Kidner added, "The last line ('while, as for me—I pass right on!') has a buoyancy worthy of the man who has slipped through many a net with the help of God, and is sure that his journey is by no means over."

Maclaren concluded, "What is uppermost in the psalmist's mind is, in any case, not the destruction of his enemies, but their being made powerless to prevent his "passing by" their snares un-captured."