



Psalm 54 - Prayer for Vindication

To the leader: with stringed instruments. A Maskil of David, when the Ziphites went and told Saul, 'David is in hiding among us.'

Introduction

This is an individual lament asking, as many laments do, for God's help against those who threaten the lives of the faithful. The title connects the song to the events of 1 Samuel 23:19, where the Ziphites, among whom David was hiding, informed Saul of where David was, promising to hand David over to him.

The psalm directs its singers to God's protection and is therefore well-suited for the pious to use when they are under threat of deadly persecution; for those who do not face such persecution, this psalm is appropriate to sing on behalf of their brothers and sisters who are in danger.

There were actually two occasions when the Ziphites betrayed David to King Saul, first in 1 Samuel Chapter 23 and the second in 1 Samuel Chapter 26. David escaped both times, but the circumstances of this psalm seem to best fit the circumstances of 1 Samuel Chapter 23, when David learned of the Ziphite betrayal but before the deliverance of God was displayed (1 Samuel 23:26-29).

Psalm 54:1-3 - O God, Save Me from the Ruthless

The psalm opens by describing the circumstances: ruthless men, who have no respect for God, i.e. they do not set God before themselves.

David was in fear for his life. In such a case the proper appeal is to God's name, where God's name can be an image for his personal presence (Leviticus 19:12 and Deuteronomy 6:13); or else as the sum of his revealed character (Exodus 34:6). There is also an appeal to God's might, which is always greater than any might of the enemies.

- ¹ Save me, O God, by your name,
and vindicate me by your might.
- ² Hear my prayer, O God;
give ear to the words of my mouth.

Psalm 54:1-2

Save me, O God, by your name, and vindicate me by your might. In his distress, David relied on both the name and the strength of God. Name speaks of the nature and character of God; strength of his great power. David knew that God's strength could respond to his need by what he knew of God's name: <<*The Lord answer you in the day of trouble! The name of the God of Jacob protect you!*>> (Psalm 20:1).

David's rescue would be his vindication. His enemies would have greater evidence that David was in the right and they were in the wrong when God answered this prayer and preserved this man after his own heart. God gave David a remarkable vindication after each time the Ziphites betrayed him. Shortly after both times the Ziphites betrayed David he had the opportunity to kill King Saul. Both times he spared Saul's life (1 Samuel Chapters 24 and 26), and both times Saul admitted his own great wrong to David.

Hear my prayer, O God. It was common for David and others in their prayers to merely ask for God to hear or give ear to their cry: <<*Answer me when I call, O God of my right! You gave me room when I was in distress. Be gracious to me, and hear my prayer*>> (Psalm 4:1). It was assumed that if the good and merciful God heard, he would act.

- ³ For the insolent have risen against me,
the ruthless seek my life;
they do not set God before them. Selah

Psalm 54:3

The term 'the insolent' is frequently translated as **strangers** and can refer to foreigners from outside Israel, for example: <<*Your country lies desolate, your cities are burned with fire; in your very presence aliens devour your land; it is desolate, as overthrown by foreigners*>> (Isaiah 1:7), and: <<*On the day that you stood aside, on the day that strangers carried off his wealth, and foreigners entered his gates and cast lots for Jerusalem, you too were like one of them*>> (Obadiah 11). In context the Ziphites, who belong to Judah, are acting like Gentiles in opposing God's faithful. Some Hebrew manuscripts read 'insolent men', Hebrew זדִים (*zdym*), in place of זרים (*zrym*), a change of only one letter to

another with similar appearance, which is the term found in the very similar Psalm 86:14. This word is also well-suited to the situation, where Israelites are acting unfaithfully in Psalm 119; the same word is rendered ‘arrogant’ in Proverbs 21:24 and Malachi 3:15 and 4:1.

They do not set God before them. Their problems were not only in relation to David, but also in relation to God. Their rejection of David was just another way that they rejected God. It is not known if David specifically had Saul in mind, but it certainly fits the jealous king.

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.

Psalm 54:4-5a - God Is My Helper

The prayer directed to God in vv.1-3 is a wise one, because God has promised to be the helper and upholder of life for each of his faithful people. Thus each believer can trust that God will return the evil to my enemies, i.e. the evil they intend to carry out, and thus can leave the timing of that to God, which may or may not be in the particular worshipper’s lifetime.

⁴ But surely, God is my helper;
the Lord is the upholder of my life.

^{5a} He will repay my enemies for their evil.

Psalm 54:4-5a

But surely, God is my helper. Although a hunted man, David could confidently expect God’s help. His present adversity had not led him to question the goodness of God, but to appeal to it. The prophet speaks with the same confidence in God: <<***Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation***>> (Isaiah 12:2).

The Lord is the upholder of my life. The sense of this remarkable statement is that *Adonai* is among those who help believers by upholding their life.

He will repay my enemies for their evil. Spurgeon writes, “They worked for evil, and they shall have their wages.” This idea is supported by: <<***The wages of the righteous is life, but the earnings of the wicked are sin and death***>> (Proverbs 10:16). Later, Paul would write about the due payment for those who sin: <<***For the wages of sin is death***>> (Romans 6:23a).

Psalm 54:5b-7 - I Will Bring a Freewill Offering

The worshipper looks forward to continued enjoyment of God's presence and favour. The freewill-offering is a kind of peace-offering (Leviticus 7:16), which means that its purpose is to celebrate God's goodness with a meal in his presence. The schemes of the ruthless cannot keep the faithful away from God forever.

- ^{5b} In your faithfulness, put an end to them.
- ⁶ With a freewill-offering I will sacrifice to you;
I will give thanks to your name, O Lord, for it is good.

Psalm 54:5b-6

In your faithfulness, put an end to them. David came to prayer again. He asked God to kill or cast out his enemies, and to do it in your faithfulness. David could pray such bold prayers against his enemies because he believed more than his self interest was at risk; so was God's faithfulness. Some are uncomfortable with prayers that ask for the doom of enemies. It is true that Jesus told his followers to pray in a more generous way for their enemies: <<*You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*>> (Matthew 5:43-44). Yet there is nothing wrong with the basic principle of wanting to see good triumph and for God to do his work against those who do evil: <<*Look at the nations, and see! Be astonished! Be astounded! For a work is being done in your days that you would not believe if you were told*>> (Habakkuk 1:5).

David lived out another aspect of this prayer. He prayed, put an end to them but refused to take vengeance in his own hands. Immediately after the second betrayal of the Ziphites in 1 Samuel 26:1, David had the opportunity to kill King Saul in his sleep and he refused to do it. David would not cut him off; he waited upon God to do it.

With a freewill-offering I will sacrifice to you. This described what is sometimes called a freewill sacrifice, one that is given to God without specific reference to a previous vow made. It was a sacrifice that did not need to be made; it was done freely out of gratitude: <<*They received from Moses all the offerings the Israelites had brought to carry out the work of constructing the sanctuary. And the people continued to bring freewill offerings morning after morning*>> (Exodus 36:3).

I will give thanks to your name, O Lord, for it is good. David said this in anticipation of God's rescue, but not in a demand for the rescue. He was able to praise God while the problem remained and before the prayer was answered: <<*O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures for ever*>> (1 Chronicles 16:34).

7 For he has delivered me from every trouble,
and my eye has looked in triumph on my enemies.

Psalm 54:7

For he has delivered me from every trouble. David confidently brought his request to God, knowing that many times before God had delivered him. God's past faithfulness became the ground for future faith. It is likely that David said this in faith, in anticipation of deliverance. When it came, it was remarkable. After the Ziphites betrayed David in 1 Samuel 26:1 Saul came very close to capturing him. When David was almost in Saul's grasp, the king learned of a Philistine invasion and had to break off his pursuit (1 Samuel 23:27-28).

And my eye has looked in triumph on my enemies. David knew what it was like to defeat his enemies before, Goliath is just one example; he trusted that he would see such defeats again.

There is a sense in which David in this psalm prefigured his great Son. Jesus was the anointed King yet to come into the fullness of his Kingdom. He came to rescue and lead God's people, and when he did, some among God's people betrayed him resulting in his death. It is easy to imagine Jesus praying the words of this psalm to his Father:

Save me, O God, by your name.
The insolent have risen against me.
But surely, God is my helper.
He has delivered me from every trouble.