



Psalm 56 - Trust in God under Persecution

To the leader: according to The Dove on Far-off Terebinths. Of David. A Miktam, when the Philistines seized him in Gath.

Introduction

Many take this to be an individual lament, but it could also be a psalm of anticipated thanksgiving: the description of troubles and prayer is taken up into gratitude that God has heard and will act, as he has acted in the past.

The specific troubles arise from people who aim to hurt the pious singer, as is common with lament psalms. The title links the psalm to the time when the Philistines captured David in Gath, which is recorded in 1 Samuel 21:10-15 and is similar to Psalm 34. It deals with the period between the visit to the tabernacle at Nob and David's arrival at Adullam. David was alone, desperate, afraid, and not thinking too clearly.

It is probable, although not certain, that 'The Dove on Far-off Terebinths' was the tune to which this psalm was sung; some connect it with the theme, thinking it represent a dove in trouble even as David was in trouble.

Like Psalm 16 and the next four psalms, Psalm 56 is called a Miktam of David. The title Miktam is best understood as golden; although others think it is related to a word meaning to cover, implying necessary secrecy in a time of crisis.

Psalm 56:1-4 - Man Tramples on Me

The singer describes his circumstances and sets his mind on the right response. The situation can be seen in the repetition of trample and attack; the response is seen in the repetition of trust. This enables those who sing the psalm to set their own hearts on the right response: when they are afraid, this is the antidote.

1 Be gracious to me, O God, for people trample on me;
all day long foes oppress me;
2 my enemies trample on me all day long,
for many fight against me.
O Most High, ³ when I am afraid,
I put my trust in you.
4 In God, whose word I praise,
in God I trust; I am not afraid;
what can flesh do to me?

Psalm 56:1-4

Be gracious to me, O God. David was in great and constant danger from many enemies, both the Philistines and Saul's servants. He cried out to God, knowing that divine help could rescue him from any man-made threat. He appealed to the mercy of God, not relying on what he may or may not deserve.

Gracious is also translated as merciful. Grace is when God gives people the things they do not deserve, whereas his mercy is when he does not punish the people in the way that they do deserve. Both grace and mercy abound in God's goodness.

For many fight against me. On earth David was greatly outnumbered so he looked for help from the God who is enthroned above. David knew the strategic value of high ground in battle; it made sense for him to look upwards for help from the Lord, O Most High.

When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. The young man who killed the lion and the bear, who killed Goliath, and was a successful young captain in Israel's army, did not deny the presence of fear. There were times when he was afraid. Yet he knew what to do with that fear; to boldly proclaim his trust in God despite the fear. Many do not serve God or speak a word in his name to others out of fear, and they wait for a time when they are no longer afraid to do so. David would counsel them, "I am sometimes afraid, but I trust in God and do what is right to do." Do not wait for the fear to stop before doing what is right before the Lord.

In God, whose word I praise. In the midst of the declaration of his trust in God, David calls attention to the praiseworthiness of God's Word. His trust in God was directly connected with God's Word. His trust was not a blind hope or wish cast up to heaven; it was based on God's revealed character and revealed promises.

In God I trust; I am not afraid. Trusting God has given David the momentum towards even greater faith. He began by trusting God even while afraid; with that trust rewarded he can take a further step: I will not fear.

What can flesh do to me? The instinctive reply to this rhetorical question is ‘a lot of harm’. One constantly hears of and experiences great harm that comes from mankind. Yet in the context of David’s trust in the Most High, he realises that with God for him, it does not matter what man or men may be against him. Jesus provides a similar message: <<***Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell***>> (Matthew 10:28). Reverential fear and awe of God breeds hope and trust in him.

Psalm 56:5-7 - They Have Waited for My Life

The psalm goes on to give more detail on the enemies’ schemes. It is clear, as is usually true with the psalms, that the enemies are not simply personal opponents of the singer but opponents of all that is good. In David’s experience, they would be the Philistines who thought he should be put to death, as confirmed by <<***the peoples***>> in v.7, i.e. Gentiles.

- ⁵ All day long they seek to injure my cause;
all their thoughts are against me for evil.
- ⁶ They stir up strife, they lurk,
they watch my steps.
As they hoped to have my life,
- ⁷ so repay them for their crime;
in wrath cast down the peoples, O God!

Psalm 56:5-7

All day long they seek to injure my cause. The attacks against David were not only violent; they were also devious, with the twisting and distortion of his words and intentions. His many enemies constantly plotted against him for evil, hoping to lie in wait and kill David with a surprise attack.

So repay them for their crime. David appealed to God’s justice. It was not right for these wicked enemies to triumph over him. Whether they were the Philistines of Gath or Saul’s servants, David asked God to cast them down.

In wrath cast down the peoples, O God! David knew that to incur the wrath of God was the most feared punishment any person could ever face: <<***A jealous and avenging God is the Lord, the Lord is avenging and wrathful; the Lord takes vengeance on his adversaries and rages against his enemies***>> (Nahum 1:2). It will be the final punishment for those who reject his Son: <<***Whoever believes in***>>

the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God's wrath>> (John 3:36), <<Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes on those who are disobedient>> (Ephesians 5:6), and: <<On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient>> (Colossians 3:6).

Psalm 56:8-11 - God Is for Me

These verses fill out the picture of trust: God keeps account of the tears of his faithful ones; he does not ignore their concerns. He is for those who trust in him. Verses 10-11 repeat v.4 with slight variations. The pious singer expects that his enemies will turn back, because God is trustworthy.

- ⁸ You have kept count of my tossings;
put my tears in your bottle.
Are they not in your record?
- ⁹ Then my enemies will retreat
on the day when I call.
This I know, that God is for me.

Psalm 26:8-9

You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle. In this period of David's life, before coming to Adullam Cave (1 Samuel Chapter 22), he was completely alone. This made him value the sympathy and care of God all the more, and he found great comfort in the thought that God noted his misery.

This I know, that God is for me. This was the ground of David's confidence. His wanderings and tears did not mean that God was against him. Instead he knew that God was for him, and would answer his prayer for rescue. Paul was to echo the triumphant end of this verse or of Psalm 118:7a, and cap it off with <<**who is against us?**>> (Romans 8:31b).

- ¹⁰ In God, whose word I praise,
in the Lord, whose word I praise,
¹¹ in God I trust; I am not afraid.
What can a mere mortal do to me?

Psalm 26:10-11

In God, whose word I praise. For the second and third times in this psalm David declared the greatness of God's Word. This was how he knew that God was for him. It was not just a wish, a dream, or a vain hope. It was well grounded because

God said it in his Word: <<*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God*>> (John 1:1).

In God I trust; I am not afraid. What can a mere mortal do to me? David repeated this phrase again, preaching confidence to himself. Because God was for him, as confirmed by his Word, David need not fear what man could do to him.

Psalm 56:12-13 - You Have Delivered My Soul from Death

The singer expresses his confidence that, if 'God is for him' (v.9), it is as good as done: God has delivered his soul from death. The vows and thank-offerings are varieties of the peace offerings that celebrate God's answer to prayer, as confirmed by: <<*And the flesh of your thanksgiving sacrifice of well-being shall be eaten on the day it is offered; you shall not leave any of it until morning. But if the sacrifice you offer is a votive offering or a freewill-offering, it shall be eaten on the day that you offer your sacrifice, and what is left of it shall be eaten the next day*>> (Leviticus 7:15-16), and: <<*With a freewill-offering I will sacrifice to you; I will give thanks to your name, O Lord, for it is good*>> (Psalm 54:6).

- ¹² My vows to you I must perform, O God;
I will render thank-offerings to you.
- ¹³ For you have delivered my soul from death,
and my feet from falling,
so that I may walk before God
in the light of life.

Psalm 56:12-13

My vows to you I must perform, O God; I will render thank-offerings to you. David referred to the sacrifice he would offer for the deliverance he knew God would bring. He was a long distance from God's altar so the sacrifice could not yet be made; but in David's heart it was already done, as was the anticipated rescue.

For you have delivered my soul from death. On his way to Gath, in Gath, and on his way from Gath, David's life was in constant danger. God and God alone delivered his life from his enemies, and kept his feet from falling.

That I may walk before God in the light of life probably describes enjoying God's presence in life, i.e. in true faithfulness; as confirmed by those who walk in the sight of God's face: <<*Happy are the people who know the festal shout, who walk, O Lord, in the light of your countenance*>> (Psalm 89:15), and those who walk in his light: <<*O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!*>> (Isaiah 2:5).