



Psalm 59 - Prayer for Deliverance from Enemies

To the leader: Do Not Destroy. Of David. A Miktam, when Saul ordered his house to be watched in order to kill him.

Introduction

This is another individual lament, seeking God's protection from enemies who threaten the pious person's life. The title connects the psalm to 1 Samuel 19:11, where David escaped from Saul's men through a window. The psalm is geared for the particular case in which the enmity is <<*for no fault of mine*>> (v.4).

The song has two sections (vv.1-10 and vv.11-17). Verses 6-7, a description of howling dogs, correspond to vv.14-15; and vv.9-10, 'O my strength' and 'steadfast love', correspond to v.17. The first section is a cry for help in the face of fierce and bloodthirsty enemies, and the second section voices confidence that God will protect the singer and make an example of the persecutors.

Derek Kidner says of 'Do not Destroy': "This may well be a tune-indication: confirmed in Isaiah 65:8, where the phrase is identified as a popular saying (perhaps a snatch of vintage song), and borrowed to become a reassuring word from God. Yet notice also David's instructions about Saul, 'Destroy him not' (1 Samuel 26:9)." Charles Spurgeon noted, "There are four of these 'Destroy not' Psalms, namely, the 57th, 58th, 59th, and 75th. In all them there is a distinct declaration of the destruction of the wicked and the preservation of the righteous."

Psalm 59:1-10 - Deliver Me from My Enemies, O God

The enemies are described as those who work evil and bloodthirsty men who lie in wait in order to take David's life (vv.2-3). They are fierce men, they stir up strife against David who is not to blame (v.4). Therefore, this psalm is for situations in which the pious may profess innocence; they face hostility even though they have done no injury to the enemies.

The enemies are described as howling like dogs, prowling about the city like a pack of scavengers. Although dogs were apparently used in Israel as guard dogs, as referred to in Isaiah 56:10, and as sheepdogs (Job 30:1), in a city the dogs roamed as semi-wild packs, feeding on carrion, trash, and anything they could kill: <<**For dogs are all around me; a company of evildoers encircles me**>> (Psalm 22:16a). Thus they posed a danger to any human who might venture out alone in the evening. However, the faithful should not despair at such threats: God is greater than the enemies and is well able to thwart their schemes (vv.8-10).

The actions of such dogs are best seen in the account of the death of the wicked queen Jezebel, the wife of King Ahab: <<**But when they went to bury her, they found no more of her than the skull and the feet and the palms of her hands. When they came back and told him, he said, ‘This is the word of the Lord, which he spoke by his servant Elijah the Tishbite, “In the territory of Jezreel the dogs shall eat the flesh of Jezebel; the corpse of Jezebel shall be like dung on the field in the territory of Jezreel, so that no one can say, This is Jezebel”’**>> (2 Kings 9:35-37).

- 1 Deliver me from my enemies, O my God;
protect me from those who rise up against me.
- 2 Deliver me from those who work evil;
from the bloodthirsty save me.

Psalm 59:1-2

Deliver me from my enemies. Many were David’s perils, many were his enemies, and many were the psalms that begin with this thought. It might be thought strange that the man after God’s heart, Israel’s greatest earthly king, had so many enemies. The idea is less strange when one considers just how many enemies the Son of David had: <<**The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify against it that its works are evil**>> (John 7:7), and: <<**If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you**>> (John 15:18).

David cried out O my God meaning it in the most reverent way. Through this psalm David declared his close and personal connection with God.

- My God (v.1).
- My fortress (v9 and v.17).
- My God of steadfast love (v.10 and v.17).
- My strength (v9 and v.17).

Protect me. The sense of this ancient Hebrew word is to lift up, as into a safe and defended place. It says, “Lift me up to your high tower where I am even higher above those who rise up against me.” This idea is repeated three more times in the psalm (v.9, v.16 and v.17).

Deliver me from those who work evil; from the bloodthirsty save me. David was the target of a focused assassination plot that came from the highest levels of Israel's government. Many felt they could advance their favour before King Saul by shedding David's blood. Knowing the danger, David looked to God for rescue and protection.

³ Even now they lie in wait for my life;
the mighty stir up strife against me.
For no transgression or sin of mine, O Lord,
⁴ for no fault of mine, they run and make ready.
Rouse yourself, come to my help and see!
⁵ You, Lord God of hosts, are God of Israel.
Awake to punish all the nations;
spare none of those who treacherously plot evil. Selah

Psalm 59:3-5

Even now they lie in wait for my life. The circumstances of 1 Samuel 19:11-12 must have amazed David. Assassins came against his own home, hoping to surprise him in the routines of daily life. David saw the mighty stir up strife against him and looked to God for help.

For no transgression or sin of mine, O Lord. David did not make a claim to sinless perfection. He simply understood and said to God that there was no justified reason at all for Saul to send the bloodthirsty assassins against him. Paul makes a similar claim when he was falsely accused and the Jewish authorities wanted the Roman governor to hand him over: *<<Now if I am in the wrong and have committed something for which I deserve to die, I am not trying to escape death; but if there is nothing to their charges against me, no one can turn me over to them. I appeal to the emperor>>* (Acts 25:11).

Rouse yourself, come to my help and see! David feared he would die if God were asleep to his need. He asked God to be active for him and to look upon his crisis: *<<Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord? Awake, do not cast us off for ever!>>* (Psalm 44:23).

You, Lord God of hosts, are God of Israel. David appealed to God with a variety of his names and titles:

- He was *Yahweh*, the covenant God of Israel (Lord).
- He was *Elohim Sabaoth*, the commander of heavenly armies (God of hosts).
- He was *Elohi Israel*, the God of his chosen people (God of Israel).

When used in the plural, as here, nations usually refers to Gentiles; refer also to v.8. The title, however, sets the psalm in a situation in which the enemies are Israelites. Perhaps the simplest way to interpret this term, then, is to see the psalm as describing these Israelites who sought to kill David as acting like Gentiles, refer to the comment made on Psalm 54:3.

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.

- ⁶ Each evening they come back,
howling like dogs
and prowling about the city.
- ⁷ There they are, bellowing with their mouths,
with sharp words on their lips —
for ‘Who’, they think, ‘will hear us?’

Psalm 59:6-7

Each evening they come back, howling like dogs. The men sent to watch David’s house and kill him were determined. They did not give up quickly and they growled like dangerous dogs, going all around the city to find and murder David. Such men also committed themselves to killing Paul: <<*In the morning the Jews joined in a conspiracy and bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink until they had killed Paul*>> (Acts 23:12)

There they are, bellowing with their mouths, with sharp words on their lips. Perhaps David actually heard such a bellow as he watched those who watched him. He heard their sharp words against him and their disregard for God or David or any authority, i.e. who will hear us? They anticipated that by killing David they would go completely unpunished for their crime.

- ⁸ But you laugh at them, O Lord;
you hold all the nations in derision.
- ⁹ O my strength, I will watch for you;
for you, O God, are my fortress.
- ¹⁰ My God in his steadfast love will meet me;
my God will let me look in triumph on my enemies.

Psalm 59:8-10

But you laugh at them, O Lord. David's danger from the assassins was real and fearful. Yet he understood that they were nothing against the might of God. The Lord could simply laugh at them and their arrogant claim that God did not hear or care about their evil.

You hold all the nations in derision. David saw God's laugh against the man who waited outside his house to kill him in connection with God's triumph over all the nations. All who opposed God would be held in derision and to account: <<**Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt**>> (Daniel 12:2), and: <<**For all of us must appear before the judgement seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil**>> (2 Corinthians 5:10).

For you, O God, are my fortress. David believed that God was like a strong, high tower for him. It seemed impossible for David to survive against such a powerful conspiracy against him, but God would be his fortress, his high tower.

David did not only believe that the Lord was the God of mercy in a distant, theoretical sense. He could confidently say my God in his steadfast love will meet me. He knew that God would be merciful to him and that God would meet him, even lead him, in his need.

Psalm 59:11-17 - Stop Them, that They May Know that You Rule

The basic request in this section is that God will bring judgement on these people in such a way that all people, both in Israel, 'my people' (v.11) and elsewhere, 'to the ends of the earth' (v.13), may know that a just, loving, and mighty God rules over Jacob and protects his faithful.

The curse is that the enemies would fail in their purpose, trapped in their pride; this is not angry vengefulness, which would be out of place in the psalms, but a cry for God to teach people a lesson. The song closes with confidence that the worshipper will survive these threats in order to sing aloud of your steadfast love, i.e. with the congregation of the faithful.

- ¹¹ Do not kill them, or my people may forget;
make them totter by your power, and bring them down,
O Lord, our shield.
- ¹² 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,

13 consume them in wrath;
consume them until they are no more.
Then it will be known to the ends of the earth
that God rules over Jacob. Selah

Psalm 59:11-13

Do not kill them, or my people may forget; make them totter by your power. David did not only want the defeat of his enemies. He wanted them defeated in a way that would do the most good for God's people. If those enemies were kept alive but scattered or would fall from grace then the lesson would last longer.

My people may forget is a reminder that whenever David prayed for the destruction of his enemies, and sometimes he prayed quite severely, he had in mind not only his personal deliverance but also what the display of divine justice would teach God's people.

For the cursing and lies that they utter. David seemed especially offended at the proud words he overheard from the men who hoped to ambush him. With cursing and lying they boasted of David's death and their own advancement through it.

Consume them in wrath; consume them until they are no more. Just a few lines before David prayed that God would not slay them; now he repeated the prayer consume them twice for emphasis. There is no contradiction; such prayers simply expressed David's desire that God 'get them' and he did not care much about how God got them.

Then it will be known to the ends of the earth that God rules over Jacob. What David did care about was God's honour and glory. David prayed that the way God dealt with these bloodthirsty assassins would tell the ends of the earth something about God's righteous rule in the world. These words are very similar to what David said to Goliath: <<*so that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel*>> (1 Samuel 17:46b), an event that happened not very long before Saul sent the assassins after David. He discerned that these enemies acted very Goliath-like.

14 Each evening they come back,
howling like dogs
and prowling about the city.
15 They roam about for food,
and growl if they do not get their fill.

Psalm 59:14-15

Each evening they come back, howling like dogs. The line from v.6 is repeated for emphasis. The reader may sense David peeking through a window at the assassins surrounding his house and seeing them for the pack of dangerous dogs that they were. In the morning (v.16) corresponds to each evening.

They roam about for food, and growl if they do not get their fill. As David watched them he noticed them prowling around in the streets around his house they way hungry dogs and people hunt for food: <<*They wander abroad for bread, saying, "Where is it?" They know that a day of darkness is ready at hand*>> (Job 15:23).

- ¹⁶ But I will sing of your might;
I will sing aloud of your steadfast love in the morning.
For you have been a fortress for me
and a refuge on the day of my distress.
- ¹⁷ O my strength, I will sing praises to you,
for you, O God, are my fortress,
the God who shows me steadfast love.

Psalm 59:16-17

But I will sing of your might. The murdering dogs howl in the street, but David will sing of God's might and steadfast love. They wait for him in the evening (v.14), but David was confident that with God as his fortress and refuge he would survive until morning, and survive singing his praises to God.

O my strength, I will sing praises to you. Although a conspiracy to kill him still existed in the highest places of the kingdom, David's heart was filled with songs of praise instead of dark fears. He started the psalm asking God for his protection (v.1); at the end of the psalm he was so confident that you, O God, are my fortress that he could sing about it.

When King Saul sent assassins to David's house, he openly revealed his desire to kill David. From then on, for perhaps 10 to 15 years, David had to live as a fugitive, constantly in danger of his life. It is interesting to notice that David entered that period singing praises, and was still able to sing praises to God at the end of it all (2 Samuel 1:17-27).