



Psalm 60 - Prayer for National Victory after Defeat

To the leader: according to The Lily of the Covenant. The Lily of the Covenant Testimony is the Hebrew phrase *Shushan eduth* and may refer to an instrument or a tune.

Introduction

This is a lament for the whole community, at a time when Israel's continued life in the land is under threat from Gentile neighbours. The title says it is 'for instruction'; perhaps this means that it is to instruct the people how to pray when their troops must fight.

The original setting is Israel, which by God's appointment dwelt in the land and was to be the source of blessing to the rest of the world, which often came, at least in Israel's better days, by making the other nations their subjects. Christians, who are not limited to one theocratic nation, recognise that God's process of conquering the Gentiles is through the witness of faithful believers: <<***And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age'***>> (Matthew 28:18-20); but they may still use this psalm to pray for God's blessing on this endeavour.

The title seems to link the psalm with the events of 2 Samuel 8:1-14; but 2 Samuel 8:13 reports the number of Edomites killed as eighteen thousand instead of the twelve thousand here. If these are the same events, then probably the different numbers represent different ways of computing the casualties, e.g. twelve thousand could be the number in an earlier report, while eighteen thousand could be the adjusted tally, after some time had passed. The campaign resulted in a great victory for David and brought several Gentile kingdoms under David's rule.

This psalm, with its air of lament, would thus represent the prayers of the people before the campaign had been completed. Verses 5-12 of Psalm 60 are taken up again in Psalm 108:6-13.

A Miktam of David; for instruction; when he struggled with Aram-naharaim and with Aram-zobah, and when Joab on his return killed twelve thousand Edomites in the Valley of Salt.

This is a Miktam, a golden psalm of David, intended for teaching, to instruct his present and future generations, especially about relying upon God and nothing else in conflict.

The historical markers against Aram-naharaim and with Aram-zobah, and when Joab on his return killed between twelve and eighteen thousand Edomites in the Valley of Salt place it sometime in the earlier part of King David's reign, when he subjected neighbouring nations. Second Samuel 8:1-8 records David's victories over Philistia, Moab, and Syria. Second Samuel 10:1-19 tells of David's victories over Ammon and Syria. First Chronicles 18:11-13 recounts David's victories over Edom specifically in the Valley of Salt, Moab, Ammon, Philistia, and Amalek.

The victories described in Second Samuel and First Chronicles do not mention the kind of setbacks lamented in this psalm. It is a reminder that the historical record often condenses events, and that the successes were real, yet not always immediate.

Psalm 60:1-5 - O God, You Have Rejected Us

The song opens by laying out the heart of the matter: the community counts itself as if God has rejected them, i.e. treated them as if they were not his own people. In this psalm, 'us' refers to the people of God as a whole, who are to view themselves as God's treasured possession, called for his own purposes, e.g. 'your people' (v.3), and 'those whom you love' (v.5). That is why the complaint is so touching, and why they may confidently pray for restoration and repair. The salvation that they pray for in v.5 is specifically success in their military endeavours, with a view toward Israel fulfilling its calling in the world.

- 1 O God, you have rejected us, broken our defences;
you have been angry; now restore us!
- 2 You have caused the land to quake; you have torn it open;
repair the cracks in it, for it is tottering.
- 3 You have made your people suffer hard things;
you have given us wine to drink that made us reel.

Psalm 60:1-3

O God, you have rejected us, broken our defences. David and the armies of Israel fought against foreign armies and experienced some measure of defeat. David knew that when the Lord fought for Israel victory was assured: <<*So David came to Baal-perazim, and David defeated them there. He said, ‘The Lord has burst forth against my enemies before me, like a bursting flood.’ Therefore that place is called Baal-perazim*>> (2 Samuel 5:20); if there was defeat, it was likely because of God’s displeasure: <<*Yet you have rejected us and abased us, and have not gone out with our armies*>> (Psalm 44:9). Therefore he appealed to what he believed to be the ultimate cause, not the immediate cause.

Now restore us! If in some way God had caused the defeat of Israel it did not discourage David from appealing to him that his favour be restored. This cry, now restore us immediately brings hope to the matter: <<*Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved*>> (Psalm 80:3).

You have caused the land to quake. David felt as if the whole earth shook at the defeat of God’s people, yet the God who could shake the earth could also repair the cracks in it: <<*if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land*>> (2 Chronicles 7:14).

You have made your people suffer hard things; you have given us wine to drink that made us reel. Israel’s defeat was hard to understand and there were many other aspects of their situation that caused David confusion. Still, there was a kind of comfort in understanding that God was the author of it all, because God what God does in judgement or discipline he can restore in love and mercy.

- 4 You have set up a banner for those who fear you,
to rally to it out of bowshot. Selah
- 5 Give victory with your right hand, and answer us,
so that those whom you love may be rescued.

Psalm 60:4-5

You have set up a banner for those who fear you. David felt that God had cast off and broken Israel, yet he would not stop flying the banner of allegiance and trust in God. The truth about God, who he is and what he has done, demanded that this banner be displayed. This is similar to the actions of Moses after their first ever battle victory: <<*Moses built an altar there and named it Yahweh-Nissi (which means “the Lord is my banner”)*>> (Exodus 17:15 NLT).

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. The Selah at this point suggests special attention to this fact. For the sake of that banner the cry for deliverance is raised: <<*On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious*>> (Isaiah 11:10).

Give victory with your right hand. The right hand is symbolic of power and might and David lets it be known that God's response will be an act of his mighty power.

So that those whom you love may be rescued. Claiming himself as God's beloved, despite the present defeat, David understood that his rescue would be found in greater allegiance to God, not less.

Psalm 60:6-8 - God Has Spoken: "These Lands Are Mine!"

These verses seem to recall an oracle, for God has spoken, that gives God's plan for Israel's place in the world. The places mentioned in vv.6-7, i.e. Shechem, Succoth, Gilead, Manasseh, Ephraim, and Judah, are all parts of the land that God promised to Israel; the places in v.8, Moab, Edom, and Philistia, are neighbouring lands, which also belong to the Lord: <<*Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine*>> (Exodus 19:5). Israel exists to bring blessing to the Gentiles; in the time of David this normally happened as these nations came under Israelite sovereignty; refer to the comments made on Psalm 2. Thus the military campaign is put in the context of Israel's mission; mere territorial expansion, as such, was not a part of Israel's calling.

- ⁶ God has promised in his sanctuary:
'With exultation I will divide up Shechem,
and portion out the Vale of Succoth.
- ⁷ Gilead is mine, and Manasseh is mine;
Ephraim is my helmet;
Judah is my sceptre.
- ⁸ Moab is my wash-basin;
on Edom I hurl my shoe;
over Philistia I shout in triumph.'

Psalm 60:6-8

With exultation. Speaking as an inspired prophet, David understood the words God spoke. God would rejoice in his lordship over Israel and his victory over the other nations.

I will divide up Shechem, and portion out the Vale of Succoth. With these and the following verses God proclaimed how the land of Israel was his special possession. The specific mentions of Shechem, the Vale of Succoth, of Gilead, of Manasseh, of Ephraim, and of Judah shows that God did not speak symbolically, but geographically. Although he is Lord over all the earth, he has a special care and regard for the land of Israel.

Judah is my sceptre. The sceptre is a symbol of kingship. It is where the line of David would reign until his Son the Messiah would humble all nations by dying there for their sins: <<*The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and the obedience of the peoples is his*>> (Genesis 49:10).

Moab is my wash-basin; on Edom I hurl my shoe. God also said that he would exalt himself over the surrounding nations. Both Moab and Edom were noted for their pride: <<*We have heard of the pride of Moab – how proud he is! – of his arrogance, his pride, and his insolence; his boasts are false*>> (Isaiah 16:6), and: <<*Your proud heart has deceived you, you that live in the clefts of the rock, whose dwelling is in the heights. You say in your heart, 'Who will bring me down to the ground?'*>> (Obadiah 3). Here God gives them places of humble service.

Psalm 60:9-12 - Grant Us Help, for Vain Is the Salvation of Man!

To come to Edom is the culmination of the military campaign of the title. If it is to do God's work, the army of Israel must seek God's help. To rely merely on their human capacities would not only be fruitless for vain is the salvation of man, it would mean they were rejecting God's calling.

- 9 Who will bring me to the fortified city?
Who will lead me to Edom?
- 10 Have you not rejected us, O God?
You do not go out, O God, with our armies.
- 11 O grant us help against the foe,
for human help is worthless.
- 12 With God we shall do valiantly;
it is he who will tread down our foes.

Psalm 60:9-12

Who will lead me to Edom? Have you not rejected us, O God? David knew that their previous defeat was because God did not fight for them, who did not go out with our armies: *<<Therefore the Israelites are unable to stand before their enemies; they turn their backs to their enemies, because they have become a thing devoted for destruction themselves. I will be with you no more, unless you destroy the devoted things from among you>>* (Joshua 7:12). He trusted that God would lead Israel to victory over the fortified city.

O grant us help against the foe, for human help is worthless. David had seen many brave men accomplish great things on the field of battle. Yet for David and for Israel, the help of man was not enough; indeed, it was useless: *<<Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help>>* (Psalm 146:3), and: *<<Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight>>* (Proverbs 3:5). God's help would lead them to victory.

With God we shall do valiantly; it is he who will tread down our foes. David understood that it was for Israel to leave off fighting and passively see what God would do. Instead, they would fight, but fight through God. Their fighting through God would be brave and valiant, and in it they would see God trample on their enemies: *<<Look on all who are proud, and bring them low; tread down the wicked where they stand>>* (Job 40:12). The psalm that began in defeat would end in victory.