

PSALM 143

¹ Hear my prayer, O LORD;
give ear to my supplications in your faithfulness;
answer me in your righteousness.

² Do not enter into judgement with your servant,
for no one living is righteous before you.

³ For the enemy has pursued me,
crushing my life to the ground,
making me sit in darkness like those long dead.

⁴ Therefore my spirit faints within me;
my heart within me is appalled.

⁵ I remember the days of old,
I think about all your deeds,
I meditate on the works of your hands.

⁶ I stretch out my hands to you;
my soul thirsts for you like a parched land.

⁷ Answer me quickly, O LORD;
my spirit fails.

Do not hide your face from me,
or I shall be like those who go down to the Pit.

⁸ Let me hear of your steadfast love in the morning,
for in you I put my trust.

Teach me the way I should go,
for to you I lift up my soul.

⁹ Save me, O LORD, from my enemies;
I have fled to you for refuge.

¹⁰ Teach me to do your will,
for you are my God.

Let your good spirit lead me
on a level path.

¹¹ For your name's sake, O LORD, preserve my life.
In your righteousness bring me out of trouble.

¹² In your steadfast love cut off my enemies,
and destroy all my adversaries,
for I am your servant.

If we read this psalm in a straightforward, literal way, what are we being taught? When bad things are happening or when the “enemy” is causing us suffering and hardship (whoever or whatever the enemy is), it is interpreted as God being distant from us. And the only reason God is distant from us is because God is in judgement of us. And so, this psalm is a prayer calling on God to have some sympathy and hear the psalmist’s plea.

If the psalmist has not been righteous or faithful enough, the prayer also includes a heart-felt request that God teach the psalmist how to be better. The psalm also recalls better times when God’s deliverance and protection were felt more immediately (presumably because the psalmist was not overcome by some enemy), and the psalmist hopes to remind God to act once again to deliver. Finally, the psalm also asks God to “destroy” the enemies because this is how God will demonstrate God’s justice.

But reading this psalm through the eyes and heart of Jesus how may we read it? (Jesus was deeply immersed in the psalms judging from all the psalm quotes in the gospels out of Jesus’ lips.) First of all, unless we find ongoing deliverance from the enemy within, we will never experience effective deliverance from the enemy without. What is the enemy within? In a number of teachings and parables through which Jesus engages various people and groups around him, there is the hard-heartedness of the religious authorities who are also the wealthy and powerful, and there is the fear, rage and despair of the people. There is also the resistance and confusion of the disciples who do not want to face difficult truths about what will happen to Jesus. They cannot imagine a good future if Jesus doesn’t seize power and control as a messiah-king by force. Hard-heartedness, fear, anger, despair, and resistance to a truth which threatens our expectations... these ways of being, reacting and responding to difficult and confusing situations can be thought of as enemies tormenting us within and causing us to behave externally in bad and sad ways.

So what happens when some “saving” shift begins to happen within us? Well, we begin to see the “enemy” differently. We begin to hear God speak to us and feel God’s healing love within us even when things are not going our way on the outside. We begin to imagine a future where destruction of our enemy is not the be-all and end-all, and healing with hoped-for reconciliation is much more attractive a vision to pray and hope for. We also begin to imagine growth in righteousness also being about growth in compassion, resilience, courage, faith and hope, and sometimes we can even get to a place where we can thank our “enemy” for having helped us by challenging us to grow stronger even in the broken and vulnerable places of our lives.

The psalmist is praying and hoping for deliverance and they are trying to persuade God they are worthy of such deliverance. But, perhaps, deliverance will come in ways they have not yet imagined. Every psalm is a journey for the psalmist from beginning to end. What about your own journey? How has your praying to God changed over the years and how have you been changed through your praying?

PRAYER: We are seeking your healing, O God, healing on the inside and the outside... We are seeking your strength and inspiration, O God, to respond to “the enemy” in ways that do not diminish us or dehumanize others... Give us a greater capacity to love even when we are in pursuit of a greater justice, O God... Give us grace so that humble gratitude and inner peace enfold us deeper than the fear and torment that can also envelope us... Warm our hearts and grant us the courage to step out of our negative mindset so we can see others and ourselves with your eyes of infinite love... Even as we may suffer hardship, you call us to be light in the darkness... Amen.