

PSALM 140

A Psalm of David.

¹ Deliver me, O LORD, from evildoers;
protect me from those who are violent,

² who plan evil things in their minds
and stir up wars continually.

³ They make their tongue sharp as a snake's,
and under their lips is the venom of vipers.

⁴ Guard me, O LORD, from the hands of the wicked;
protect me from the violent
who have planned my downfall.

⁵ The arrogant have hidden a trap for me,
and with cords they have spread a net;
along the road they have set snares for me.

⁶ I say to the LORD, 'You are my God;
give ear, O LORD, to the voice of my supplications.'

⁷ O LORD, my Lord, my strong deliverer,
you have covered my head in the day of battle.

⁸ Do not grant, O LORD, the desires of the wicked;
do not further their evil plot.

⁹ Those who surround me lift up their heads;
let the mischief of their lips overwhelm them!

¹⁰ Let burning coals fall on them!

Let them be flung into pits, no more to rise!

¹¹ Do not let the slanderer be established in the land;
let evil speedily hunt down the violent!

¹² I know that the LORD maintains the cause of the needy,
and executes justice for the poor.

¹³ Surely the righteous shall give thanks to your name;
the upright shall live in your presence.

Reading this psalm literally, what do we get? David the righteous king is being threatened by those who are wicked enemies. Why? They stir up reasons for conflict and attack. They lie, they seek the king's downfall and they set all kinds of traps to achieve this. But the prayer of the righteous king will be heard by God. The answer to prayer will be the humiliation and defeat of the enemy. If God is a God of the vulnerable needy, poor and righteous, God will answer their prayer. The king may not be poor and needy, but he is righteous before God, vulnerable before his enemies and needy of God's protection.

OK, but how would Jesus read and interpret this psalm? Sometimes a literal reading of a passage can lead to all kinds of unhelpful interpretations. For example, how does God protect the righteous and help them defeat their enemies? Does God intervene somehow in a physical way? Does God somehow influence circumstances in the righteous king's favour? And even if this is what is believed to happen, does this not set up the kind of relationship with God where the righteous obey God's laws and God rewards them with success, and if they fail to meet God's holy requirements God abandons them to their enemies?

I don't know about you, but this does not look anything like the reality I witness in the world. Those who often succeed, are healthy and experience good fortune are not necessarily righteous, kind or loving, whereas many of the most beautiful souls suffer all kinds of hardship and misfortune. Is God asleep, ignorant or selective as to who God jumps in to protect and save?

But then, we have Jesus. Many of the quotes of scripture in Jesus' mouth are taken from the psalms. Clearly Jesus internalized, memorized and prayed them. And even as Jesus took on many of the messianic kingly psalms to help him understand his own identity as messiah, he obviously "spiritualized" them to make them fit. To spiritualize a passage of scripture does not mean we throw a more literal and historical reading out the window. But it means we look for a more-than-literal-and-simply-historical understanding of scripture too.

I have no doubt that this psalmist and king David understood God as an interventionist power in the world. They are praying for success against enemies and they do image God as a God of righteous vengeance. But they are also struggling to engage God in a deeper relationship too. Protection is not just about an enemy out there. It is also about our own fears and temptations, and how these shape our behaviours and responses to life's challenges. Enemies are not simply other persons, but more often than not, other difficult realities that threaten our health and many other factors to our well-being and those we love. Defeating our enemies is not necessarily about harming anyone, but about coming through things, overcoming our fears and temptations, or at least keeping them at bay as we work through things, struggle through things and hopefully grow through things too. We can grow "strong in the broken places" (E. Hemingway), even when the final outcome is death.

And beyond even this, Jesus takes the reading and interpretation of scripture and the psalms further still. To see another as simply an enemy and to pray for their defeat is itself a defeat and a tragedy. The true victory is to overcome hate even as we work through our fears and resentments. Jesus was vulnerable to all kinds of hardship and suffering, including physical abuse, torture, betrayal and abandonment by those close to him. Even as he trusted God above and within him to bring him through to resurrection, facing his last and greatest ordeal was overwhelming as witnessed in his gut-wrenching prayer in the garden of Gethsemane. In those

final hours on the cross he went through doubt and despair even as he surrendered his life to his Abba God in the end.

So then, making scripture alive requires some spiritualizing. We do not pray for vengeance and defeat of those who oppose us, even as we pray for inspiration and strength to defeat the ways our fears and temptations may undermine our capacity to overcome the enemy with grace and compassion. Sometimes we need a lot of courage, patience, perseverance and tenacity to remain compassionate and maintain grace as we fight for justice or work through conflicts and hurts. God can do the impossible in us and through us. But the God of Jesus and in Jesus will never achieve that impossible by destroying other people no matter who they are. What do you think?

PRAYER: Relieve us of our anger and our resentment, O God. Meet us in our doubt and restore us to faith. Give us hope when despair is clawing at us. Give us the kind of love that can overcome our fear and worry. May your peace be the blanket that enfolds us as we sleep, as we wake and as we make our way through difficult situations and encounters this season of our lives... in Jesus' name; Amen.