

PSALM 144

Of David.

Blessed be the LORD, my rock,
who trains my hands for war, and my fingers for battle;
² my rock and my fortress,
my stronghold and my deliverer,
my shield, in whom I take refuge,
who subdues the peoples under me.

³ O LORD, what are human beings that you regard them,
or mortals that you think of them?
⁴ They are like a breath;
their days are like a passing shadow.

⁵ Bow your heavens, O LORD, and come down;
touch the mountains so that they smoke.

⁶ Make the lightning flash and scatter them;
send out your arrows and rout them.

⁷ Stretch out your hand from on high;
set me free and rescue me from the mighty waters,
from the hand of aliens,
⁸ whose mouths speak lies,
and whose right hands are false.

⁹ I will sing a new song to you, O God;
upon a ten-stringed harp I will play to you,
¹⁰ the one who gives victory to kings,
who rescues his servant David.

¹¹ Rescue me from the cruel sword,
and deliver me from the hand of aliens,
whose mouths speak lies,
and whose right hands are false.

¹² May our sons in their youth
be like plants full grown,
our daughters like corner pillars,
cut for the building of a palace.

¹³ May our barns be filled
with produce of every kind;
may our sheep increase by thousands,
by tens of thousands in our fields,

¹⁴ and may our cattle be heavy with young.

May there be no breach in the walls, no exile,
and no cry of distress in our streets.

¹⁵ Happy are the people to whom such blessings fall;
happy are the people whose God is the LORD.

Reading this psalm makes me uncomfortable at first. It's all about us versus them. And who is them? The enemy. The stakes are high. It's life and death depending on who wins. From the perspective of a ruler like David, calling on God for our victory and our enemy's defeat has to also mean death for them. We must protect our communities, our families and our children. Our future depends on it. There's no middle ground.

And yet, context is everything. If I were Ukrainian living in one of the embattled cities and villages, a psalm like this one would be powerful a prayer. I pray for my enemy's defeat because their actions against us are wicked. We are simply seeking to defend our homeland not cross over and annex the territory of another nation. And yet, I also know that such a prayer must be provisional, not final. Once the battle is over, I have to find a way for peace – peace with the outcome, peace with where things have gone, peace with the losses and peace within myself for terrible deeds I will have been drawn into committing whatever the justification.

I may have to keep fighting for justice, for restitution, for atonement of the many losses of life and the terrible trauma of the survivors... But without the goal being peace, I will keep suffering torment in one form or another if I also have a compassionate heart.

So how does all this translate into other contexts like my own? Jesus taught that we should love our enemies, and he demonstrated on the cross what such love should look like... Love is not about letting people off the hook when they commit harm to others. No. But love means I have to purge myself of hate which is the greatest inner enemy. For hate will consume me even more totally than any external enemy ever can.

Hate manifests in many ways. In more subtle forms it can come out as resentment, bitterness, impatience and even constant irritation with specific persons. Hate judges and condemns and always sees a sinister motive to every action of "the enemy". In his sermon on the mount, Jesus even challenges us to think of our inner thoughts and words of insult as arising out of the same seed of hate that can fester to full blown murder if not checked at its root.

What is saving about Psalm 144 is that there is not much hate in it. Even as it prays for the kind of victory that is defeat and death of the enemy, the focus is on the psalmist before God, praying for all they care about and love – their homeland and people, the children and youth, the livestock... It's about surviving and having a future.

That's a lot of what I hear about from Ukrainians in the midst of all this. A lot of tears, a lot of fear, a lot of terror, but also a resilience and courageous determination to defend and rebuild their nation. This is the best "revenge" against the enemy. It will also mean hate will not ultimately consume the people even as it will take generations to heal from the trauma of loss and destruction.

For us here in Canada, however, far away from that kind of battle, we need to ask ourselves what battles we fight, internal and external. How do we protect ourselves from the poison of hate? How does God through prayer inspire and empower us to fight without becoming bitter or despairing? How do we even grow our capacity to love in tough situations? What new insights open up for us? Where will the journey take us with God more central a grounding for us? How will our identity as the hands, feet and heart of Jesus become more felt at the core of our being? And where further has the Spirit yet to take us as enemies come at us in various forms? Many are the questions this psalm provokes us to explore for ourselves.

PRAYER: Happy and blessed are we, O God, that you have found us and we have found you. But sometimes, the enemy is mighty and we are afraid, O God. Sometimes the enemy threatens and we feel overwhelmed. Sometimes the enemy wounds us and we feel hate and resentment well up within us difficult to contain. Come to us again, O God. Fill us anew with your love. Heal us of any hate that lives in us whatever form it takes. Fill us with hope that a new way and a new day are possible. In Jesus' name; Amen.