

Psalm 28
Psalm 28
Hebrews 4:14-5:10

“A Song for the Helpless”

October 30, 2016

As we look back at Psalm 28, we need to start with the superscription:

Of David.

Let that sink in for a moment.

Our problem is well-described by the chorus of an old pop song:

“You’re so vain, you probably think this song is about you.”

Since we’ve been trained to think that the Bible is about *us*

we find ourselves stumbling over so much of the Bible

that seems irrelevant to our situation.

We don’t like all that stuff about “tear them down and build them up no more” –

because, quite frankly, we have a good life

where most people around us are decent folk.

So how can we sing this song?

Who is this song about?

“Of David”

The Hebrew preposition here could mean “for David” “about David” “by David.”

Given that David is said to have written many songs,

it is likely that many of the Psalms were written by him.

But the *point* of the superscription is *not* that David wrote the song.

The point is that this is *Davidic* song.

This is a David-centered song.

It is interesting to see how many different contexts
people come up with for interpreting this Psalm.

In 5th century Antioch, Theodoret thought that it referred to a time when Saul was chasing David.

As such, he said that it is well suited “to everyone encountering calamities of this kind”

In 4th century Tarsus (Paul’s home town),

Diodore thought that Psalm 28 was spoken of Hezekiah’s illness and recovery.

In 5th century Rome, Arnobius the Younger says that Psalm 28 speaks in the inner man of Christ,
“that he who committed no sins not be handed over to sinners.” (p210)

The reason why they see these diverse contexts

is because Psalm 28 was *written* for each of these situations (and many more!).

The first thing they all agree on
is that Psalm 28 is speaking first and foremost of the Davidic King – the Lord’s anointed,
and the second thing they all agree on
is that when we see this song in a David-centered way,
we will then know how to sing this song with the Lord’s anointed!

If you try to start with yourself, then you will stumble over verse 8.
“The LORD is the strength of his people; he is the saving refuge of his anointed.”
It is only because Jesus is the anointed one – because God has heard Jesus –
that we can sing these songs in Jesus.

But as we’ve seen throughout Book One of the Psalter,
when Israel sings these songs in David –
and when we sing them in David’s Lord, Jesus Christ –
then we can inhabit them as we are drawn into the greater story
of what God is doing in Jesus.

Sing Psalm 28
Read Hebrews 4:14-5:10

I hope that you heard in Hebrews 4-5 the pattern of Psalm 28.
Jesus is the one who “offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears,
to him who was able to save him from death,
and he was heard because of his reverence.”
Therefore because Jesus is the great high priest – tempted as we are, yet without sin –
we may draw near to the throne of grace with confidence,
that we may receive mercy and find grace to *help* in time of need.

I have called Psalm 28 “A Song for the Helpless”
because of the theme of *help* in verses 2 and 7.

In scripture a *helper* does something for you that you could not possibly do for yourself.
In English, the word “help” can sometimes fall far short of this.
Think of the “hired help” –
namely, those who do what we don’t feel like doing!
But the English word “help” *can* mean what the Hebrew is getting at.
Let’s say you are standing on a rocky ledge 200 feet above the canyon floor,
and your feet slip, and you are about to fall to your death –
what do you say?
“HELP!!”

And when you say “HELP” you do not mean

“I don’t feel like doing it, so I’ll pay someone else to do it for me!”
You mean, “someone, please SAVE ME!”

That is what the Psalmist means by “I cry to you for help” (v2)
and “in him my heart trusts, and I am helped” (v7).

Psalms 28 is a song for the helpless.

1. Hear Me or I Die! (v1-2)

*28 To you, O LORD, I call;
my rock, be not deaf to me,
lest, if you be silent to me,
I become like those who go down to the pit.*

Do you sometimes feel like the Psalmist is a little melodramatic?

“To you, O LORD, I call;
my rock, be not deaf to me,
lest, if you be silent to me,
I become like those who go down to the pit.”

I mean, seriously, who talks like that?!

This is one challenge for us as we learn to sing the Psalms.

We *don’t* talk like this!

When I am talking to my wife,

I don’t say, “Ginger, be not deaf to me!”

What child says to his father, “Hear the voice of my pleas for mercy”?!

Some have argued that therefore we should retranslate the Psalms into modern lingo.

The Contemporary English Version says,

“If you don’t answer me, I will soon be dead.”

The Living Bible says,

“If you refuse to answer me, I might as well give up and die.”

The Message says,

“If all I get from you is deafening silence, I’d be better off in the Black Hole.”

These paraphrases are useful – because they challenge us to think about what is meant here –
but each paraphrase leaves out something that is equally important.

The pit.

The Psalmist is not just concerned about *death*.

He is concerned about *the pit*.

The Message with its image of the “black hole”

does far better than those who say “I’ll soon be dead” –
but the black hole is too remote.
Do any of you expect that anyone today will end their life in a black hole?
But the Psalmist sees the *pit* as a likely ending point!

What is the “pit”?

The term is often used to speak of a cistern (Joseph’s brothers threw him into a “pit”).
In Psalm 7:15, it speaks of the wicked digging a pit –
and then falling into the pit that he made for others.

The pit *can* refer to the grave:
for instance in Psalm 30:3, “O LORD, you have brought up my soul from Sheol,
you restored my life from among those who go down to the pit.”

But going down to the pit is *not quite* the same thing as *dying*.

Psalm 40:2 says that God “drew me up from the pit of destruction,
out of the miry bog.”
Psalm 88:6 says that God has put me in the depths of the pit.

In both cases, the Psalmist is still alive when he calls out from the pit –
or remembers being in the pit.

The pit is closely associated with death –
and several passages speak of the pit as the place of the dead –
but it is entirely possible to be “among the dead” while you are still alive.

“The pit” is where Joseph was left to die by his brothers.
“The pit” is where Jeremiah was left to die by his enemies.
When you go down to the pit, you are in the shadow of death.

The language of the pit allows for a considerable variety of situations.
When you are alone, depressed, worried, under attack –
you can feel very much as though you are dead.

This is why it is so important for us to remember that the Psalms are *poetry*.
If you try to translate poetry into prose
you will remove the powerful imagery.

The poetry of the Psalms was designed to allow – or better yet, to encourage – you
to re-read and re-sing them in your own setting.

If the Psalms were written (or translated) precisely for your situation,
then they would not be useful for others.

We need to take these songs and inhabit them.

It's all good and fine for other people to paraphrase them,
but *you* need to learn to paraphrase them as well!

And to do that well, we need to see that they were written for David and Israel –
in order to show us how we fit into what God has done in his anointed King.

Listen to verse 2:

² *Hear the voice of my pleas for mercy,
when I cry to you for help,
when I lift up my hands
toward your most holy sanctuary.*

Last time our focus was on *seeing* – light, gazing, beauty, seeking God's face –
looking on the goodness of the LORD.

In Psalm 27 the *one thing* that I seek is that I may *see* God.

Now we turn to *hearing* – to you I call, be not deaf, silence, voice, pleas, crying for help –
speaking peace, he has heard my voice, and with my song I give thanks.

The plea of Psalm 28 is that God will *hear* me.
That God will hear me and *help* me.

And verses 1-2 set the context in terms of two *places* –
the pit
and the sanctuary.

If you are silent I will become like those who go down to the pit.

But I do not want to end there,
and so I cry to you for help,
Hear me!
when I lift up my hands toward your most holy sanctuary.

And even as the pit has a broader meaning than simply “death,”
so also the sanctuary has a broader meaning than simply “the temple.”

Solomon could say “heaven of heavens cannot contain you,
how much less this house that I have built”!

When Psalm 150 says “praise God in his holy sanctuary –
it pairs that with “praise God in his mighty firmament”!

The heavens and the earth were created as a sanctuary where man might worship God.
The blue dome above our heads was mirrored in the blue ceiling of the tabernacle,

(which is why we painted our ceiling here a light blue).

Solomon also asked God that when the Davidic king prayed “toward this temple” that God would “hear from heaven your dwelling place...”

The earthly sanctuary is only a picture and shadow of the heavenly sanctuary.

Here at the beginning of Psalm 28 we see the pit and the sanctuary –
the picture of eternal misery – and the picture of eternal blessedness.

We come every week into the heavenly Holy of Holies
because we recognize that our only hope is Jesus –

But where I find myself right now is much closer to the pit.

You O LORD are my rock – I lift my hands toward your most holy sanctuary –
In Psalm 27 we sang that the *one thing* that we seek
is to *dwell in the house of the LORD forever*.

In Psalm 26 we said that we *will* bless the LORD in the great assembly.

But while I see that all this *will be* –

it is *not* the way it looks right now!

Right now I am in danger of being dragged off with the wicked into judgment!

2. My Plea: Do Not Judge Me with the Wicked (v3-5)

a. Their Defining Characteristic: Double-Tongued (v3)

³ *Do not drag me off with the wicked,
with the workers of evil,
who speak peace with their neighbors
while evil is in their hearts.*

Verse 3 then turns to the Psalmist’s plea.

I am in peril of the pit – the place of judgment and death and destruction.

But I have one way to avoid going there.

Because the same God to whom I cry for help

is the same God who will drag the wicked off to judgment.

Psalm 28 is all about speaking and hearing –

and so it is no wonder that the defining characteristic of the wicked
is the way they speak.

They speak peace with their neighbors while evil is in their hearts.

We have heard the language of “integrity” in recent Psalms.

Psalm 24 says that the one who ascends the hill of the LORD
is one who has “clean hands and a pure heart,
who does not lift up his soul to what is false,
and does not swear deceitfully.”

His heart is pure – and his words reflect his heart.

Psalm 26 declares that *I am* the blessed man of Psalm 24 –
“for I have walked in my integrity.”

And one evidence of this is that I do not sit with men of falsehood (v4).

How then should we understand this language in Psalm 28, verse 3?

The workers of evil are those “who speak peace with their neighbors
while evil is in their hearts.”

At *one level* all of us are guilty of this – at least in minor ways.

All of us have been guilty of betraying others in our words.

And that is why we need Psalm 25 – the prayer of confession –
our acknowledgment of guilt.

But verse 3 is not talking about the ordinary, everyday sorts of betrayals.

Verse 3 is talking about people who are actively seeking to destroy their neighbors.

This is not some petty neighborhood kerfuffle over hurt feelings.

The wicked here are like the evildoers of Psalm 27 – who seek to eat my flesh!

They speak peace – they say that they are friends, that they seek our good –
but their true goal is to destroy us!

Many – perhaps most – of us will never experience this personally from other people.
Why?

Because you and I are *not* kings.

We are not important, influential people –
so no one wants to take us down!

This is why we need to sing Psalm 28 (and other Psalms like it)
in the voice of *Jesus*.

Because there are *many* who speak peace to the Kingdom of Jesus
while evil is in their hearts.

There are many who hate the Kingdom of Christ
and will do anything in their power to destroy his church –
even while they profess peace – toleration – friendship.

That’s why the early fathers focused our attention on the importance of Psalm 28

as a song of the Davidic King – a song of King Jesus –

because his enemies rose up against him –

Herod and Pilate along with the priests and rulers of the Jews –

and they sought to drag him down to the pit.

And, when you see Psalm 28 in that light,
then you learn how to sing verse 4 as well:

b. Give to Them According to Their Works (v4)

⁴ *Give to them according to their work
and according to the evil of their deeds;
give to them according to the work of their hands;
render them their due reward.*

These are hard words.

How can we pray “render them their due reward” –
when we are a people saved by grace?!

It is certainly appropriate to pray *first* that they repent and turn from their evil.
But the scriptures clearly teach that *not everyone* will repent.

What should God do about those who stubbornly persist in trying to destroy his kingdom?

When you pray “thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”
you are praying for the kingdom of Satan to be destroyed.

When you pray “deliver us from evil” –
you are praying the same thing as Psalm 28.

The souls under the altar, in Revelation 6:10, pray that God would avenge their blood.

And Paul, in 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10, says:

“This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God,
that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God,
for which you are also suffering –
since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you,
and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us,
when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven
with his mighty angels in flaming fire,
inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God
and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.

They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction
away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might,
when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints,
and to be marveled at among all who have believed,
because our testimony in you was believed.”

The Christian should not seek vengeance.

After all, “vengeance is mine, says the Lord, I will repay.”

Which means that the Christian should trust God to take vengeance on the wicked.
When the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven,
he will *inflict vengeance* on those who have opposed him.

Now, I know, some of you really struggle with that!
How can a good and loving God inflict vengeance?
The answer is simple: because he loves all that he has made!

Let me give you an example:
You are walking down the street,
and you see a man grab a girl and start trying to rape her.
What do you do?
Do you say, “Well, who am I to judge?”
No!
You *inflict vengeance as fast as you possibly can!*

Why?
Because you love her!
(And for that matter, because you love him –
and you do not want him to do something so horribly inconsistent
with what God made him to be!)

When something bad happens, we *want it* to be made right.
When the wicked get away with their injustice, we plead with God to make it right!

And he promises that he will:

c. God Will Tear Them Down (v5)

⁵ *Because they do not regard the works of the LORD
or the work of his hands,
he will tear them down and build them up no more.*

There will come a day when the Lord Jesus will inflict vengeance
on those who have opposed his kingdom.

If there is a God – and if he really did make this world –
then those who oppose him – those who reject the works of the LORD –
are facing a day of judgment.

When you go through the whole book of Acts,
this is the constant conclusion of every sermon that the apostles’ preached:
Acts 2:40 – “save yourselves from this crooked generation.”
Acts 3:23 – “And it shall be that every soul who does not listen to that prophet

shall be destroyed from the people.”

Acts 10:42 – “And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

Acts 17:30-31 – “The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

I could keep going, but I think you get the point!

Judgment Day is coming.

He will tear them down and build them up no more!

And this is a reason for praise.

3. My Praise: God Has Heard Me! (v6-9)

⁶ *Blessed be the LORD!*

For he has heard the voice of my pleas for mercy.

As usual, the Psalm ends on a note of praise.

We are still in the middle of the troubles and miseries of life.

But we *know* how the story will end.

We know that God will make everything right in the end.

And so David puts it in the past tense.

He has heard the voice of my pleas for mercy.

God has heard Jesus – and *because* God has heard Jesus,
he will also hear you.

Verse 7 is the song of our Lord Jesus:

a. The LORD Is My Strength (v7)

⁷ *The LORD is my strength and my shield;
in him my heart trusts, and I am helped;
my heart exults,
and with my song I give thanks to him.*

The LORD is my strength and my shield –

Evil is in the heart of the wicked,

but *my heart* trusts in the LORD.

As the proverb says,

“Trust in the LORD with all your heart,

and do not lean on your own understanding,

in all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make your paths straight.” (Proverbs 3:5, 6)
I call this the song of our Lord Jesus
because this can only be true for us if it is first true for him
(as we see in verse 8):

b. And Because He Saves His Anointed, He Is the Strength of His People (v8-9)

⁸ *The LORD is the strength of his people;^[b]
he is the saving refuge of his anointed.*

The word “anointed” is the word “Messiah” (translated “Christ”) in the NT.
The LORD is the saving refuge of his Christ.
Because God saves his Anointed Son,
therefore he is the strength of his people.

⁹ *Oh, save your people and bless your heritage!
Be their shepherd and carry them forever.*

I want you to think about this language that David uses.
“The LORD is my strength and my shield.”
“The LORD is the strength of his people; he is the saving refuge of his anointed.”
This is the language of battle and war.
But it is the language of protection and defense.

Where are we in this picture?
We are the helpless sheep being carried by the Good Shepherd.
We are the helpless people protected by the Divine Warrior.
Notice that in this Psalm God does not give *us* strength.
He *is* our strength.
The imagery is all defensive.
My shield – the saving refuge of the Christ.

You are helpless before your foes.
There is *nothing* you can do to save yourself!
All you can do is cry out to the LORD – “HELP!!”

The LORD is my strength and my shield; in him my heart trusts – *and I am helped.*