

# Responding Rightly to Terror

Psalm 56:1 *"To the choirmaster: according to The Dove on Far-off Terebinths. A Miktam of David, when the Philistines seized him in Gath.*  
Be gracious to me, O God, for man tramples on me; all day long an attacker oppresses me;

<sup>2</sup> my enemies trample on me all day long, for many attack me proudly.

<sup>3</sup> When I am afraid, I put my trust in you.

<sup>4</sup> **In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid.**

**What can flesh do to me?**

<sup>5</sup> All day long they injure my cause; all their thoughts are against me for evil.

<sup>6</sup> They stir up strife, they lurk; they watch my steps, as they have waited for my life.

<sup>7</sup> For their crime will they escape? In wrath cast down the peoples, O God!

<sup>8</sup> You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your book?

<sup>9</sup> Then my enemies will turn back in the day when I call. This I know, that God is for me.

<sup>10</sup> In God, whose word I praise, in the LORD, whose word I praise,

<sup>11</sup> **in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can man do to me?**

<sup>12</sup> I must perform my vows to you, O God; I will render thank offerings to you.

<sup>13</sup> For you have delivered my soul from death, yes, my feet from falling, that I may walk before God in the light of life."

*"To the choirmaster: according to Do Not Destroy. A Miktam of David, when he fled from Saul, in the cave.*

Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me, for in you my soul takes refuge; in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge, till the storms of destruction pass by.

<sup>2</sup> I cry out to God Most High, to God who fulfills his purpose for me.

<sup>3</sup> He will send from heaven and save me; he will put to shame him who tramples on me. Selah God will send out his steadfast love and his faithfulness!

<sup>4</sup> My soul is in the midst of lions; I lie down amid fiery beasts-- the children of man, whose teeth are spears and arrows, whose tongues are sharp swords.

<sup>5</sup> **Be exalted, O God, above the heavens! Let your glory be over all the earth!**

<sup>6</sup> They set a net for my steps; my soul was bowed down. They dug a pit in my way, but they have fallen into it themselves. Selah

<sup>7</sup> My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast! I will sing and make melody!

<sup>8</sup> Awake, my glory! Awake, O harp and lyre! I will awake the dawn!

<sup>9</sup> I will give thanks to you, O Lord, among the peoples; I will sing praises to you among the nations.

<sup>10</sup> For your steadfast love is great to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds.

<sup>11</sup> **Be exalted, O God, above the heavens! Let your glory be over all the earth!**

Psalm 56-57

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## Wars of Religion and Trusting in God

RELIGIOUS WARFARE. Both Testaments begin with this idea. The first murder was a matter of religious warfare:

Cain assassinated his own brother Abel because Abel's religious sacrifice was better his own. The Lord Jesus was put to death by wicked hands because the rulers and powers of this age could not stand the thought of his kingdom intruding upon their own. Those were both attacks carried out upon **individuals**.

Then there are attacks carried out upon **groups**. In the OT, the main group involved in religious warfare was Israel. Sometimes Israel was on the giving end, like when Joshua took them into the conquest of the land. Other times, they were the receivers, like when they went into exile into Babylon. In the NT, religious persecution happened to the Christians living in Jerusalem in the book of Acts. It was so severe, it caused most to leave the Holy City and flee to the nations of the world. So both Testaments are also replete with religious warfare of one form or another be it against individuals or groups.

It is vital in this respect to remember that there is nothing new under the sun. This is especially true when **modern religious warfare** comes to the forefront of the discussion. What comes to your mind when you think of this? Catholics killing Protestants or infant Baptists killing

Baptists? These probably aren't modern enough (unless you live in Ireland). There is a lot of religious warfare going on today, but most of us don't think too much about them, unless they involve Christians. But just here, one thing seems prominent: Islam vs. Christianity.

This has been pressed upon our minds in recent years by the unrelenting, remorseless, and merciless assaults--day after day and week after week, of jihadists hell-bent in wiping Western civilization off the map, and by the never-ending news coverage it receives (1% of which is spent reporting that the person who just perpetrated the horror was yelling "Allahu Akbar," and the other 99% reporting why what they did has nothing do to with Islam). Because of these things, **fear** has gripped many a heart, even though they have **never personally** had terrorism happen to them or to anyone they know. It is more of a cultural fear, fear that comes to a **group**.

As a **group**, our nation has a **collective saying**. It seems to have first appeared in our national consciousness in the fourth stanza of the *Star Spangled Banner* ("And conquer we must, when our cause it is just, and this be our motto – 'In God is our trust...'"). It then began to appear on U.S. coins

in 1864, to “relieve us from the ignominy of heathenism,” and with the timing of it most likely to justify the Union over and against the Confederacy.<sup>1</sup> Finally, it became the official motto of the United States in 1956 during the Cold War as a virtually equally split Congress voted together seeking to distance our nation from the state atheism of the Soviet Union.<sup>2</sup>

What is curious about the phrase is that it does not actually tell us which God is the one in whom we put our trust. It’s just the letters “G-O-D.” Undoubtedly, for many people, this would be the God of the Bible. But I wonder what a 33<sup>rd</sup> degree Mason (many of our nation’s Fathers), a Muslim, or a Mormon would think when they read it? I do also find it fascinating that in all three instances, war and enemies and wanting God on your side was the catalyst for the inclusion of the phrase. Also curious is that the very same motto is the national motto of Nicaragua. Even the socialist Sandinista terrorists want God on their side.

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<sup>1</sup> “History of ‘In God We Trust,’” *U.S. Department of the Treasury*, 3-8-3011, <https://www.treasury.gov/about/education/Pages/in-god-we-trust.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> A 2011 vote to re-affirm the motto passed the House: 396 to 9 in favor.

# Religious Persecution and Trusting in God: Psalms 56-60

Having God on your side is an attempt to curb collective fear. At least, that seems to be the idea. Maybe this national motto has helped alleviate some people's fear of religious terror. I'm not going to say it hasn't. Though maybe, it just allows people to justify whatever it is that they are doing in response to religious persecution. God has to be on *my* side, right? Maybe it also slightly distorts our understanding, such that what it ends up doing is causing us to put our trust in a nation or a group because God is on *its* side? It is interesting that when Joshua met the preincarnate Christ—the Commander of the armies of the LORD, he asked him whose side he was on, his or his enemies? He answered, “No” ([Josh 5:14](#)), implying that Joshua was asking the wrong question. It is not us having God on our side, but us being on God's side. Whatever the case, it is interesting and provoking to think about such things.

Psalm 56 has [a refrain](#) that appears twice, but with slightly different language:

Psalm 56:4	Psalm 56:10-11
<p>In God, whose word I praise,  <u>In God I trust;</u> I shall not be afraid. What can flesh do to me?</p>	<p>In God, whose word I praise, in the LORD, whose word I praise, <u>in God I trust;</u> I shall not be afraid. What can man do to me?</p>

You can see that the national motto appears in a slightly different form in this refrain. And we will talk about this a little later.

The refrain occurs in the first instance after [the Psalmist is being attacked and trampled upon](#) in a kind of ancient terrorism against him. The second refrain comes after the same kind of thing, but now having added his “tears and tossings” at night as his own response to these attacks. These attacks come to him, as they so often do, as a form of religious persecution. David was a believer, and others hated him for it. And so you can see how our initial thoughts fit nicely into the psalm.

Let’s now put this into context with the Psalms around it. In the same way that Psalms 52-55 were grouped using the common introductory phrase “[A Maskil of David,](#)” so Psalms 56-60 are a grouping, collected with the common

introduction, “A Miktam of David.” The only other “Miktam” is Psalm 16, so it is clear that they are grouped together for a reason. We don’t know what a Miktam is. Many ideas have been put forward: “an inscription,” “a golden psalm,” “humble, blameless,” “a silent prayer,” “an atonement psalm.” Craigie thinks the first makes the most sense of our psalms, as each is written in a time of great crisis, which provided a moment to record it into an “inscription.”<sup>3</sup>

What are these crises? In Psalm 56 it is “When the Philistines seized him in Gath” (56:1). In 57, “When he fled from Saul, in the cave” (57:1). In 58, we are not sure, but it is according to “Do not Destroy” as it is also in 57. So something terrible was probably happening as “Do Not Destroy” was probably a tune the words were set to, and you don’t set a happy song to a tune like that. In 59 it was, “When Saul sent men to watch his house in order to kill him” (59:1). In 60 it was, “When he strove with Aram-naharaim and with Aram-zobah, and when Joab on his

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<sup>3</sup> Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 2nd ed., vol. 19, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville, TN: Nelson Reference & Electronic, 2004), 154. Craigie died prior to completing the second volume, so Marvin Tate refers to him here.

return struck down twelve thousand of Edom in the Valley of Salt” (Ps 60:1).

What this means is that like 52-55, you need to be reading 56-60 together. In fact, you should be reading them all together, even going back to 50. There are direct connections between each, so that they are developing themes as they move along. Psalm 56 “carries forward”<sup>4</sup> the previous group of 52-55 which showed us sin and its terrible consequences when God goes after it, but also shows the undeserved grace that can come through trusting in the LORD. The connection is the last verse of 55, “But you, O God, will cast them down into the pit of destruction; men of blood and treachery shall not live out half their days. But I will trust in you” (Ps 55:23). Trust in you. In God I trust. That is the thought that links them all together. The OT is about faith, just like the NT is.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51-100*, ed. Klaus Baltzer, trans. Linda M. Maloney, Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 66.

<sup>5</sup> Another interesting connection, “Oh that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest” (55:6). “To the choirmaster [For The End]: according to The Dove on Far-off Terebinths” (56:1). The word “dove” only appears in four psalms. “The Dove’ may be a reference to Yahweh” (Dahood, 41), in which case, we have a close connection to the Holy Spirit as Yahweh.

**Psalms 56-60** now work on you, helping you trust in God, through individual lamentation of specific events in David's life which he is reflecting upon to give you "instruction" (see **60:1**). These individual laments are especially 56, 57, and 59 which "build to a climax,"<sup>6</sup> but are interrupted by 58 which gives "an infusion of wisdom," as you realize that Yahweh is Judge, and then learn to think about this not only individually, but corporately, together (60).<sup>7</sup>

In light of our own national motto, it is curious that the focus of these psalms is on **the nations** and even on the gods of those nations<sup>8</sup> vs. David and his trust in Yahweh. His focus is not on some kind of national motto, even though Yahweh is clearly the God of Israel. His focus is personal. It is the first person "I" and not "we." David was personally attacked and David must personally trust. This begins to take us away from "In God We Trust" and whatever it is that people do with this as Americans, and it moves us to

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<sup>6</sup> Lothar, 75.

<sup>7</sup> Lothar, 83.

<sup>8</sup> For example, Dahood translates **Psalm 56:1**, "For the director; according to 'The Dove of the Distant Gods.'" ("Distant gods" is translated as "For-off Terebinths [trees] by the ESV. This is probably the name of a popular tune). **Psalm 58:1** (ESV) begins, "Do you indeed decree what is right, you gods? Do you judge the children of man uprightly?"

beginning to **respond properly to religious persecution**. It is not enough that “*we* trust.” You must trust. I must trust. God is the only hope in such times as these. This is the very message that so offends our own nation, because it means that you will not trust in it to save you from terror. You will not worship your politicians, your personalities, your pundits, or anyone who tries to get you to rest in them as your only comfort in the face of terrorism. In God alone I trust.

Though it could be helpful to look at all five songs together (indeed, as I said 50-60!), I’m only going to look at 56-57 in more detail here. The reason is because, as one scholar put it, these are “**twin**” **psalms** which share many ideas and words in common, and because 57 is an intensification of 56.<sup>9</sup> In light of how we began, I want you to first think about how you have been responding to the terrorist threat of Islam in recent days, including how you respond to each new attack, either at home or abroad. Do

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<sup>9</sup> Lothar, 75. These words include: חנני: 56:2\*; 57:2\*; שאף: 56:2\*; 57:4\*; נפשי: 56:7\*, 14\*; 57:2\*, 5\*, 7\*; עמים: 56:8\*; 57:10\*; אקרא: 56:10\*; 57:3\*; אדם: 56:12\*; 57:5\*. (This is Lothar’s verse division).

you run to the news, to the radio talk shows, to Facebook to vent or to fuel anger?

Then, and I don't want to downplay the importance of attacks against our way of life, but I do want you to ask yourself if you have personally been party to such horror. Have you lived through an attack? Have you been threatened personally by a Muslim? And I don't ask this because I think none of you have (I couldn't possibly know everyone's history here), but because I want you to consider that this is the real state of the psalmist. He is not watching objectively as an observer the horrors of religious persecution from afar happen to someone else. *These things are happening to him.* What is his response? How does it differ from your own, whether you have been personally attacked, or more likely haven't been at all?

Do you worry? Do you fret? Do you get zealously religiously angry? Do you even become irrational? Or how about ignoring it altogether, or pretending that it really isn't a problem, or passing the problem onto something that isn't really a problem? We live in a godless age. It is an age of psychosis where people suffer from the Stockholm Syndrome (praising the very people who create harm out of

an inability to deal with reality), or where irrational fears that every single person who falls into a broader category like a Muslim must be a terrorist. We have both radical religious deniers and rabid religious zealots. Opposite extremes to a growing, real, and present problem. But one that honestly hasn't personally hit most of us. So what is the deepest impulse of your heart as it regards these things? **How do your circumstance and responses compare to the Psalmists?**

## **Religious Persecution and Trusting in God: Psalms 56**

Again let me point out that Psalm 56 is was written **when David was seized by the Philistines in Gath**. Gath is where Goliath was from. It is still a city today in what we call the Gaza Strip. It was not Israelite territory then; it isn't now either. It was a home of terrorists then; it is the home of terrorists now. The story is likely when David was fleeing from Saul, so he went to the Philistine territory and eventually ended up feigning insanity because they had seized him (**1Sa 21:14**). While the story does not tell us that

they held David prisoner, it ends with him “escaping” to the cave of Adullam (1Sa 22:1). How bad was it really for David if to escape Saul he went to the Philistines? This wouldn’t be like you escaping by fleeing to Canada, but rather to Libya or Syria or Iran. Can you imagine anything that would make you run there for protection? If you thought it was an easy thing to flee his own country because of a madman seeking to kill him and go to the Philistines—the great enemies of Israel—think again. If you think David acted insane because he enjoyed playing a role in a Hollywood movie, think again. He was under dire distress in Gath. This is what our Psalm adds to the story in Samuel.

Thus he begins, “Be gracious to me, O God, for man tramples on me; all day long an attacker oppresses me; my enemies trample on me all day long, for many attack me proudly” (Ps 56:1-2). You can hear the repetition and almost poetic nature of this in English. How much more in Hebrew! He is being trampled upon. He is being attacked by oppressors. It is constant. It is relentless. They are attacking him in pride. This is what they love to do to enemies! There is no remorse here. It is brazen. It is brash. These enemies are the epitome of religious fanatics, for David is the king of

Israel—their great enemy. His God is the enemy of their gods. Yahweh and his king must be destroyed.

What is David's response? First, he is **afraid** (3). Fear. Fear of man. Fear of the enemy. Fear of the oppressor. How could you not be in the face of being seized in a nation that was already your enemy, but which you fled to in the slightest hope that it would be better for you there than in your own country?

Yet, a beautiful thing happens next. The moment he fears, that is when he trusts. **"I put my trust in you"** (3). Not "we" trust. But "I" trust. David needs grace from God personally; *he* puts his trust in God.

What is the object of David's trust? That sounds like a silly question. It is God, of course! But it is more. **"In God, whose word I praise."** "Word" should be capitalized. He is not praising God's words (plural). He is praising God's Word (singular). He is not praising the Bible. He is praising a Person. For we do not worship a book; we worship God. For David, to trust in God is to praise his Word. **"In the Beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God. And the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God"** (John 1:1-2).

As Gill beautifully puts it,

In and by the help, assistance, and grace of Jehovah the Father, will I praise the eternal and essential Word, his Son. The Targum renders it his *Memra*; a word often used in it for a divine Person, the eternal Logos; the loveliness of his person, the love of his heart to his people, the fulness of grace that is in him, the offices he sustains on their account, and the virtue of his blood, righteousness, and sacrifice, render him praiseworthy in their esteem.<sup>10</sup>

Do not think that the Apostle just made this up. He knows his OT. And David knows the Word of God.

If to be afraid means to trust God, if to trust God is to praise his Word, then to praise his Word is to no longer be afraid. “I shall not be afraid” (4). There is a logical progression to this, and it is a key to sanctification.

- I was afraid. So I trusted in God.
- I trusted in God, so I praised his Word.
- I praised his Word, so I shall not be afraid.

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<sup>10</sup> John Gill, [\*An Exposition of the Old Testament\*](#), vol. 3, The Baptist Commentary Series (London: Mathews and Leigh, 1810), 758.

People fear radical religious persecution. What is the solution? Personal trust in God and his Word.

He knows that this fear was in men. But now he knows, “**What can flesh do to me?**” (4). David, don’t you know? It can do all kinds of things to you. It can mock you. It can torture you. It can maim you. It can emasculate you. It can cut out your tongue. It can kill you. Of course the Psalmist knows this! Yet he says it anyway. Why?

Because he is **not looking to a pleasant life in this world**. Yet, David is not ignoring reality. This is an implicit confession of *belief in eternal life* with God. For only in this way does the statement make any sense. What sense would it make to say that man could do nothing to you, if you were talking about temporal things? He can do all kinds of things to you. So he is speaking eternally. Thus, the refrain ends with strong trust in God and in Christ and with a confession that it doesn’t matter what people do to me, they cannot take away my trust and hope in God. And therefore, I shall not be afraid. For I praise his Word. Are you afraid of what Muslims or others may possibly do to you when you leave your home, go to a concert, walk into a theatre, stroll down

a mall, go to church? Then what are you trusting? Because praising the Word does not lead to such things as this.

In vs. 5 it is almost as if the song begins again. This time, it gets louder. “All day long they injure my cause; all their thoughts are against me for evil” (5). This is a malicious, wicked plot to attack and injure his “cause.” What cause is that? Not merely his personal happiness. Also his life. “They stir up strife, they lurk; they watch my steps, as they have waited for my life” (6).

This enemy seeks to obliterate every vestige of David’s hope. In destroying him, they think they will destroy his God. Their sin is not just against David, it is an attack on the Lord’s anointed; it is an attack on God himself. It is religious warfare. They hate David because of who his God is. And it is an intense, violent hatred indeed.

The song stops for a moment and asks God, “For their crime will they escape?” (7). Then the nations come into view. “In wrath cast down the peoples, O God!” (7). The psalmist is not afraid of God’s wrath, but he does believe in it. He doesn’t hate it. In fact, it becomes a hope of his. How could this possibly be?

Those who hate the Christian God because he is a wrathful God do not understand what God's wrath is against. And so they create strawmen that help them justify their own hatred and idolatry. God's wrath always views people as sinner. Sin is wickedness and evil. And people love their own sin and don't want to be told it is wrong. But what about when others sin against them? Suddenly, they change their tune. David sings about God's wrath because in the face of injustice against those who seek to harm him, against those who are perversely wicked, wrath is necessarily just and a great comfort. They will not escape after all! They won't get away with this forever, even if the Psalmist is unable to do anything about it himself.

But in the meantime, his worries can't help but return. The Psalmist really is human, just like me and you. It is one thing to say "Don't worry because of Christ." It is another to do it. He worries, even though he praises the Word and looses his fear. He tosses at night. He cries all day. **But God knows all this.** He sees his suffering. He sees the injustice against his servant. God is not only not aloof to it, he is actively taking stock in what is happening to his son. **"You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle.**

*Are they not in your book?*” (8). Counting these things is counting them against his enemies. They will be held to justice on the Last Day. He relies upon the All-Knowing God to remember everything, to see all the injustice, to hear all of cries, to rescue his child. And so he calls upon him.

“*Then my enemies will turn back in the day when I call. This I know, that God is for me*” (9). But which God? This part of the Psalter is filled with the generic word ‘*Elohim*’ for God. Finding the divine name is much rarer than it is in the first Book. Yet, here it is. The refrain returns, but this time with an added line: “*In God, whose Word I praise, in the LORD, whose Word I praise...*” (Ps 56:10). The God of David is not just any God, like it is in America. It is Jehovah, the LORD, Yahweh, the covenant God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In *this* God I trust. “*I shall not be afraid. What can man do to me*” (11). This in the face of radical evil personally dealt against him. This in the face of sleepless nights and tear-filled days. This in the face of personal persecution he faces from his real enemies that are actually doing something to him.

All there is left to do in this psalm is “*perform my vows to you, O God*” (12). What would that be? “*I will render*

thank offerings to you” (12). Before he finds temporal relief, before he is at peace with his neighbors, while he is under heavy attack, **this is the moment to thank God**. Not just after he is delivered. But before, because this is what faith does. This is what trust is all about. In the darkness, I will praise him still. The day the terrorists attack, that is the day to praise God. Why?

Not because God can't control it. Not because God is evil to allow it. Not because evil is something to be praise. But rather, again, what can flesh do to me? Nothing. This is why you praise. Because even in the midst of great terror and physical assaults, **“You have delivered my soul from death, yes, my feet from falling, that I may walk before God in the light of life”** (13). If he is your God, then you know eternal life. This is your security in the midst of an evil, hostile, insane world of religious fanatics that want to destroy you, your way of life, your civilization, and your God. Those things cannot harm you, even if they kill you, even if they take your family, because your soul is safe, and you have seen the Light of Life through the Word of God in Christ.

# Religious Persecution and the Glory of God: Psalms 56

As I said, Psalm 57 intensifies Psalm 56 (and 59 brings it to a climax). But 57 is not about trusting in God so much as it is **the glory of God** in the midst of religious persecution. It was apparently written just after 56, as it has in mind when David fled from Saul in the cave, which is exactly where he went after Gaza. Like the previous psalm, it is to the Choirmaster (For the End), but “**according to Do Not Destroy**” (apparently, a common tune, which itself conveyed an implicit message).<sup>11</sup>

It begins with the same word as Psalm 56: *chanan*. In 56:1 it was translated as “**gracious.**” Not it is translated as “**merciful.**” “**Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me.**”

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<sup>11</sup> **Going Deeper—Music and Meaning:** People do not stop to think about music itself as conveying a message, but it does. A Brahms lullaby conveys a message that is very different from a war march. Music conveys objective meaning. Even though that meaning is much more open to interpretation and as subjective aspects to it (cultures can infuse a kind of temporary meaning to tunes that become ubiquitous to them, but which may not have the same interpretation outside of that culture), you don’t go off to war to a lullaby. For David to put at least two psalms about enemies attacking him to a tune called “Do Not Destroy,” he is conveying meaning to the people not only through the words, but through the tune—whatever it was—which the people heard and knew had a cultural meaning that fit the message. This is one of the reasons we need to be careful in the music we choose to sing in church. If that music has a cultural meaning attached to it, or even a transcendent meaning, and this meaning does not fit the words, then we create cognitive dissonance in the church with words and music that are at odds with one another.

Why? Because “in you my soul takes refuge; in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge, till the storms of destruction pass by” (1). What is this about wings? Is God a bird? Well, not literally. And yet, the last two songs have both used the idea of a “dove” (see n. 5), a common image of the Holy Spirit in the Scripture. Not that the Spirit *is* a dove, but that he takes this form as a means of teaching us something about his Person. Like a bird that hovers over its young, so also the Spirit of God protects God’s children until the storms of destruction pass by. And curiously, another main image of the Spirit is the cloud-storm. So the Spirit of God protects us from the wrath of God which destroys those who refuse his loving refuge from the theophanic-storm.

As with the previous song, David now “cries out to God Most High, to God who fulfills his purpose for me” (2).<sup>12</sup> I had a friend die this past week. He and I used to talk about the divine council all the time. His favorite term for God was “Most High.” He always called God the Most High. Strangely, I don’t think I’ve ever heard anyone outside of

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<sup>12</sup> Dahood has the fascinating translation, “I call to God, Most High, to the Avenger El, Most High.” It would be easy to take this in a very different kind of application.

his family call God this in normal, everyday talk. But He *is* the Most High (Elyon), and this is a term that appears whenever the gods and the peoples of the nations are close by. In fact, it presupposes them, for David's God is Most High above someone—that is, all others in heaven or on earth. It is increasingly one of my favorite words to describe our God.

Psalm 8 asked how the Most High can think upon man?<sup>13</sup> What is man that you are mindful of him? And yet, here, he is not only mindful, but he has purposes for us. *And, he fulfills them.* We are not people born into a meaningless existence. God has sovereign designs for his people, he purposes their lives to go as he chooses, and he fulfills those sovereign desires because he *is* Most High and can do whatever he wants. This is a God to cry out to!

What are those purposes for the psalmist? “**He will send from heaven and save me; he will put to shame him who tramples on me. Selah**” (3). So many times we have **pauses** in the Psalms. They are also at the most appropriate places. For **God's sovereign purposes** are to save his elect and to punish those who trample upon them. The Psalm does not say when

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<sup>13</sup> Technically, it is Psalms 7 and 9 that refer to him as the Most High, Psalm 8 calls him Yahweh.

God will do it. But he is professing a belief that he will sooner or later. Why? Because he is the God of *hesed*. “God will send out his steadfast love (*hesed*) and his faithfulness!” (3). Because God has promised to do so and he never goes back on his word.

But again, the context is **enemies and persecution**. Saul was seeking to kill David because Saul was angry at David’s God for deposing him as king for his own disobedience. “My soul is in the midst of lions; I lie down amid fiery beasts (literally: the blazing ones)—the children of man, whose teeth are spears and arrows, whose tongues are sharp swords” (4). This is not the normal way we think about people, as the imagery shows the utter brutality of men, the hideousness of their cruelty. But it probably is the way we think about religious enemies who are hell-bent on destroying us. And how could we not? And so does David. And if we read the Psalms **Christologically**, so did our Lord. This sounds very much like Psalm 22, “They open wide their mouths at me, like a ravening and roaring lion ... Save me from the mouth of the lion!” (Psalm 22:13, 21). We know that this is a song all about the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus.

But the truly amazing thing about his Psalm is where it goes next. For where is God in all of this wickedness of one man against another? There is a refrain in Psalm 57 as well. This refrain sings, “Be exalted, O God, above the heavens! Let your glory be over all the earth!” (5). There have been several contemporary choruses built around this verse, but sadly, the context is often left off.<sup>14</sup> They praise God and exalt him above all the earth and heavens, but you never really learn why? For the Psalmist, it is because God’s steadfast love and faithfulness save his people and trample his enemies into the dust.

The second stanza begins, “They set a net for my steps; my soul was bowed down. They dug a pit in my way, but they have fallen into it themselves. Selah” (Ps 57:6). This is

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<sup>14</sup> For example, “I will give thanks to Thee O Lord, among the people | I will sing praises to Thee among the nations | For Thy steadfast love is great | It is great to the heavens And Thy faithfulness | Thy faithfulness to the clouds Be exalted | O God above the heavens Let Thy glory be over all the earth Be exalted | O God above the heavens Let Thy glory be over all the earth.” (Jeff Hamlin, “Be Exalted, O God,” 2010, Hosanna! Music). Or, “For Thou, O Lord, art high above all the earth | Thou art exalted far above all gods | For Thou, O Lord, art high above all the earth | Thou art exalted far above all gods. I exalt Thee, I exalt Thee | I exalt Thee, O Lord | I exalt Thee, I exalt Thee | I exalt Thee, O Lord. | We exalt Thee, We exalt Thee | We exalt Thee, O Lord | We exalt Thee, We exalt Thee | We exalt Thee, O Lord. | Oh with all we have | And with all we are | We have come so far | To lift Your name. Lift Your name on high, Jesus | Cause it's all about You, oh Jesus | Oh it's all about You - oh yeah yeah yeah. | And this love, this song, this praise | Is what we bring to You.” (Chris Quilala, “I Exalt Thee,” n.d., n.p.)

a familiar theme in the Psalms by now. But though we have seen it time and again, nevertheless we are to **pause**. The end for the wicked comes, again, because they are wicked. It is their own doing. This is human responsibility in the face of divine sovereignty. They fell into their own pit that they dug to kill God's people. Justice is an eye for an eye, and justice is never blind or unfair. She always does what is right. The final ruin of the wicked come because of their own wicked hands.

In the face of their demise, “**My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast! I will sing and make melody**” (7). “Heart” is literally his “**liver**,” but as that isn't very sentimental in English, you see why they render it as they do for us. But with “heart” you get the point. He is deeply committed to praising his God, in the very depths of his being. And you hear again the repetition. This is a song and he is singing it to his God. It is good to sing of the full counsel of God, not just the happy things, because those have their full expression only in the totality of who God is.

And God hears the song of his beloved. “**Awake, my glory! Awake, O harp and lyre! I will awake the dawn**” (8). Many have commented how “**the dawn**” was deified in

other religions.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, it seems possible that David is singing here not about just dawn as we think of it, and certainly not to the gods of the nations, but to his God. Peter probably picks up on this when he encourages you, “We have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts” (2Pe 1:19). He is encouraging us with the Lord Jesus who rose at dawn (Matt 29:1; Luke 24:1) and is the Bright Morning Star (Rev 22:16).

The Apostle arouses us to actions which God sees when he tells us, “The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light” (Rom 13:12), loving our neighbor (10), not committing adultery or murder or theft or coveting (9). And David is now arousing the LORD by awakening (in a figurative sense) his mighty God, his glory, the Dawn of his light through his beautiful harp and lyre. Not that God sleeps, but that he wants the LORD to hear his song:

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<sup>15</sup> The Canaanites had a myth to Shachar (*šhr*; Dawn) and Shalim (*šlm*; Sunset), a celebration of rejuvenation and fertility (see Tate, 80). The Hebrew word “dawn” is *shachar*.

“I will give thanks to you, O Lord, among the peoples; I will sing your praises to you among the nations” (9). Again the nations are in view. The king will proclaim the Name of the LORD to any and all, near and far, Jew or Gentiles. He will thank his God in the midst of his enemies.

“For your steadfast love is great to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds” (10). He ends the way he began. God will not let him down. God will be the one to hear his prayer and come to his aid. He will be his trust and his salvation. And he alone will help him as he deals with the religious persecution that comes at the hand of Saul his king and in some ways former friend.

As you think about yourself in the face of terrorism, ask yourself if you are responding to it the way David did. If they are not personal for you, but corporate, consider this in light of the fact that these were personal to David. If he trusted God in the midst of it, how much more should you? If you are not, then read these Psalms many times over until they are engrained in the very fabric of who you are.

It is not enough for a nation to trust in God, *you* must trust in God. It is not enough to trust in any old god, for even the Dawn can be perverted into a god of the nations

(and along with Sunset, both were viewed as gracious gods!). You must trust in Yahweh. It is not enough to just believe in One Divine Essence known as “God,” but you must believe in Father, Word, and Spirit—three Persons in one Godhead. This is whom David is singing to. This is who he exalts.

“Be exalted, O God, above the heavens! Let your glory be over all the earth” (11). The Glory of God belongs to the Father. But we behold the Glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2Co 4:6). And by his Glorious Holy Spirit, “The Spirit of Glory” (1Pe 4:14), he allows us to see this God not in wrath, but in mercy and grace.

Be gracious to us, O God. And let your glory be over all the earth. This is what it means to trust. May this be our response to terror. Amen.