

Have you ever dealt with someone who uses words as weapons?

Someone who uses verbal snares to trap you?

Someone whose *poisoned* words are designed to fester and destroy?

Their nets become a maze – with no way out –

a labyrinth that traps you in its bewildering passages

and leaves you wondering where on earth you are!

How do I deal with this mess?!

Psalm 140 draws us out of the trap and shows us the One who protects us, guards us,  
and delivers us from the snares of evil men.

Psalm 140 opens with the title:

*To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David.*

Almost every verse draws on parallels to other psalms of David (especially from book 2),  
which could mean that it was written by David,  
or it could mean that it was written to imitate David.

Either way, it is a “A Psalm of David” –

since the preposition could mean “by David,” “for David,” “about David” –  
the point is that this is a *Davidic Psalm* –

you need to hear it and sing it with the first person singular  
being the voice of *David*.

Think of the glorious ending of Melito of Sardis’s sermon, “On Pascha” –  
which we sing in “This Is the One” (PHSS 220)!

It’s a first-person singular in the voice of Jesus.

Everyone knows that Melito was the author –

but he uses the first-person singular as the voice of Jesus.

It’s a very helpful rhetorical method.

In the same way, Psalm 140 is written in the voice of David –  
the voice of Jesus Christ!

And therefore, all who have been united to him by faith,  
can sing this song in and with him.

### **1. Heart and Tongue: Deliver Me from Where Evil Starts (v1-3)**

*140 Deliver me, O LORD, from evil men;  
preserve me from violent men,  
<sup>2</sup> who plan evil things in their heart  
and stir up wars continually.  
<sup>3</sup> They make their tongue sharp as a serpent's,  
and under their lips is the venom of asps. Selah*

In the morning service, we are working through the book of Nehemiah.

It is perhaps interesting to reflect on the relationship between Psalm 140 and Nehemiah. Psalm 140 comes from Book 5 of the Psalter, which was the last of the books to be compiled (after the exile), and plainly has lots of connections with the post-exilic context. Many have noticed that Psalm 140 connects really well with Nehemiah's situation!

“violent men who plan evil things in their heart  
and stir up wars continually.  
They make their tongue sharp as a serpent's...”

The term “violence” is generally used in the Psalms to refer to “violence that is lawless and outrageous, often because it is exercised by means of the law” (Goldingay 644).

Nehemiah is certainly facing the sort of situation that Psalm 140 envisions!

So have many others.

And so, I daresay, *have you*.

You have experienced the conspiracies of the wicked!  
It may have been a neighborhood bully.  
It may have been colleagues plotting your demise at work.  
It may have been a group of pastors and elders  
conspiring to destroy your friend the night before a presbytery meeting...

Yes, it happened.  
I was there.  
I was young, and I did not know what to do –  
but it was an evil plot!

But let me add – I went on to work with many of those men over many years –  
and many, perhaps all, came to repent of the way that they acted that night.

I mention the episode as a reminder that sometimes otherwise good men can get drawn into an evil plot.

We often assume that the Psalms are talking about awful, nasty people.

But even good, decent people can become unwittingly part of awful, nasty plots!

But notice how *bodily* the plot is:

All of the sections describing the wicked focus on body parts.

They plan evil things in the *heart*.

They make their *tongue* sharp and under their *lips* is venom (v2-3).

Guard me from their *hands* which seek to trip my *feet* (v4).

And then verse 9 speaks of their head and their lips.

There's a pattern here:

heart, mouth, hands.

Action (whether good or evil) *starts* in the heart.

We take action when we think that something needs to be done.

Let's take Sanballat as our case study!

Nehemiah had come to Samaria and presented the king's letters to Sanballat the governor.

Sanballat thought that Nehemiah's timing was awful.

They had recently finished building the *Samaritan* temple at Mt. Gerizim.

Sanballat has been working to integrate his disparate territory,

bringing Jews, Samaritans, Ammonites, Arabs, and others together.

Nehemiah's plan of rebuilding the wall is going to inflame sectarian tensions.

"making Jerusalem great again" is *not* going to help Sanballat's efforts to promote his own dynastic ambitions!

Sanballat doesn't sound evil!

He sounds like a very ordinary politician.

And he doesn't *actually* attack Jerusalem.

He tweets about how very *sad* this dinky little wall is – and he threatens to use his power to smash them.

Yeah, he sounds like a very ordinary politician.

Out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks.

You see, when verse 2 says "who plan evil things in their heart and stir up wars continually..."

that's talking about the way that *human beings* seek their own advantage *all the time!*

We see our kids picking fights – poking and provoking each other.

And *we do the same thing* – only we're a little more sophisticated about it!

Left unchecked this results in verse 3 –

“whose tongue is sharp as a serpent’s, and under their lips is the venom of asps.”

This is why we discipline our children!

It is why we discipline church members – and pastors!

Out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks.

Words *matter*.

When our hearts are pointed in the wrong direction,  
our mouths will speak harmful things!

And if that is never dealt with,  
then our tongues become as sharp as a serpent’s –  
our lips become poisonous.

(Paul will cite this verse in Romans 3:13 as an example of how all have sinned –  
all have turned aside – none is righteous!)

Words can *hurt*.

And not just the stabbing pain of one biting comment!  
Poisoned words linger – as the poison continues to flow through the community –  
or in our minds and hearts.

One tongue was all it took to say it –  
but now the poison spreads as others take up the refrain –  
and now even I may wonder, is it really true?  
Am I really what they say of me?

You can understand why the Psalmist says,

“Rescue me, O LORD” – “Deliver me!” – “Preserve me”!

## **2. Hands and Feet: Guard Me from the Traps of the Wicked (v4-5)**

<sup>4</sup> *Guard me, O LORD, from the hands of the wicked;*

*preserve me from violent men,  
who have planned to trip up my feet.*

<sup>5</sup> *The arrogant have hidden a trap for me,  
and with cords they have spread a net;<sup>[a]</sup>  
beside the way they have set snares for me. Selah*

And in the second stanza, he continues “Guard me, O LORD” –

and again “preserve me from violent men” –  
again focusing on the *hands* of the wicked, and the *plans* of the violent.

Because now it has gone beyond words!

A trap has been set – snares are in place to trip up my feet,  
so that I might stumble and fall.

If anything “trip” is too mild a translation –  
the idea is much more aggressive – to “cast me down”  
They are trying to destroy me!!

And “they” are described as “the arrogant” in verse 5.

The word means “eminent.”

It’s an important distinction because arrogant people come from all sorts of backgrounds!

But these are *eminent* people –

these are the *important* people!

Think of Sanballat – the *governor* in Samaria!

The eminent people (those who have good reason, you might say, to be arrogant!)  
are especially likely to set snares for those whom they want to “get rid of”.

And of course, all of this was seen in the attempt to get rid of Jesus!

It was the “eminent men” of his day – governor Pilate, King Herod, High Priest –  
all the important people of the region –  
who conspired together against the Lord and his Anointed One!

It is often the eminent – the powerful –

who conspire against the helpless in order to get what they want.

Michael Willcock says well,

“let us make no mistake: now as then there are plenty of *men of violence* around  
who really do intend evil,  
and who really do deserve the imprecations of psalms like 140.” (263)

### **3. You Are My God – the Strength of My Salvation (v6-8)**

<sup>6</sup> *I say to the LORD, You are my God;*

*give ear to the voice of my pleas for mercy, O LORD!*

<sup>7</sup> *O LORD, my Lord, the strength of my salvation,*

*you have covered my head in the day of battle.*

<sup>8</sup> *Grant not, O LORD, the desires of the wicked;*

*do not further their<sup>[b]</sup> evil plot, or they will be exalted! Selah*

At the center of the Psalm (verses 6-8) we have the Psalmist’s plea for God to act.

But before we ask God to *act*, we need to remember who God *is*!

This is important for us – because in the middle of difficult times,  
it can be easy to forget!

We can get so focused on our plea for justice that we forget who we are talking to!

So, in our prayers, we need to make sure that *we remember who God is!!*

“I say to the LORD, You are my God.”

I come to you because you are my God!  
I am not able to fix everything!  
I am weak and helpless.  
I need *you* to act!

“give ear to the voice of my pleas for mercy, O LORD!”

In other words, I am committed to you as my God –  
and you have promised that you will hear those who cry out to you in faith  
so I am asking you to do what you promised and *hear me!!*

And so he turns in verse 7 to remind God of what God has done:

“O LORD, my Lord, the strength of my salvation,  
you have covered my head in the day of battle.”

You have protected me in the past –  
you have guarded me –  
please do it again!

The language of “covered my head” is particularly appropriate  
given the fact that the *head* is the most vulnerable appendage to the body!

You can cover the rest of your body with protection –  
but if you completely cover your head,  
then you *can't see or hear* –  
and if you can't see or hear,  
you can't *fight!!*

And furthermore, the head is the most important part of the body to protect!

A shot to the arm will *hurt*  
but you could lose an arm or a leg and survive.  
If you lose your head, well, game over –  
as Goliath learned the hard way!

So when you go out into battle,

it is important to trust not in your great technology –  
nor in your great expertise and skill –  
but in the LORD's protection.

And so now, in verse 8, the Psalmist comes to state his plea:

“Grant not, O LORD, the desires of the wicked;

do not further their evil plot, or they will be exalted.”

This may seem obvious.

But it’s okay – indeed, it’s a good thing – to pray for the obvious!  
“Don’t let the wicked get away with it!”

We sang this in Psalm 73 recently.

Psalm 73 reminds us that often we see the wicked prosper –  
we see their schemes succeed –  
they oppress the righteous *and get away with it!*

But God is the strength of my salvation.

Psalm 73 says that our greatest good is to be *near God*.

Psalm 140 will end with saying that the upright will *dwell* in God’s presence.

Stephen Long reminded me recently that the word for “sacrifice” in Hebrew means “something brought near” –  
and while Augustine may not have known Hebrew,  
he knew the Bible well enough to see the connection.

In the City of God (book 10) Augustine says:

“Thus a true sacrifice is every work which is done  
that we may be united to God in holy fellowship,  
and which has a reference to that supreme good and end  
in which alone we can be truly blessed....

Since, therefore, true sacrifices are works of mercy to ourselves or others,  
done with a reference to God,

and since works of mercy have no other object than the relief of distress  
or the conferring of happiness,

and since there is no happiness apart from that good of which it is said,  
'It is good for me to be very near to God,'

it follows that the whole redeemed city,

that is to say, the congregation or community of the saints,

is offered to God as our sacrifice through the great High Priest,

who offered Himself to God in His passion for us,

that we might be members of this glorious head,

according to the form of a servant."

Psalm 140 operates with the same way of thinking.

Yes, we can be dismayed at the prosperity of the wicked.

We can be frustrated at how the eminent and powerful people  
use their power to knock other people down.

And yes, sometimes we'll be the ones who are knocked over.

But when we are lying on our back sides, staring up at the heavens,  
we can still call on God, saying,  
“do not give them what they want!  
Do not further their evil plot, or they will be exalted!”

Indeed, verses 9-11 then follows a very familiar pattern of God's “poetic justice”:

#### **4. Head and Lips: Let Their Own Mischief Destroy Them (v9-11)**

<sup>9</sup> *As for the head of those who surround me,  
let the mischief of their lips overwhelm them!*  
<sup>10</sup> *Let burning coals fall upon them!  
Let them be cast into fire,  
into miry pits, no more to rise!*  
<sup>11</sup> *Let not the slanderer be established in the land;  
let evil hunt down the violent man speedily!*

God is the one who protects *my head* –  
but “as for the head of those who surround me,  
let the mischief of their lips overwhelm them.”

In other words, let the poison of their own lips poison themselves!  
“May the attackers drink their own medicine” (Goldingay, 647)

The “slanderer” is literally a “tongue” –  
“let not the tongue be established in the land.”  
The reason why it is translated “slanderer”  
is because in English “tongue” sounds strange!  
But we have already seen what these people have done with their tongues!  
They have sharpened their tongues so that they might destroy others.  
But once you let mischief out of the bag,  
it will do its naughty work!

The attackers thought that evil and mischief was something that they could control.  
But no one can master mischief.

God's justice is a sort of “poetic justice.”  
Those who seek to destroy others will be destroyed.  
Those who seek to ensnare others will be caught in their own traps.

Jesus explained how this works,  
when he said that by the measure you use, it will be measured to you.



God will judge you according to the way that you judged others.

I realize that when *some* people hear this, they think,  
“well, then if I never judge anyone, then God won’t judge me!”

But that’s not possible!  
You make judgments every day!  
You decide what is good – what is bad –  
    when a child is getting beaten up,  
    you aren’t going to say, “Oh, who am I to judge?!”  
No, you are going to make a judgment and you are going to rescue the child!

But even if you don’t rescue a child – you have still made a judgment!  
You have judged that the child was not worth rescuing!  
And so God will treat you the way you treated that child.  
You’re not worth rescuing!

Notice that this is the very point of the last stanza in verses 12-13:

**5. The Righteous Will Give Thanks – Because the LORD Will Maintain the Cause of the Afflicted (v12-13)**

<sup>12</sup> *I know that the LORD will maintain the cause of the afflicted,  
and will execute justice for the needy.*

<sup>13</sup> *Surely the righteous shall give thanks to your name;  
the upright shall dwell in your presence.*

There is a confidence here in these last two verses.

All through verses 1-11, there was a *plea* that God *would* do something.  
But now the Psalmist speaks with great confidence that God *will* do it.

*I know* that the LORD will maintain the cause of the afflicted,  
and will execute justice for the needy.

God will not decide for the strong and powerful.  
He will not vindicate the eminent men for their abuse of power!

God’s verdict will come back in favor of the afflicted and the needy.  
Therefore, in keeping with the “poetic justice” theme,  
    we need to see that righteousness is about doing *right* to those who are afflicted.  
The upright are those who deliver the needy from the hands of the eminent.

It’s not enough to say that “generally speaking” – “most of the time”  
it works out better if you are upright.

Now it's *true* that living rightly in God's world generally works better than living wrongly!  
But that's not the point of verses 12-13!

But when the Psalmist says "I know that the LORD will maintain the cause of the afflicted,  
and will execute justice for the needy" –  
that's not saying that "more often than not" God will make things right.  
Psalm 140 is pointing to the final judgment  
when God will make things *right*.

In the end, Psalm 140 only makes sense in the light of the resurrection of Jesus.  
That's why it was written as a Psalm of David.  
It is only when you sing Psalm 140 in the voice of the Son of David,  
our Lord Jesus Christ,  
that the confidence of the Psalm makes sense!

As Psalm 73 had said,  
"You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory."  
Or as Psalm 140 says,  
"Surely the righteous shall give thanks in your name;  
the upright shall dwell in your presence."

One final comment on the importance of eschatology for Psalm 140.  
Notice how he says it:  
"I know that the LORD will maintain the cause of the afflicted."

This means that *affliction* will be a part of our lives in this age.  
If you have no afflictions – then the LORD has nothing to do with you!  
Hebrews 12 says this very clearly –  
"If you are left without discipline...then you are illegitimate children,  
and not sons."  
God disciplines you with afflictions *because he loves you!*

We often try to get rid of our afflictions.  
But we need to remember that our afflictions – our sufferings –  
are designed by God to make us partakers of Christ's sufferings.

So our goal should not be to eliminate affliction.

As one author puts it:  
"One of the central elements of being a Christian is sharing in the *sufferings* of Christ  
(2 Cor. 1:5-7). Not some of the time. Not occasionally. But *always* (2 Cor. 1:8-9). Suffering is  
not an anomaly for Christians. It's our daily bread and butter...."

As strange as it sounds, when we believe in Christ, we are raised with him and receive a down-payment of his resurrection life. And what do we do with that down payment? We pay a daily toll that gives us entrance to a road marked “Fellowship with Christ’s Sufferings” (Phil. 3:10). We walk that road knowing that now our life is one modeled after Christ’s: weakness and frailty *in us* lead to strength and power *from him*. In Gaffin’s words, “the power of Christ’s resurrection is realized just *as* the fellowship of his sufferings and conformity to his death” (p. 234). Conforming to the image of Christ, to his death, is our end goal. All the time. I know that sounds like doom and gloom. But stay with me.

Here’s the big point: If you try to avoid or dissolve all suffering, you’re actually running away from the adopted life that God welcomed you into. When we were adopted by our heavenly Father, we were *granted* something: “it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake” (Phil. 1:29). “Remove that suffering,” Gaffin says, “and you take away our very identity as God’s adopted children, our being heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ” (p. 238). Lose the suffering of Christ, and you lose your Christian identity on earth.

In short, we were adopted by our heavenly Father, in the loving power of the Holy Spirit, in order to be conformed to the image of the Son. And that conformity “means suffering now, for ‘the present time,’ and the glory to be revealed at his return” (p. 238).”

Pierce Hibbs (<http://www.wordsfortheologians.org/how-should-christians-face-an-anxiety-disorder-counter-intuitive-advice/>)

Therefore, your afflictions – your sufferings –  
are the means that God is using to reveal his power in your weakness –  
his life in your death.

The eternal Son of God joined himself to our humanity,  
so that we might become partakers of his divine life.  
And that happens as we are conformed to the likeness of his suffering –  
so that we might be conformed to the likeness of his resurrection glory.