

Adam Clarke:

Introduction

David, in great danger and distress from the implacable malice of his enemies, calls on God for mercy, Psalm 55:1-5; wishes he had the wings of a dove, that he might flee away, and be at rest, Psalm 55:6-8; prays against his enemies, and describes their wickedness, Psalm 55:9-11; speaks of a false friend, who had been the principal cause of all his distresses, Psalm 55:12-14; again prays against his enemies, Psalm 55:15; expresses his confidence in God, Psalm 55:16-18; gives a farther description of the deceitful friend, Psalm 55:19-21; encourages himself in the Lord, and foretells the destruction of his foes, Psalm 55:22, Psalm 55:23.

The title, "To the chief Musician upon Neginoth, A Psalm of David, giving instruction." This is the same as the preceding, Psalm 54:1-7 (note), which see.

Verse 1

Give ear to my prayer - The frequency of such petitions shows the great earnestness of David's soul. If God did not hear and help, he knew he could not succeed elsewhere; therefore he continues to knock at the gate of God's mercy.

Verse 2

I mourn in my complaint - מְשִׁיחִי (mesichi), in my sighing; a strong guttural sound, expressive of the natural accents of sorrow.

And make a noise - I am in a tumult - I am strongly agitated.

Verse 3

They cast iniquity upon me - To give a colourable pretense to their rebellion, they charge me with horrible crimes; as if they had said: Down with such a wretch; he is not fit to reign. Clamour against the person of the sovereign is always the watch-word of insurrection, in reference to rebellion.

Verse 4

The terrors of death are fallen upon me - I am in hourly expectation of being massacred.

Verse 5

Fearfulness - How natural is this description! He is in distress; - he mourns; - makes a noise; - sobs and sighs; - his heart is wounded - he expects nothing but death; - this produces fear; - this produces tremor, which terminates in that deep apprehension of approaching and inevitable ruin that overwhelms him with horror. No man ever described a wounded heart like David.

Verse 6

O that I had wings like a dove! - He was so surrounded, so hemmed in on every side by his adversaries, that he could see no way for his escape unless he had wings, and could take flight. The dove is a bird of very rapid wing; and some oil them passing before his eyes at the time, might have suggested the idea expressed here.

And be at rest - Get a habitation.

Verse 7

Would I wander far off - He did escape; and yet his enemies were so near, as to throw stones at him: but he escaped beyond Jordan. 2 Samuel 17:22, 2 Samuel 17:23.

A passage in the Octavia of Seneca has been referred to as being parallel to this of David. It is in the answer of Octavia to the Chorus, Acts v., ver. 914-923.

Quis mea digne deflere potest Mala?

Quae lacrymis nostris quaestus

Reddet Aedon? cujus pennas

Utinam miserae mihi fata darent!

Fugerem luctus ablata meos

Penna volucris, procul et coetus

Hominum tristes sedemque feram.

Sola in vacuo nemore, et tenui

Ramo pendens, querulo possem

Guttur moestum fundere murmur.

My woes who enough can bewail?
 O what notes can my sorrows express?
 Sweet Philomelâ€™s self eâ€™en would fail
 To respond with her plaintive distress.
 O had I her wings I would fly
 To where sorrows I neâ€™er should feel more,
 Upborne on her plumes through the sky,
 Regions far from mankind would explore.
 In a grove where sad silence should reign,
 On a spray would I seat me alone;
 In shrill lamentations complain,
 And in wailings would pour forth my moan.
 J. B. Clarke.

Verse 8

The windy storm - From the sweeping wind and tempest - Absalom and his party and the mutinous people in general.

Verse 9

Destroy, O lord - Swallow them up - confound them.

Divide their tongues - Let his counsellors give opposite advice. Let them never agree, and let their devices be confounded. And the prayer was heard. Hushai and Ahithophel gave opposite counsel. Absalom followed that of Hushai; and Ahithophel, knowing that the steps advised by Hushai would bring Absalomâ€™s affairs to ruin, went and hanged himself. See 2 Samuel 15,16, and 17.

Violence and strife in the city - They have been concerting violent measures; and thus are full of contention.

Verse 10

Day and night they go about - This and the following verse show the state of Jerusalem at this time. Indeed, they exhibit a fair view of the state of any city in the beginning of an insurrection. The leaders are plotting continually; going about to strengthen their party, and to sow new dissensions by misrepresentation, hypocrisy, calumny, and lies.

Verse 12

It was not an enemy - It is likely that in all these three verses Ahithophel is meant, who, it appears, had been at the bottom of the conspiracy from the beginning; and probably was the first mover of the vain mind of Absalom to do what he did.

Verse 14

Walked unto the house of God in company - Or with haste; for the rabbins teach that we should walk hastily To the temple, but slowly From it.

Verse 15

Let death seize upon them - This is a prediction of the sudden destruction which should fall on the ringleaders in this rebellion. And it was so. Ahithophel, seeing his counsel rejected, hanged himself. Absalom was defeated; and, fleeing away, he was suspended by the hair in a tree, under which his mule had passed; and being found thus by Joab, he was despatched with three darts; and the people who espoused his interests were almost all cut off. They fell by the sword, or perished in the woods. See 2 Samuel 18:8.

Let then go down quick into hell - Let them go down alive into the pit. Let the earth swallow them up! And something of this kind actually took place. Absalom and his army were defeated; twenty thousand of the rebels were slain on the field; and the wood devoured more people that day than the sword devoured, 2 Samuel 18:7, 2 Samuel 18:8. The words might be rendered, â€œDeath shall exact upon them; they shall descend alive into sheol.â€• And death did exact his debt upon them, as we have seen above.

Verse 16

I will call upon God - He foresaw his deliverance, and the defeat of his enemies and therefore speaks confidently, â€œThe Lord shall save me;â€• or, as the Targum, â€œThe Word of the Lord shall redeem me.â€•

Verse 17

Evening, and morning, and at noon, will I pray - This was the custom of the pious Hebrews. See Daniel 6:10. The Hebrews began their day in the evening, and hence David mentions the evening first. The rabbins say, Men should pray three times each day, because the day changes three times. This was observed in the primitive Church; but the times, in different places, were various. The old Psalter gives this a curious turn: "At even I shall tell his louing (praise) what time Christ was on the Crosse: and at morn I shall shew his louing, what time he rose from the dead. And shall here my voice at mid day, that is sit at the right hand of his father, whether he stee (ascended) at mid day."

Verse 18

He hath delivered my soul - My life he has preserved in perfect safety from the sword; for there were many with me: "for in many afflictions his Word was my support." - Targum. Or David may refer to the supernatural assistance which was afforded him when his enemies were so completely discomfited.

Verse 19

Because they have no changes - At first Absalom, Ahithophel, and their party, carried all before them. There seemed to be a very general defection of the people; and as in their first attempts they suffered no reverses, therefore they feared not God. Most of those who have few or no afflictions and trials in life, have but little religion. They become sufficient to themselves, and call not upon God.

Verse 20

He hath put forth his hands - A farther description of Ahithophel. He betrayed his friends, and he broke his covenant with his king. He had agreed to serve David for his own emolument, and a stipulation was made accordingly; but while receiving the king's pay, he was endeavoring to subvert the kingdom, and destroy the life of his sovereign.

Verse 21

Were smoother than butter - He was a complete courtier, and a deep, designing hypocrite besides. His words were as soft as butter, and as smooth as oil, while he meditated war; and the fair words which were intended to deceive, were intended also to destroy: they were drawn swords. This is a literal description of the words and conduct of Absalom, as we learn from the inspired historian, 2 Samuel 15:2, etc. He was accustomed to wait at the gate; question the persons who came for justice and judgment; throw out broad hints that the king was negligent of the affairs of his kingdom, and had not provided an effective magistracy to administer justice among the people, and added that if he were appointed judge in the land, justice should be done to all. He bowed also to the people, and kissed them; and thus he stole the hearts of the men of Israel. See the passages referred to above.

Verse 22

Cast thy burden upon the Lord - Whatever cares, afflictions, trials, etc., they may be with which thou art oppressed, lay them upon him.

And he shall sustain thee - He shall bear both thee and thy burden. What a glorious promise to a tempted and afflicted soul! God will carry both thee and thy load. Then cast thyself and it upon him.

He shall never suffer the righteous to be moved - While a man is righteous, trusts in and depends upon God, he will never suffer him to be shaken. While he trusts in God, and works righteousness, he is as safe as if he were in heaven.

Verse 23

But thou, O God, shalt bring them down into the pit of destruction - The Chaldee is emphatic: "And thou, O Lord, by thy Word (בְּמַעְמַרְכִּי) shalt thrust them into the deep gehenna, the bottomless pit, whence they shall never come out; the pit of destruction, where all is amazement, horror, anguish, dismay, ruin, endless loss, and endless suffering."

Bloody and deceitful men shall not live out half their days - So we find, if there be an appointed time to man upon earth, beyond which he cannot pass; yet he may so live as to provoke the justice of God to cut him off before he arrives at that period; yea, before he has reached half way to that limit. According to the decree of God, he might have lived the other half; but he has not done it.

But I will trust in thee - Therefore I shall not be moved, and shall live out all the days of my appointed time. The fathers in general apply the principal passages of this Psalm to our Lord's sufferings, the treason of Judas, and the wickedness of the Jews; but these things do not appear to me fairly deducible from the text. It

seems to refer plainly enough to the rebellion of Absalom. "The consternation and distress expressed in Psalm 55:4-8, describe the king's state of mind when he fled from Jerusalem, and marched up the mount of Olives, weeping. The iniquity cast upon the psalmist answers to the complaints artfully laid against the king by his son of a negligent administration of justice: and to the reproach of cruelty cast upon him by Shimei, 2 Samuel 15:2, 2 Samuel 15:4; 2 Samuel 16:7, 2 Samuel 16:8. The equal, the guide, and the familiar friend, we find in Ahithophel, the confidential counsellor, first of David, afterwards of his son Absalom. The buttery mouth and oily words describe the insidious character of Absalom, as it is delineated, 2 Samuel 15:5-9. Still the believer, accustomed to the double edge of the prophetic style, in reading this Psalm, notwithstanding its agreement with the occurrences of David's life, will be led to think of David's great descendant, who endured a bitter agony, and was the victim of a baser treachery, in the same spot where David is supposed to have uttered these complaints." - Bishop Horsley.