TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

The Response of a Slandered Saint

Psalm 7

David Anguish

Introduction

A ministry friend once told me about being asked to encourage three people whose stories were essentially the same. A co-worker had begun a smear campaign against each of them, spreading lies about them throughout their workplace in an effort to discredit them. The campaign was working: all of their jobs were in jeopardy if they had not already been forfeited. Because the slander was so effectively spread, there was nothing any of them could do.

Their situation reminds us that the world is often not a place where everyone wants the best for us. Some people have motives and agendas that are anything but pure, and their skill in exercising them is so good that we may be left with no option but to suffer the consequences of their deceit. Our suffering will be made worse by the knowledge that we are not guilty as charged.

What are we to do when we have no recourse? How do we cope when our foundation is taken from us by unfair attacks by others? This is the situation the psalmist is facing in Psalm 7. Studying it can help prepare us to respond to similar unfair situations.

Preparing for Analysis.

Before we examine the details of Psalm 7 we should recall that not all the psalms are upbeat and comforting. Around one-third of them are *laments*, expressions of often deeply felt feelings of trouble, anger, grief, depression, protests against injustice, and so on. As Walter Brueggemann has written,

> The Psalms … propose to speak about human experience in an honest, freeing way. This is in contrast to much human speech and conduct which is in fact a coverup. In most areas where people live, we are expected and required to speak the language of sage orientation and equilibrium, either to find it so or to pretend we find it so. … As a result, our speech is dull and mundane. Our passion has been stilled and is without imagination.… This means that the agenda and intention of the Psalms is considerably at odds with the normal speech of most people, the normal speech of a stable,

> functioning, self-deceptive culture in which everything must be kept running young and smooth (Brueggemann 1982, 19).

Indeed, Brueggemann continues, there is a danger in making "these Psalms too 'religious' or pious. They are not religious in the sense that they are courteous or polite or deferential. They are religious only in the sense that they are willing to speak this chaos to the very face of the Holy One" (Brueggemann 1982, 22).

With this background in mind, we are ready to look at Psalm 7 which "moves from the intensely personal plea of a man who is betrayed and hounded, to the conviction that God is judge of all the earth, and that wickedness is self-defeating. So it ends with confidence and praise" (Kidner 1973, 63).

Analysis of Psalm 7

Verses 1–2 present us with a hunted man who has been knocked off-balance. David[1] is not lacking all confidence relative to his covenant relationship with God. This is evident in his use of the personal address, "my God" and the Hebrew tense of the verb, "take refuge" which indicates that the refuge already exists. But the emotion expressed shows that his confidence has been eroded. His plea, "save me" is urgent, and the figure in verse 2 is graphic, a point made clearer in the NIV: "or they [his pursuers] will tear me apart like a lion, and rip me to pieces with no one to rescue me."

Neither his feelings nor their result are difficult to understand. We hear a man whose world has been shaken. He has been knocked so far off balance that he ignores the social niceties which often worry us and is driven to the most emotional prayer and song. His situation illustrates what we may have experienced when it is the feelings "of being overwhelmed, nearly destroyed, and surprisingly given life which empowers us to pray and sing" (Brueggemann 1982, 17).

Facing such extreme disorientation, he has no room for anything except the most candid honesty: about himself, about God, and about what he wants (or expects) to happen (vv. 3–16). Verses 3–5 illustrate the toughest honesty—honesty with himself. He's so convinced he's not guilty that he calls down a curse on himself if he is. Verse 3 emphasizes that he believes he has been slandered: the phrase "wrong in my hands" is literally "wrong in my palms," a phrase that usually refers to the acceptance of bribes (Briggs 1906, 53). In verse 4, the phrase, "if I have repaid my friend with evil" suggests a covenant relationship, or at least one in which the person had the right to expect good treatment but believed the other had breached the friendship. His conviction that he is innocent is emphasized in verse 5's willingness to accept a dire outcome if he is not.

Having expressed his innocence, David turns to the LORD to make things right, something he counts on because he has an honest and balanced view of God (vv. 6–11). The point of this section is found in verse 11: "God is a righteous judge, and a God who feels indignation every day." This view of God is not palatable for many in recent years, as Lewis, Dodd, and Tippens found in their study of the faith of Generation X where they wrote, "What we find often being omitted from the menu of divine qualities is his transcendent power, his exclusive claims on us, his fierce judgment on evil and evil-doers, and his high demands for personal sacrifice" (Lewis, Dodd, and Tippens 1995, 43). But,

[1] We conclude that David is the author from the heading: "A Shiggaion [a musical term] of David, which he sang to the LORD concerning the words of Cush, a Benjaminite."

as they correctly go on to emphasize, "there is much in the Bible—both Old Testament and New—which does not square with a soft user-friendly deity. Reverence, awe and fear for a God who is 'a consuming fire' (Hebrews 12:29) must be restored to the library of images used by our young people" (Lewis, Dodd, and Tippens 1995, 46).[2]

David's concern in Psalm 7 shows why this is so important. Only a God who refuses to take sin lightly can lead a people away from sin and give justice to those who persist in doing evil. The same God who so graciously chooses the Israelites (Exod 19.5–6) also gives them instruction so they will maintain a holy fear (Exod 20.18–20). The same God who promises to restore a faithful remnant is able to do so only because those people are impressed with his righteous anger and turn away from apostasy (Isa 12.1–2). If David's lament in Psalm 7 does not represent that balance, it's because the situation that leads him to write this psalm is characterized by motives and actions by those who had tipped the scales toward evil.

So, in verses 6–8, David calls on the LORD to wake up (cf. v. 6b), a figure used in writings in the ancient near east to affirm an active belief in God's universal rule even in the face of terrible injustice. The belief was that God would be aroused to act on behalf of those who were being victimized. Furthermore, David grounds his claim on God's righteousness on something more than his own situation and integrity: verses 9–10 make a universal plea for righteousness to overcome evil. And notice that he does not passively accept evil; he sees a wrong and tries to make it right.

Verses 12–16 show that David's awareness of God's righteousness led him to declare, without reservation, his expectation that God would pursue his enemy and make him pay. Verses 12–13 show what God's righteousness looks like when he is pursuing sin. Verses 14–16 show the outcome for the man who gives in to malicious evil. Verse 14 uses the imagery of conception, pregnancy, and birth to emphasize that David's enemy is so filled with evil that he devotes himself to consistently conceiving more, as spelled out in verse 15: "He makes a pit, digging it out, and falls into the hole that he has made." But his evil ("mischief") will be repaid in kind, "and on his own skull his violence descends" (v. 16). As a friend used to say, "what goes around comes around—only harder."

Verse 17 implicitly shows the basis for David's confidence in the outcome: the LORD'S righteousness. So, he declares his intention to give thanks and sing praise. His declaration may strike us as being out of touch, but in fact it is the essence of wisdom. When the righteous are attacked by the wicked and have no recourse, they count on God to do right for them. Thus, as Brueggemann writes,

> Even the lament Psalms are acts of hope. They articulate the deepest hurt, anger and rage of Israel. But they are not statements of resignation which accept the bad situation. Rather, they are insistences upon and expectations from God, who can and will, may and must, keep promises" (Brueggemann 1982, 62).

[2] Since the Gen X adolescents in the study of Lewis, Dodd, and Tippens are now the parents of a new generation, we should consider the possibility, if not likelihood, that they are passing on the same views of God. Some evidence of the work still needed in this regard is found in this passage from Michael Kruger, written in 2021: "Most people have a very different view of God from the one presented in the Bible. Most people view God (if he exists at all) as a pretty affable fellow, generally laid back, who stays out of your business unless you need a little help. He's a bit like the cool, uninvolved parent who is not too worried about how you live your life 'as long as you are happy'" (Kruger 2021, 93; for elaboration on the point, including emphasis on recognizing God's holiness, see his discussion on pp. 93–94).

Conditions for Claiming This Psalm's Promises

Not everyone can pray Psalm 7's prayer or claim its promises. To understand that statement, we should notice several theological truths that are assumed in this psalm (Hicks 1997, 13).

- This prayer assumes a covenant relationship between God and the accused, as seen in the phrase, "my God" (vv. 1, 3).
- The accused asserts his loyalty to God's covenant; he also asserts his integrity before God's covenant and invites God to test his heart.
- The curse against his antagonist is rooted in God's righteousness as the one who saves the upright in heart.
- God is active in his world to test the hearts of the righteous and destroy the wicked (cf. Exod 20.20).
- God's righteousness pursues evil through its own self-destructive character; God wages war against the impenitent.
- God is praised for his righteousness which exalts the righteous and destroys the wicked.

These principles provide the basis for our response when we face situations that are comparable to David's. (1) He models a prayer that can be utilized by *all* who have been unjustly accused. (2) He shows us how to express anger against personal injustice: appeal to the just God. (3) The psalm as a whole provides us with a *biblical form* through which we can express our longings for justice, anger against injustice, and trust in God's righteousness (Hicks 1997, 13).

Conclusion

In various illustration sources and websites, you will find the story of Vera Czermak. According to the story, Vera was a woman in Prague who, in 1972, discovered that her husband had been unfaithful. After wrestling with whether to murder him or commit suicide, she decided on the latter. She jumped from her third story window but survived the fall. Per the story, a local newspaper reported that she was recovering in a hospital. Her husband, however, had been killed—when she landed on him.

Some have questioned the story as an urban legend, but, whether or not it is true, it does serve to illustrate that sometimes life has a way of evening things out. But sometimes, our only hope is in the righteousness of God and the fact that his justice will ultimately overcome the plans of those who would do us harm.

That expectation is available only if we are growing in a covenant relationship with God.

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www.davidanguish.com