

# Prayer under pressure

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[ 0 : 00 ] It is written, Lord I cry unto thee, make haste unto me, give ear unto my voice when I cry unto thee.

Psalms 141 verse 1. Now this psalm is one of the less well-known psalms of the Old Testament. Part of the reason for that is it is a very difficult psalm to understand.

The three verses in the middle, 5, 6 and 7, are our favorite battlefield for commentators. They all seek to explain it in their own way and their explanations are all different.

It defies confident exegesis. But I want to look at the psalm and even if we leave aside the difficult portion where the commentators have problems and don't go into the water where it's becoming too deep for us, even if we stick to the rest of the psalm I think it has some valuable lessons for us to learn.

The first thing we notice about it is its title. It's described as a psalm of David. In other words, here we have not an anonymous piece of poetry, but something written by a real man.

[ 1 : 25 ] A real man of God, about whom we know a great deal and with whom we can identify. This is someone whose life story we know not just in outline but in fairly considerable detail.

There are a few characters in the Old Testament about whom we know as much as David. But having said that, we are not told any further, we are not given any further information about the circumstances in which David wrote the psalm.

You look at other psalms that David wrote, a number of them anyway, 51, 57, 58, 59 for example, you will find the titles tell us the occasion when David penned these words.

And we know where in the course of his life these words were first uttered. They are associated with particular incidents in his career. But not so this psalm.

The context leads us to infer that it perhaps belongs to the period when David was persecuted by King Saul. Or perhaps to the time of the revolt of King Absalom.

[ 2 : 39 ] Certainly the third thing we know about it is it is a psalm written under pressure. David speaks in verse 4 of the wicked practices of evildoers.

He speaks in verse 9 of wickedness directed against him personally. Keep me from the snares or traps which they've laid for me.

He's a man who's surrounded by evil influences. There are people who are out to get him. This psalm is written under pressure. And it teaches us lessons which are relevant to us when we are under pressure.

We may not be pursued as David was by Saul or as our Scottish covenanters were on the moors forced to hide in caves.

But we all have our times of stress and pressure. And this psalm helps us to see how one man of God coped in these situations.

[ 3 : 48 ] The first thing I think this psalm tells us tonight shows us tonight is how David prays. How David prays.

And first of all we see very clearly in verse 1 the urgency of his prayer. Look at it. It's a series of short phrases.

Lord I cry to thee make haste to come to me give ear to my voice when I cry unto thee. Like shots bullets from a gun. Quick staccato-like pleas.

One can imagine David in a situation he's surrounded by his enemies uttering these prayers to God like bullets right down.

What our fathers used to call ejaculatory prayers. Not when we sit down with our Bibles and spend time before the Lord in the morning or the evening or whenever it is.

[ 4 : 51 ] When the situation doesn't lend itself to that. We can't do that. It's critical. And all we've time to do is say Lord help me in this situation. It's not always possible to have long wordy petitions. Sometimes all that the situation can give us opportunity for is a sigh in the spur of the moment. And he mustn't neglect or denigrate the prayers that are offered under such circumstances. The urgency of his prayer. But secondly we see the discipline of his prayer. Although he prays in that urgent situation these ejaculatory prayers he also prays in a disciplined manner. And he uses the imagery of the Old Testament ritual. He says first of all prayer is like incense. Let my prayer be set before you as incense. In a way the priest set the sacrifice before the Lord and incense was poured over the sacrifice in order to produce a pleasant odor. And the idea of sacrifice of incense suggests an acknowledgement of the presence of God.

[ 6 : 15 ] Leviticus chapter 16 verse 12 The priest is to take a censer full of burning coals from the altar before the Lord and two handfuls of finely ground fragrant incense and take them behind the curtain.

He is to put the incense on the fire before the Lord and the smoke of the incense will conceal the atonement cover above the testimony so that he will not die. Incense is to be put over the sacrifice because the smell of burning flesh is the most unpleasant smell.

And the incense covered over the smoke and reminded the worshippers the presence of God.

Reminded the worshippers that their worship was being offered in the presence of God.

The book of Revelation speaks doesn't it of bowls full of incense which are the prayers of the saints. so when we pray says David our prayers are to be like the incense that the old priest put offered with a sacrifice.

John Owen the great Puritan writer speaks of incense beaten and pounded before it was used.

Exodus chapter 30 verse 36 grind some of it to powder and place it in front of the testimony in a tent of meeting where I will meet with you.

[ 7 : 44 ] It shall be holy most holy to you. The incense was beaten and pounded before it was used. And Owen the Puritan says acceptable prayer arises from a heart that's beaten and pounded that's broken and contra.

the prayer that God loves to hear as he loved to accept the sacrifices which are accompanied by incense the prayer God loves to hear is the prayer that comes from a broken and a contrite heart. And says Owen incense was no use I did serve no purpose until fire was put from it was put under it from the altar to make the incense ascend the aroma ascend fire had to be taken from the altar and put under it.

And Owen says that's like our prayers. True prayer must be kindled by the fire of the Holy Spirit. If you and I are going to pray in a manner that is pleasing to God our prayers must be prayers that are produced by the Holy Spirit working in us.

And incense as Owen naturally ascended up towards heaven the scent rose towards heaven and our prayers must be designed to ascend to the very throne of God.

[ 9 : 09 ] We have to remember when we pray who we are speaking to. It's not just a formula that we are going through we are addressing God as the incense in the in the tabernacle in the temple rose to heaven.

And incense yielded a sweet savor in a temple where I say of tense smell so prayer yields a sweet savor to God.

It's something which God likes to hear. Do you know that God loves to hear your prayer? Is that not a great encouragement to you in your times of prayer?

Prayer is like the incense. And secondly David says prayer is like the evening sacrifice. Every day in the temple the sacrifice is offered.

A lamb is offered every morning and every evening. Exodus chapter 29 verse 39 this is what you are to offer on the altar regularly each day. Two lambs a year old.

[ 10 : 23 ] Offer one in the morning and the other at twilight. So David is saying our prayers are to be offered regularly like the evening sacrifice on the altar.

What does he mean by that? Well there are two possible explanations. First of all David is asking that his prayers may be regular. in the same way as the prayers in the temple were offered regularly.

Not just now and again. Not just when some crisis descends upon our home. Not just when we are worried about something. But regularly as regularly as the lamb was offered on the altar every morning and every night.

You and I are we regular and disciplined in our prayers like that? Even in times of pressure? Do we offer our morning and our evening sacrifices to God in our homes and in our own hearts?

But there's another explanation. David you see is on the run we think. He's hiding. He's unable to go to the temple himself. Now if you've been prevented by sickness or some other reason from coming to church you know what a deprivation that is don't you?

[11:46] You can't get to the house of God in the Lord's day. You feel there's something terribly wrong and missing from your life. You would give anything to be up and about and out to join in the worship of God's people.

David's in that situation. He would love to go to the temple in Jerusalem or wherever but he can't because of the situation he's in. and David says I can't go to the temple and offer a lamb in the morning and a lamb at twilight.

I would love to be there but take the prayer that I'm offering now and accept it in place and instead of the prayer that I would be offering in the temple if I were able to be there.

And of course David is hitting upon a truth. The truth which the New Testament may be spelled out much more clearly that it doesn't matter where you are where you worship where you offer prayers. It's not the place that matters. Remember what our Lord said in John chapter 4 verse 20 the woman said to him the woman of Samaria our fathers worshipped on this mountain but you Jews claim that the place we must worship is in Jerusalem.

[13:08] Jesus declared believe me woman a time is coming when you will worship the father neither on the mountain nor in Jerusalem. Time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the father in spirit and in truth.

It's not the place where you worship it's the way in which you worship. As Bishop Bryle said in another context it's grace not place that makes people believe.

And we have that realization that we can pray to God anywhere and if in his providence we are not able to go to church if we are unwell and confined to the house on the Lord's day if we have to work at the time of the prayer meeting if we can't get out to the house of God that doesn't mean to say that we can't pray.

That God will accept the prayers which we offer. So we have the urgency of his prayer we have the discipline of his prayer and thirdly we have the posture of his prayer.

Look at verse 2 second part May the lifting up of my hands be as the evening second. Remember that when Jews prayed they raised their hands that was an attitude of humility and dependence.

[14:42] David speaks of raised hands. Paul in his letter to Timothy you remember says I want men everywhere to hold up holy hands in prayer without anger nor disputing.

God is concerned not so much about the posture but about what that posture represents the attitude of heart which we bring to our prayers the sense of humility in his presence that raised hands represented to the Jew.

He also speaks in verse 8 of raised eyes raised hands and raised eyes my eyes are fixed on you O sovereign Lord.

And that's a theme which a phrase which we find in the psalm like Psalm 123 I lift my eyes to you the psalmist speaks of looking to the Lord my eyes fixed on the Lord and that's a sense represents a sense of dependence upon the Lord.

We look upon the Lord in utter dependence upon him when we come to pray whenever we come to pray but especially in our times of pressure and crisis we come and we stop and we look to the Lord and we are still and know that he is God.

[16:12] The writer of the Hebrews says in the New Testament context looking to Jesus the author the finisher of our faith our times of pride when so often all we can think of is whatever is worrying and upsetting us it's our duty to look to Jesus to see through all the trials and difficulties to him and to rest upon him for what he has done and for what he gives to us so this psalm shows us how David prays and secondly the psalm shows us for what David prays he prays for deliverance from temptation under pressure and we all know how exposed particularly exposed we are to temptation in times of pressure because our defenses are very often done and first of all he prays for deliverance because pressure brings temptation to evil speech verse 3 set a guard over my mouth oh Lord keep a watch over the door of my lips how do you and I react under pressure very often we

say things which we shouldn't say and which we may not even mean we may use blasphemous language we may utter harsh words about those who are harming us we may even blame or cry out and complain against God and these of course are all wrong responses we find that in the Bible remember Jacob

Rachel to Jacob give me children or I'll die remember Job in her time of pressure curse God and die Job's wife remember the psalmist says of Moses because they provoked his spirit so that he spoke unadvisedly with his lips Simon Peter in her time of pressure I know not the man and the dying thieves and Calvary how they abused and reviled the Savior and we read the warnings the very frightening and realistic warnings that the apostle James gives in the third chapter of his letter he says if anyone is never at fault in what he says he's a perfect man verse 6 of that chapter the tongue is a fire a world of evil among the parts of the body it corrupts the whole person sets the whole course of his life on fire and is itself set on fire by hell verse 8 no man can tame the tongue it is a restless evil full of deadly poison and so on what we say is important it's an index to our character it's out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks and says James no man can control the tongue ah but you see no man can control the tongue but God can control the tongue he can enable us by grace so that we may pray not only set a guard over my mouth oh Lord keep watch over the door of my lips and we all have to pray this sometimes and some of us have to pray this very often but we can also pray Lord open thou my lips and thy mouth shall show forth thy praise pressure brings temptation to evil speech but secondly temptation brings pressure brings temptation to wrong behavior let my heart not be drawn says verse 4 to what is evil to take part in wicked deeds my heart here is my will that part of me which makes decisions and what the psalmist is saying is don't bend my will in the wrong direction in other words this is our Old Testament equivalent of the petition in the Lord's prayer lead us not into temptation David is asking that God will so order his life providentially that he will be kept from wrong thoughts not merely what we say but what we think molding our whole lifestyle every evil tendency of our lives must be brought in prayer to God and thirdly pressure brings temptation to wrong associations let not my heart be drawn to what is evil to take part in wicked deeds as a psalmist with men who are evil doers let me not eat of their delicacies he's praying that he may not be led astray by evil companions by the wrong kind of friends how easy it is at any time especially in times of pressure to be sucked into just following the crowd going along with the others we don't want to be different we don't want to stand out and so we go on and follow the crowd wherever they lead on the downward trail to be the fairs the last line of that verse verse 4 of eating of their delicacy staring in their food enjoying perhaps the luxurious living which marks so often evil people certainly a suggestion of intimate fellowship with them they said come along come along to my house and join the party come and have a meal with me you see here's a temptation coming to come involved with them at that kind of deep and intimate personal basis to share their food you share food with people whom you whom you like and whose company you want to enjoy you must be careful not become too involved with evildoers remember what happened to Lot or it may be the danger of our social situation where we get entrapped we find ourselves unable to extricate ourselves we got caught up in it and we reach the stage where we can't get out bad company says Paul in 1st 2nd 15 bad company corrupts good character pressure brings temptation to form association we have to remember and we have to remember in a sensible way what the new testament teaches us about separation from the world but

David goes on to pray for the provision of right companions and I think this is what verse 5 means he says let a righteous man strike me it's a kindness let him rebuke me it's oil on my head my head will not refuse it that's why I read that translation I think it's a more helpful translation than the King James Version he's asking not that he be associated with the wrong kind of people but that he might associate with the right kind of people who are they they're the righteous let a righteous man strike who's the right kind of friend for a Christian the right kind of friend for a Christian is another Christian one whose hearts are right with God whose heart is right with God I am a friend says the psalmist to all who fear you to all who follow your precinct and why we can't and mustn't limit our friends to our fellow Christians of course we are never required in the

[ 24 : 52 ] New Testament to do that the friends to whom we are closest should be those with whom we share our faith in Jesus Christ they are the righteous and they are the honest folk the folk who will not let him off with wrong behavior but will tell him the truth let a righteous man strike me he said it's a kindness let him rebuke me it's oil on my head there's something wrong I say something I

shouldn't say I go to a place where I shouldn't go my real friend is the one who will take me aside and say to me look you shouldn't have said that you shouldn't have gone there you shouldn't have done that that's the kind of friend who is our real friend faithful are the wounds of a friend and this idea we find over and over again in the New Testament if your brother sins against you go says Jesus and show him his fault just between the two of you if he listens to you you have won your brother over

Paul says in Galatians 6 brothers if someone is caught in a sin you who are spiritual should restore him gently go and speak to him and bring him back gently from his sin but watch yourself for you also may be tempted tempted not just to share his sin but tempted to feel superior over him to think that you are a bit better than he is because you haven't fallen into that sin to feel superior and spiritually proud that's the kind of friends we should pray for those who are not afraid to speak to us when we need a friend to speak to us is that the kind of friend you seek for yourself do you seek those who will say what you want to say the yes men yes women those who will agree with us or those who are not afraid to rebuke us in a Christian spirit how do we do we react to criticism given in the spirit do we accept it great survey let him rebuke me says David it is oil on my head what does that mean well it could mean a number of things but I think the most satisfactory explanation is that he's referring to the oil with which our host anointed the head of his guests when they came for a meal it was something which was part of the convention part of the tradition a sign of friendship hospitality

David says let me accept criticism the right kind of criticism with the spirit with which I would accept anointing with oil when I go to someone's house do we accept it gratefully or do we prefer empty flattery do we actively seek it or do we resent it it also raises the question what kind of friends are we to our friends are we the flattering type or are we the friends who will not be ashamed to speak a word in season now I know there are people who jump at every opportunity to do that they enjoy nothing better than telling other people where they're going wrong I don't mean that that's what the word of God suggests we be that's a temptation which Paul was referring perhaps in that verse are quoted from Galatians but there is a situation where love and concern for our

Christian brother or sister brings us to the place where we say I must have a word in love in his or her you and David prays for his friends this is one of the interpretations of the last phrase of verse 5 in the King James version my prayer also shall be in their calamities the same humility which enables David to submit to the rebuke of his friends enables him to pray for his enemies in their calamities he sees things going wrong for them and he doesn't jump up and down with joy and say well they are getting their comeuppance he prays for them in their calamities love for our enemies and prayer for our enemies is something which Christ himself lays upon us are we in the habit of praying for our enemies in this spirit or are we so pleased when things go wrong for them how do we react in this situation but the verse can also mean as the

NIV takes it my prayer is ever against the deeds of evildoers because he knows that they're out to get him and he knows that they're not to that they're not to fussy what they will do to him when they find him so he turns to God in earnest prayer that his enemies will not be able to catch him he prays that their evil activities will be brought to nothing that the traps which they're setting for him will not that he will not be caught in them David prays for his enemies he prays for them but he also prays against their evil purposes lastly David commits himself to God's protection verse 8 my eyes are fixed in you oh lord and you I take refuge do not give me over to death he's surrounded by temptation he realises all the pitfalls all these different things that could happen to him that he's prayed against in this psalm at the end of the day he knows it's hopeless he's bound to fall victim to one or other of them sooner than later so he commits himself to the protection of God and takes refuge in him you and I have to be realistic about this sad world in which we live we've not to be ignorant of

[ 31 : 44 ] Satan's devices we've to know that we have an enemy and we've not to be mealy-mouthed about we've to be watchful and prayerful the devil has given us an example in this psalm you and I say our circumstances are very different from David's but in the end of the day the way that he quotes it the prayer that he brings in the midst of it is the prayer that you and I can usefully bring to may it be so let us pray we thank thee lord that thy word brings us the experience of real men and women of flesh and flesh facing situations and temptations and stresses just as weedy grown to fail under the weight of the pressures upon grant we pray and pray that in their experience we may learn lessons for our experience that will help us and guide us in our

Christian pilgrimage teach us to pray teach us to pray with wisdom with understanding with discernment with realistic awareness of the world in which we live and of the enemy with whom we have to do grant we pray that as David fixed his eyes upon thee and took refuge in thee we too may find in thee our refuge and our strength a very present health in triumph for the sake of thy dear son we ask it Amen