

Mercy and Glory
 Psalm 57
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To the choirmaster: according to Do Not Destroy. A Miktam of David, when he fled from Saul, in the cave.

- 57** 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.
- 2** I cry out to God Most High,
 to God who fulfills his purpose for me.
- 3** 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!
- 4** 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.
- 5** Be exalted, O God, above the heavens!
 Let your glory be over all the earth!
- 6** 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*
- 7** My heart is steadfast, O God,
 my heart is steadfast!
 I will sing and make melody!
- 8** Awake, my glory!
 Awake, O harp and lyre!
 I will awake the dawn!
- 9** I will give thanks to you, O Lord, among the peoples;
 I will sing praises to you among the nations.
- 10** For your steadfast love is great to the heavens,
 your faithfulness to the clouds.
- 11** Be exalted, O God, above the heavens!
 Let your glory be over all the earth!

In the Cave

I am fascinated by caves. My favorite episode of “Planet Earth” is the one on caves. I find the hidden beauty, unusual life, bizarre formations and seemingly endless passageways and chambers of caves

intriguing. My cave fascination can probably be traced to two formative experiences in my childhood – visiting Carlsbad Caverns at the age of 6 and reading Tom Sawyer at the age of 12. When Tom and Becky get lost in the cave, we see a cave turn from exciting and mysterious to frightening and potentially deadly, especially once they start running low on candles and Tom sees Injun Joe in the cave.

This is the nature of caves: What makes them exciting and even a welcome refuge can also make them very dangerous. Few things frighten us more than the prospect of being lost in the complete darkness, except perhaps the prospect that we might be trapped in the darkness with a deadly enemy.

David wrote Psalm 57 from a cave, where he had fled from Saul and was hiding. The most famous of the caves David hid in was the Cave of Adullam, which is sometimes referred to as a fortress. David fled to Adullam immediately after he escaped from Achish, the king of Gath. We read about this in 1 Samuel 22 –

David departed from there and escaped to the cave of Adullam. And when his brothers and all his father's house heard it, they went down there to him. ² And everyone who was in distress, and everyone who was in debt, and everyone who was bitter in soul, gathered to him. And he became commander over them. And there were with him about four hundred men. (ESV)

A. Need for Mercy (vv. 1-4)

Hidden inside this fortress cave, with a growing band of desperate men gathering around him, David sought the Lord and cried out to Him –

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.

The first thing David asks for is for mercy, and he repeats his request twice. This is a regular pattern in David's prayer life. Psalm 56 opens with the same request, although it is translated slightly differently –

*“Be gracious to me, O God, for man tramples on me;
all day long an attacker oppresses me.”*

In Psalm 56, David cried for mercy or grace, with his eyes on the terror of his enemies. In Psalm 57, he is again crying for mercy, this time with his eyes more firmly fixed on God, in whom his soul takes refuge.

David also opens Psalm 51, written after his sin with Bathsheba, with this cry:

*“Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;*

*according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.”*

So we see that whether David is afraid, because his enemies have him in their grasp, or he is hiding in a fortress cave, or he has sinned grievously against the Lord, he knows first and foremost what he needs – mercy, grace. The Hebrew word David prays carries the idea of bending low, of stooping down. It speaks of God’s greatness and of David’s helplessness and of how little David deserves or can earn or merit this favor, this kindness, this help, this deliverance from God. Even though David is being unjustly persecuted, he doesn’t cry out for justice. He needs God to be merciful, to be gracious, to condescend to help him in a way he doesn’t deserve and cannot earn.

Also, David is not trusting in the natural strong refuge provided by Adullam, nor is he trusting in the growing army of men gathering themselves to him. Just as he repeats his cry for mercy twice in these opening lines, so he also repeats twice that his refuge is in God. First, he says generally that his soul takes refuge in God, but then he paints a more specific picture and says “in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge.” The ark of the covenant was overshadowed by the wings of the cherubim and the part of the ark that was in the shadow of the wings of the cherubim was called the mercy-seat.

After David cries out to God for mercy, he expresses his confidence in God’s coming response:

*I cry out to God Most High,
to God who fulfills his purpose for me.
3 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!*

David rests on God’s character and His promises. He calls God “Most High,” which speaks of God’s all-surpassing power and glory. When we are struggling, we are under some great difficulty, we are feeling overwhelmed and are being crushed by the weight of something which is bigger or higher than we are. We are in over our heads. God is Most High, so He is above all things. He is never overwhelmed. He is never under the weight of anything because He is above everything. He is One whose help we need, the One who stoops to save us. The One who bends low with condescending grace and mercy is the God who is Most High. Because He is merciful, He is willing to rescue us, and because He is Most High, He is able to save us.

But David is also reflecting on God’s promises, as he cries “to God who fulfills his purpose for me.” David knows that God will rescue him because God has purposes for David which must be fulfilled. God will not abandon His purposes for David, and so David confidently expects His answer.

How will God answer David?

*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!*

David expects that God will send two things to answer him, His steadfast love and faithfulness. Other translations say, “His mercy and His truth.” God’s steadfast love or mercy is His covenant love for His own people. If the first word David cries for “mercy” in verse 1 emphasizes the condescending nature of God’s love, which stoops low to save, this word emphasizes the steadfast loyalty of God’s love, the depth of the commitment He has made to His people and His determination not to break that commitment.

Faithfulness, or truth, refers to the stability and strength of God. God remains true to His word, always. He never changes and He never fails. This strength and stability backs up the commitment He has made to His people in covenantal love with unbreakable force. This is how David can be confident: It is wholly because of who God is and what God has pledged.

And yet David is not unaware of his enemies. He is not a sentimentalist who denies reality and looks at the world through rose-colored glasses. David is keenly, intensely aware of his enemies, as he says in verse 4:

*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.*

David’s enemies are passionately committed to his destruction, and much of the power of their attack against him is coming through their words, as they are slandering his character and seeking to undermine his reputation. The lies and slander started David’s trouble, as we saw in Psalm 7, where we started this summer, with David crying out against Cush the Benjaminite. While the physical threat against David has intensified, the slanderous accusations have apparently not diminished.

B. Concern for God’s Glory (vv. 5-11)

Yet notice whose reputation, whose honor, whose glory David is most concerned to see upheld and exalted:

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

*⁶ 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*

*⁷ My heart is steadfast, O God,
my heart is steadfast!
I will sing and make melody!*

*⁸ Awake, my glory!
Awake, O harp and lyre!
I will awake the dawn!*

*⁹ I will give thanks to you, O Lord, among the peoples;
I will sing praises to you among the nations.*

*10 For your steadfast love is great to the heavens,
your faithfulness to the clouds.*

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

Twice, in verse 5 and in verse 11, which bracket this second half of David's song, David calls on God, not to exalt David's name and reputation, but His own –

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

David seeks mercy and deliverance from God, not for his own sake, but for the sake of God's glory, and not only His glory in Israel, but His glory over all the earth.

As far as his enemies are concerned, David knows that whatever traps they set for him will only end up snaring them in the end. Instead of worrying about his enemies, David is committed to praising the Lord. David resolves to keep his heart steadfast, even while in terrible danger, and to make the praise of God his first and highest priority.

Apparently, as these men are gathering around him, David requested or they brought him some instruments, and David began the habit of waking early, probably before sunrise, to sing praises to God.

Verse 10 shows us that David's praise of God is rooted in the same character that gives him his expectation of God's deliverance, God's steadfast love and faithfulness - "*For your steadfast love is great to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds.*"

David's knowledge of God's character gives him both the confident expectation of deliverance and fuel for his praise of God. Knowing God helps David to both fear his enemies less and to be less concerned for His own honor and glory.

In other words, raising His eyes to God both strengthens and humbles David in a way that nothing else can. When our eyes are limited to earthly realities, we can either be strengthened in self-confidence or humbled in the face of overwhelming opposition, but we cannot gain both confidence and humility. Only God Most High who has mercy on us in His covenant faithfulness fills our souls with both an unshakable strength and an overwhelming sense of our own humility and inadequacy.

C. From David in the Cave to Christ on the Cross

But we see more than just the heart of David in this psalm. We also see the heart of Christ. While Psalm 57 was written by David in the cave, it is an even better picture of Christ in His agony in the Garden and on the cross.

Like David, Jesus was threatened by both physical violence and slanderous lies from His enemies. Jesus' enemies accused Him of lying, of mis-leading the people, and they accused Him to Pontius Pilate of trying to undermine and overthrow Roman rule. They called Him a blasphemer as they struck Him and spit on Him.

Verse 6 of Psalm 57 is even more true of Jesus than it was of David –

*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.*

The enemies of Christ attacked Him under Satan's influence, and yet their attack of Christ was their own undoing. As Jesus was hung on the cross, Pilate had a sign hung above His head in three languages, proclaiming Jesus to be the King of the Jews. This public proclamation greatly upset the Jewish leaders. Further, Satan orchestrated his own undoing, for in fulfillment of Genesis 3:15, when the serpent struck the heel of the Son of Man, Jesus crushed Satan's head. As Colossians 2:15 says, "*He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in the cross.*"

Like David, Jesus' focus was on the glory of God as He faced the trial of the cross. In John 12:27-28, we hear Jesus pray, "*Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. ²⁸ Father, glorify your name.*" Then a voice came from heaven: "*I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.*" (ESV) Ultimately, Jesus went to the cross not only because it was the only way for us to be saved, but also because it was the best way for Him to glorify His Father.

Even more clearly, David's proclamation in verse 7 that his heart is steadfast was really more of an aspiration for him. We know David's heart was not always steadfast, that he did waver in the face of danger and opposition. We know that Jesus was always steadfast. He never wavered and He committed His soul to God with His dying breath.

And while David's deliverance from the hand of Saul and his ascension to the throne of Israel did bring God glory, it was the deliverance of Jesus from death and the glory of His resurrection that truly and most powerfully brings glory to God among all the nations. And when we hear David pray, "I will awake the dawn" in verse 8, we should think of Jesus rising from the dead early in the morning on the first day of the week, the first day of New Creation, and awakening the dawn, not just of a new day, but of a New Age, a new reality in His own resurrected, glorified body.

In Our Caves

As we have moved from David to Christ, we can now ask, "How can we sing Psalm 57?" Well, are you in a cave? We come into all kinds of caves at different times in our lives. Sometimes we are in a cave of our own making, as our sin and its consequences can have us feeling trapped and cut off from hope. At

times, we may be overwhelmed by the assaults of our enemy on our minds, filling us with doubt, fear, disbelief or shame. We may struggle with depression and anxiety, wondering how God can love us and how we can possibly do all the things we're supposed to do. We can feel like failures and struggle with our own inadequacy. Or we may be dealing with someone who is literally slandering us, seeking to tear down our reputation and bring dishonor to the Lord through an attack on us.

If we think about it, we have all been in caves in our lives, haven't we? Maybe you are in one right now. If you're not, you know you probably will be before too long. Sometimes these caves can be deep and dark and we can lose our way and feel absolutely alone and overwhelmed. What do we do?

David sets a great pattern for us in this Psalm and Jesus fulfills that pattern in Himself:

First, we need to cry out to God for mercy. We need God to stoop to save us.

In our cry, we can be assured of God's answer because God is merciful and faithful. He is gracious and strong. We also know that the God who stoops low to save us is God Most High, over all.

When God sends us help from heaven, He sends out His steadfast love and faithfulness. Ultimately, this means that He sends us Himself. He comes to our rescue in the person of Jesus Christ.

Our concern, even as we cry for mercy, should be the glory of God. God has purposes for our lives, and these purposes are for His glory above all and for the good of all of His people. He will fulfill His purposes for us, just as surely as He fulfilled His purposes for David and for Jesus.

When we cry for mercy, we also need to sing praises. Singing praise to God in our distress is one of the most powerful and life-changing things we can do. Praising God orients our hearts on Him and anchors our souls in Him.

If you belong to Jesus Christ, then Psalm 57 is your song to sing to God in Him, from the depth of whatever cave you may find yourself in. He will send from heaven and save you; he will put to shame him who tramples on you. God will send out his steadfast love and his faithfulness! He will do so for the glory of His name in all the earth and in fulfillment of all His purposes for you!