

My Strength and Our Shield | Psalm 59
Pastor Jason Van Bommel

To the choirmaster: according to Do Not Destroy. A Miktam of David, when Saul sent men to watch his house in order to kill him.

Deliver me from my enemies, O my God;
protect me from those who rise up against me;
² deliver me from those who work evil,
and save me from bloodthirsty men.

³ For behold, they lie in wait for my life;
fierce men stir up strife against me.
For no transgression or sin of mine, O LORD,
⁴ for no fault of mine, they run and make ready.

Awake, come to meet me, and see!
⁵ You, LORD God of hosts, are God of Israel.
Rouse yourself to punish all the nations;
spare none of those who treacherously plot evil. *Selah*

⁶ Each evening they come back,
howling like dogs
and prowling about the city.

⁷ There they are, bellowing with their mouths
with swords in their lips—
for “Who,” they think, “will hear us?”

⁸ But you, O LORD, laugh at them;
you hold all the nations in derision.

⁹ O my Strength, I will watch for you,
for you, O God, are my fortress.

¹⁰ My God in his steadfast love will meet me;
God will let me look in triumph on my enemies.

¹¹ Kill them not, lest my people forget;
make them totter by your power and bring them down,
O Lord, our shield!

¹² For the sin of their mouths, the words of their lips,
let them be trapped in their pride.

For the cursing and lies that they utter,

¹³ consume them in wrath;
consume them till they are no more,
that they may know that God rules over Jacob
to the ends of the earth. *Selah*

¹⁴ Each evening they come back,
howling like dogs
and prowling about the city.

¹⁵ They wander about for food
and growl if they do not get their fill.

¹⁶ But I will sing of your strength;
I will sing aloud of your steadfast love in the morning.

For you have been to me a fortress
and a refuge in the day of my distress.

¹⁷ O my Strength, I will sing praises to you,
for you, O God, are my fortress,
the God who shows me steadfast love.

What is Life? What Did You Expect?

Several months ago, on January 15, when I was preaching from John 3, I asked what you thought life was. At that time, I was emphasizing the truth that life is a gift. The fact that life is a gift of God's grace and not a crisis or a competition should fill us with gratitude and with humility.

Today, I want to ask the same question and consider the answer from a different perspective: What do you expect your life as a gift to be like? If we think that life is the gift of a vacation, then we can be sorely disappointed and frustrated. We can also be unprepared for some of the tougher realities we regularly face. We might even become bitter, because if this life is supposed to be a gift of God's undeserved kindness and love, it seems like it should be better. Well, life is a gift, but it's not the gift of a vacation; rather, the Bible teaches us that life is war.

On the surface, the truth that life is war seems to contradict the idea that life is a gift. After all, how can war be a gift? But the Bible clearly teaches both truths, and Psalm 59 can help us see how they are both true and how they meet below the surface to give us a rich and powerful picture of our lives, shaping what we should expect and what we need.

Last week, I acknowledged that, while many Christians love the Psalms, others find them confusing and difficult. In my own life, one of the keys to moving from confusion over the Psalms to cherishing the Psalms came when I learned to read the Psalms spiritually. That will be our goal today with Psalm 59.

A. Deliver me! (vv. 1-10)

The title of Psalm 59 tells us that David wrote it "**when Saul sent men to watch his house in order to kill him.**" We're told about this incident in 1 Samuel 19:1-18:

And Saul spoke to Jonathan his son and to all his servants, that they should kill David. But Jonathan, Saul's son, delighted much in David.² And Jonathan told David, "Saul my father seeks to kill you. Therefore be on your guard in the morning. Stay in a secret place and hide yourself."³ And I will go out and stand beside my father in the field where you are, and I will speak to my father about you. And if I learn anything I will tell you."⁴ And Jonathan spoke well of David to Saul his father and said to him, "Let not the king sin against his servant David, because he has not sinned against you, and because his deeds have brought good to you."⁵ For he took his life in his hand and he struck down the Philistine, and the LORD worked a great salvation for all Israel. You saw it, and rejoiced. Why then will you sin against innocent blood by killing David without cause?"⁶ And Saul listened to the voice of Jonathan. Saul swore, "As the LORD lives, he shall not be

put to death.”⁷ And Jonathan called David, and Jonathan reported to him all these things. And Jonathan brought David to Saul, and he was in his presence as before.

⁸ And there was war again. And David went out and fought with the Philistines and struck them with a great blow, so that they fled before him. ⁹ Then a harmful spirit from the LORD came upon Saul, as he sat in his house with his spear in his hand. And David was playing the lyre.¹⁰ And Saul sought to pin David to the wall with the spear, but he eluded Saul, so that he struck the spear into the wall. And David fled and escaped that night.

¹¹ Saul sent messengers to David's house to watch him, that he might kill him in the morning. But Michal, David's wife, told him, “If you do not escape with your life tonight, tomorrow you will be killed.”¹² So Michal let David down through the window, and he fled away and escaped.¹³ Michal took an image and laid it on the bed and put a pillow of goats' hair at its head and covered it with the clothes. ¹⁴ And when Saul sent messengers to take David, she said, “He is sick.”¹⁵ Then Saul sent the messengers to see David, saying, “Bring him up to me in the bed, that I may kill him.”¹⁶ And when the messengers came in, behold, the image was in the bed, with the pillow of goats' hair at its head. ¹⁷ Saul said to Michal, “Why have you deceived me thus and let my enemy go, so that he has escaped?” And Michal answered Saul, “He said to me, ‘Let me go. Why should I kill you?’”

¹⁸ Now David fled and escaped, and he came to Samuel at Ramah and told him all that Saul had done to him. (1 Samuel 19:1-18)

This section of 1 Samuel is a good example to us of how the psalms can help us flesh out and better understand the life of David as recorded in 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 Chronicles. As we read of Saul's hatred for David, it's helpful to know that the slanderous counsel of Cush the Benjaminite might have been holding sway as a counter voice to Jonathan's support of David. And as Michal is warning David and lowering him out the window in a basket, it's helpful to read Psalm 59 and know that David was, in fact, crying out to the Lord and trusting in him. At the same time, 1 Samuel 19 lets us see how deadly the situation was for David when he wrote Psalm 59. To get the full picture of David's life, we need to lay the narrative from Samuel and Chronicles next to his prayers and praises from the Psalms. One shows the outer circumstances of his life, while the other shows us his heart.

So, when David's life was in clear and immediate danger, we hear him crying out to the Lord to deliver him. But we see something else in the title, too. David wrote this psalm: **“To the choirmaster: according to Do Not Destroy.”** David wrote Psalm 59 to be sung by the congregation of the people of Israel, set to a well known tune. This is actually one of four psalms set to the tune “Do Not Destroy.” The others are 57, 58 and 75. 57, 58 and 59 are all written by David, while 75 is written by Asaph.

The significance of this is that David was not only thinking about himself and the immediate danger he faced when Saul sent men to watch his house. He was also thinking about the people of God and the danger they face from hostile nations that surround them. So the One whom David addresses as “my strength” in verses 9 & 17 is addressed as “our shield” in verse 11, when David is thinking about the people of God.

David's first cry to God is for deliverance:

*Deliver me from my enemies, O my God;
protect me from those who rise up against me;
deliver me from those who work evil,
and save me from bloodthirsty men.*

This is understandable. It makes perfect sense. David was in immediate danger. Some unknown number of men were prowling about the city of Bethlehem in the night, threatening his very life. He describes them as “fierce men” who lie in wait for his life and who stir up strife against him. He pictures them as howling like dogs and prowling around the city. In the ancient world, dogs were not house pets but ravenous, semi-wild, dangerous animals. Many people kept them for protection, but at night, many dogs would roam the streets looking for food and it would be very dangerous to run into one. Saul has sent these men, probably hired foreigners, perhaps even Philistines, who were semi-wild and dangerous.

David also knows that these men have not been sent by the king to arrest David because David has committed some crime. Like David’s plea of innocence in Psalm 7, which we saw last week, David pleads his innocence here, not in an absolute sense, but in the context of these men pursuing him, lying in wait for him:

*For no transgression or sin of mine, O LORD,
for no fault of mine, they run and make ready.
Awake, come to meet me, and see!
You, LORD God of hosts, are God of Israel.*

When we realize that we are under attack by our enemy, this should be our cry, too. Like David, we are surrounded by an enemy that is more powerful than we are. Peter tells us that he prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking to devour. Jesus tells us that he is a thief who comes only to steal, kill and destroy. He hates us, not because of any sin we’ve committed, but because we bear the image of God and are the objects of God’s special, saving love. Sometimes he sets traps for us, lying in wait for us to fall into the trap of his temptation, when he will then pounce on us and seek to destroy us. At other times, he will directly assault us with doubt and despair.

Like David, we can and should cry out to God for deliverance. Jesus taught us to pray, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil” and it’s probably a better translation to say “deliver us from the evil one.” Thankfully, like David, we can cry out to the “LORD God of hosts” for our deliverance. He is the LORD, YaHWeH, the covenant God, the One who has promised to be our God and who never breaks His promises. He is the God of hosts, the Mighty One who commands the Armies of Heaven.

This reminds me of the time when Elisha and his servant were surrounded by the army of Syria in 2 Kings 6. Like Saul hated David, the king of Syria hated Elisha, and he sent an army to go at night and surround Elisha.

When the servant of the man of God rose early in the morning and went out, behold, an army with horses and chariots was all around the city. And the servant said, “Alas, my master! What shall we do?”¹⁶ He said, “Do not be afraid, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them.”¹⁷ Then Elisha prayed and said,

“O LORD, please open his eyes that he may see.” So the LORD opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw, and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. – 2 Kings 6:15-17, ESV

Those who are with us are more than those who are with them. Or, in the words of 1 John 4:4: *“Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.”*

Though David is outnumbered and on the run, he is confident because of the greatness of God:

*My God in his steadfast love will meet me;
God will let me look in triumph on my enemies. (v. 10)*

We can have this same confidence in Christ. God has already secured our ultimate redemption and the defeat of the enemy of our souls through the death and resurrection of Jesus. One day, our deliverance will be final, complete and perfect in every way. On that day, we will indeed look in triumph on our enemies, as the world, our flesh and the devil are all defeated.

B. Bring them down! (vv. 11-17)

This statement of confidence and triumph in verse 10 serves as the transition in Psalm 59. While verses 1-10 of Psalm 59 are a prayer for deliverance, the second half, verses 11-17, is a prayer for justice. It is expressed in words that might confuse us or make us uncomfortable:

*Kill them not, lest my people forget;
make them totter by your power and bring them down,
O Lord, our shield!*
¹² *For the sin of their mouths, the words of their lips,
let them be trapped in their pride.
For the cursing and lies that they utter,
¹³ consume them in wrath;
consume them till they are no more,
that they may know that God rules over Jacob
to the ends of the earth.*

We might initially be confused as to why David does not want these violent men to be killed and then we might be uncomfortable by some of the vindictive language here. But David has in mind two main concerns: a concern for God’s people, that they not forget and that they may know the truth and the power of God, and the second is a concern for the glory and honor of God.

David wants to see these evil men exposed for what they are, that God’s people may be protected from being deceived. He also wants God’s power and sovereign rule over His people to be displayed clearly, to the glory of God and for the good of His people. These two concerns at the heart of David’s prayer for justice are the two concerns that should shape our prayer lives, as they are the two goals that God pursues in all of His actions: The glory of God and the good of His people. These two goals are inseparable, for we find our good in His glory and He is glorified in our good, in our salvation.

C. O my Strength! (vv. 9-10, 16-17)

David closes each of his prayers – his prayer for deliverance and his prayer for justice – with praise to God. David prays until He praises and then he prays again until he praises again. Our prayers should lead us to praise and our praise should lead to more prayer. We may begin with a cry of desperation for deliverance, but we can end with a song of thanksgiving for the victory that is ours in Christ.

David's praise to God is similar in both places, as he praises God as his strength and sings of His steadfast love:

*O my Strength, I will watch for you,
for you, O God, are my fortress.
My God in his steadfast love will meet me;
God will let me look in triumph on my enemies. – vv. 9-10*

*But I will sing of your strength;
I will sing aloud of your steadfast love in the morning.
For you have been to me a fortress
and a refuge in the day of my distress.
O my Strength, I will sing praises to you,
for you, O God, are my fortress,
the God who shows me steadfast love. – vv. 16-17*

The emphasis on God's strength and steadfast love is even repeated twice in verses 16-17. God is our strength, that speaks of His greatness, while His steadfast love speaks of His goodness. When we have God's glory and the good of His people in view, we have all we need to guide our prayer lives. When we have God's greatness and goodness in view, we have all we need to guide our praises.

Notice what David's confidence in God's strength and steadfast love cause him to do:

I. I will watch for You.

When looking for deliverance, he says in verse 10, "I will watch for you."

Are we watching for God to bring the deliverance we need? David's deliverance from Saul's men came through his wife, Michal, but he was still watching for God's final deliverance. David may have been on the run from Saul for 8 years of his life. Bible scholars have suggested that David was anointed at the age of 15, entered Saul's service at the age of 16 or 17, served Saul until the age of 22 or so, then fled from Saul until Saul died and David was anointed king at the age of 30. David was going on the run, but he said, "I will watch for you."

Are we watching for the Lord to bring deliverance?

In 2 Chronicles 20, King Jehoshaphat and the people of God were faced with an overwhelming enemy. The Moabites and the Ammonites joined forces against Judah. Jehoshaphat cried out to God, "*O our God, will you not execute judgment on them? For we are powerless against this great horde that is coming against us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you.*"

Is that our prayer, "We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you.?"

2. I will sing praises to You.

David is not just waiting. He is also singing. When looking for justice and trusting God for it, he says twice in verse 16, “I will sing” - *I will sing of your strength; I will sing aloud of your steadfast love in the morning*

This was God’s battle plan for King Jehoshaphat in 2 Chronicles 20, too:

... he appointed those who were to sing to the LORD and praise him in holy attire, as they went before the army, and say,

*“Give thanks to the LORD,
for his steadfast love endures forever.”*

And when they began to sing and praise, the LORD set an ambush against the men of Ammon, Moab, and Mount Seir, who had come against Judah, so that they were routed. – 2 Chron. 20:21-22, ESV

While we are watching God, waiting for Him to deliver, we can sing of His greatness and His goodness, of His strength and His steadfast love. He delights in our praises and will show us His saving strength and steadfast love.

Conclusion: Psalm 59 Drives Us to the Cross

Ultimately, Psalm 59 drives us to the cross and causes us to sing praises to Jesus at the foot of Calvary. How does it do that? Well, where do God’s strength and steadfast love, His greatness and goodness, meet in the ultimate manifestation of both? On the cross! Jesus showed the matchless might of God in being able to take all of the sins of all of God’s people upon Himself, paying for all of them, crying out, “It is Finished!” Jesus alone was strong enough, great enough to drink the cup of God’s wrath to the very bottom. On the cross, the tender love of God is also most fully displayed, as God lovingly placed our sins on His Son, so we could be forgiven and accepted and freed.

Psalm 59 is a cry to God for deliverance and for justice. Well, where are we delivered and where is God’s justice fully satisfied? Only at the cross, where Jesus freed us from the curse of sin and satisfied the justice of God. When David cried for justice in Psalm 59, he was concerned for God’s glory and for the good of God’s people. Well, where is God’s glory fully displayed and where are God’s people most richly blessed? At the cross!

In the end, as we will learn to sing and pray Psalm 59, we will be drawn to worship Jesus at His cross, for the greatness of God and the goodness of God, for the deliverance and justice, for the glory of God and good of His people, as it is all fulfilled and poured out in fullness in the loving, powerful sacrifice of the Son of God in our place.