

Your Name, O LORD, Is Good

Psalm 54

David was a unique person in the history of redemption. The role he played was of much more significance than perhaps the roles we play. He was a type of Christ; we are not types of Christ. He was the representative head of the people of God on earth, typifying Christ as the head of the Church.

Also, unlike David, I've never been hiding on one side of a hill betrayed by my own people with a king and his army on the other side *seeking my life* (cf. Ps 54.3; I Sam 23:15). For these reasons, we may read a psalm like Psalm 54 and say, *So what? What does that have to do with my situation in life? Of course, God heard David, but I'm not David.*

Yet, God through such a person in such circumstances gave us this psalm to invite us to call on the Name of the LORD in the day of trouble. While it has a historical reference in the superscription, noting the betrayal of the Ziphites, the substance of the psalm is intentionally crafted to become part of the praying and singing of the people of God throughout history. This is David's song, and it's ours.

What we have in common with David is we find ourselves in circumstances not of our choosing that we must navigate by faith. This psalm came through David not simply to inform us but to guide us in the lamentable places of life.

The structure of the psalm is simple, there is a plea and the reason stated for it in verses 1-3; then there is a surge of confident faith, along with an imprecation in verse 4-5; last there is praise in anticipation of what God will do. The psalm moves from urgent lament to confident faith to unbounded praise.

To encourage us to call on God, Psalm 54 emphasizes the divine name in the beginning, the middle, and the end (1-2, 4, 6). The psalm is in a group of Psalms (42-83) that primarily use the name *God* to refer to God, which this psalm employs 3 times (1,2,4). Unlike most of the others psalms in the Psalm 42-83 grouping, Psalm 54 uses the personal name of God translated *LORD* (6b). Two times, at the beginning and at the end, the psalm uses *your name* (1,6), which is a synonym for *LORD*. The psalmist uses *Lord* (4), employing yet another divine name. The psalmist reflects the divine attributes implied in the Name: *might* (1), *helper* and *upholder* (4), *faithfulness* or *truth* (5) and *goodness* (6b, cf. 52:9b).

With such variety in references to God, the psalmist is bringing all he knows to be

true of God to bear on his situation. He is in effect confessing the adequacy of God to deal with his crisis and calling on God to bring all he is to his rescue. Thus is the Name of our God. There is no other like him.

Psalm 54 is a helpful guide in crisis praying.

1. In the day of trouble, we may call on the name of the Lord (1-3)

Prayer is more urgent than we may think: for my spouse, my kids and my grandkids, my church, and my friends. If we were cognizant of our own situation, we would feel more urgency in prayer. A lot of things are optional in life. Prayer is not one of them.

The psalmist is in dire straits. The superscription of the psalm reveals the occasion for the psalm: *a maskil of David, when the Ziphites went and told Saul, "Is not David hiding among us?"* The Ziphites did this not once but twice (cf. 1Sam 23:19; 26:1).¹

The town of Keilah had come under attack by the Philistines. Through Abiathar the priest, David, the anointed but not yet reigning king of Israel inquired of the LORD concerning what he should do about the Keilah situation—a very kingly things to do.

I love those conversations David had with God by means of priestly *ephodic* communication. It is conversation in the Urim and Thummim style.

David: *Shall I go and attack these Philistines?*

The LORD: *Go and attack the Philistines and save Keilah.*
(1Sam 23:2)

David: *Will Saul come down, as your servant has heard?*

The LORD: *He will come down.*
(1 Sam 23:11)

David: *Will the men of Keilah surrender me into his hand?*

The LORD: *They will surrender you.*
(1Sam 23:12)

Saul, the un-anointed but reigning king of Israel, heard from insolent informants that David was in the town of Keilah. Though Saul knew David was to be king (1Sam 23:17), the Scripture says, *Saul sought him everyday, but God did not give*

him into his hand (1Sam 23:14b).

David and his men fled Keilah and hid themselves *in the hill country of the wilderness of Ziph* (1Sam 23:13-14). The Ziphites went to Saul and said, *Is not David hiding among us* (1Sam 23:19)? Saul sent them ahead of him to do reconnaissance so they could guide him efficiently to his target.

This is where we have the moving scene of Saul closing in on David, with David on one side of the mountain and Saul on the other (1Sam 23:26). At the very moment when no escape seemed possible, Saul got urgent word of a Philistine raid against the land. He was forced to abandon his search for David, at least for the moment.

A. The psalmist's plea in the Name of God (1-2)

Could it be that while David is on one side of the hill and Saul on the other, David cried out, *O God, save me by your name*, (1a)?ⁱⁱ

The name of the Lord is not some kind of magic spell or formula, but rather the *Name* represents the *Person*, his nature, attributes, and character. The Name of the Lord is the glue that holds this psalm together.

It is exactly because of the nature and character of God that the psalmist made his plea. The God of the Bible—the Creator, Sustainer, Controller of all things—is the only God upon whom it makes sense to call. When we see his character—merciful, loving, kind, holy, righteous, just, true—we are compelled to cry out to him.

The whole idea of prayer assumes everything about God that is necessary for prayer to be meaningful. For example, if God does not know everything, so that he has to be informed, if he is not powerful enough to do something about my situation, and if he is not present, so that he must travel to my aid, prayer is pointless.

One, because I may mis-inform him, so that he acts on bad information; two, my request may be beyond his ability in wisdom, power, or resources to resolve; and three, he may be pre-occupied with other matters elsewhere.

Remember Elijah's taunting of Baal. How pointless were the prayers of the prophets of Baal: "*O Baal, answer us!*" *But there was no voice, and no one answered* (1Kgs 18:26); Elijah mocked them: *Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is musing, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened* (1Kgs 18:27).

The person, presence, nature, and character of God matter for prayer to be

meaningful. The God-ness of God, the Godhood of God, is the basis and the ground of the psalmist's plea: *save me by your name*,

David expands on the first line with the second: *Vindicate me by your might* (1b). On more than one occasion, David could have killed Saul, but killing Saul would not have vindicated David and shown him righteous. It would have implicated David in a coup. If David's kingdom is to be established, God must unmistakably establish it.

In David's prayer his relationship with and knowledge of the person of God, and why he pleads for God *hear his prayer*.

B. The reason for his plea (3)

The reason the psalmist gives for his urgent plea is *strangers* had risen up against him and *ruthless* men were seeking his life.

Strangers is strong language. It is normally used of those who are not part of the covenant community of faith. We don't want to soften the text and miss its message. David is saying that those who have risen up against him are not true members of the covenant community.

He further says they are *ruthless* men who *seek his life*. These are the exact words that are used of Saul in 1 Samuel 23:15: *David saw that Saul had come out to seek his life*.

What characterizes *strangers* and *ruthless* men? Why are they the way they are? The psalm gives the answer: *they do not set God before themselves* (3). Another way of saying this is that they have no regard for God. Saul knew he had forfeited the anointing. He, also, knew David was to be king (cf. 1Sam 23:17), yet he had no intention of submitting to what he knew to be the will of God. That is the definition of a *stranger* and *ruthless* man. He surrounded himself with those who shared his values. He called in favors, but David called on God: *Save me by your name; vindicate me by your might. Hear my prayer; give ear to my words*.

2. In the day of trouble, we may take confidence in the name of God (4-5)

When we earnestly call on the Name, our confidence in God begins to take root. He is our *helper* and *sustainer* and the one who will ultimately set right all wrongs.

A. God as helper and upholder (4)

David emphatically calls our attention to his soaring confidence in the Name:

Behold, God is my helper (4a).

When the Psalmist says, *Behold, God is my helper*, he is saying, *Without him, I am a dead man*. This is not like the help you need when you say to someone, *Give me a hand*. This is like the help you need when you're drowning and you cry out, *Help me*.

He further defines *helper* when he says, *The Lord is the upholder of my life* (4b).¹ How frustrating the task of *ruthless men seeking his life*, when the *Lord is the upholder of his life*. When you read the 1 Samuel narrative, you see God's providential governing of man. David on one side of the mountain, Saul on the other closing in, thirsting for blood, and suddenly the messenger arrives and says to Saul, *Hurry and come, for the Philistines have made a raid against the land* (1 Samuel 23:27).

B. God as judge (5)

Taking confidence in the Lord as his *helper* and *upholder*, the psalmist notes that *God returns the evil to his enemies* (5a). This is the poetic justice of God. Again, the psalmist is drawing on the nature and character of God. He is trusting in the Name, the God who is Present and executes justice.

Returning evil to my enemies is not some impersonal moral force at work in the universe that tends evil deeds to come back on the perpetrator. David said a similar thing in relation to Nabal in 1 Samuel 25. The Bible says, Nabal was *harsh and badly behaved* (1Sam 25.3). David and his men had protected him and flocks, but Nabal was so ungrateful he would not give David and his men anything to eat. The Bible says, *the LORD struck Nabal, and he died* (1Sam 25:38). When David heard the news, he said, *The LORD has returned the evil of Nabal on his own head* (1Sam 25:39).

The same concept is here in this psalm. It is not as MLK said that the moral arc of the universe tends toward justice. It is rather what the Bible says, the God of the universe personally executes justice. That is why we can take confidence in him. Justice is personal and relational.

This confidence moved the psalmist to prayer again, *In your faithfulness* (emet, truth) *put an end to them* (5b). The idea of God's *faithfulness* is *truth that calls for trust*. The Psalmist is saying on the basis of your truthfulness, put an end to them. God is truth you can count on.

What a prayer! Is it right to pray such things. We need to remember **two things**. **First**, the words of in Psalm 54:5 are God's words to us.² Like David in relation to Saul, these words teach us to put our enemies in the hands of God. He is truth we can trust. Perhaps, you have experienced such abuse and betrayal and anguish. Perhaps you think no one can understand. God is truth you can trust. He set things right. He will execute justice.

A judge put people in prison for singing hymns and praying outside an abortion clinic. He or she sits in the seat of power for the moment, but will ultimate have to contend with the Court of heaven. Mad men may kill children in presence of their parents and then abuse and kill the parents. The God of heaven will turn that evil on them. He is coming for them. A man may be charges with a hate crime for tearing down a pool noodle statue to Satan in the Iowa state house, but what will they do with the one who will cast Satan and all his helpers in the lake that burns with fire.

Since 2009 more than 50 thousand Nigerian Christian souls at the hands of Boko Haram and Fulani Muslims have been added to the martyrs under the altar in heaven who cry out for the Sovereign Lord to judge and avenge their blood on heads of those who killed them. Our prayers are too timid on this topic.

The **second** thing to remember from this prayer is that when we ask God to set things right, establish justice, vindicate the righteous, and bring an end to evil, we are joining the psalmist in pleas for the destruction of the wicked.ⁱⁱⁱ

We may take confidence in the Name of God.

3. In the day of trouble, God will give us reason to praise his name (6-7).

The psalm moves us from lament to confidence to praise. We are witnessing the transforming power of prayer in this psalm. There is no indication that the psalmist's situation has changed, but he has taken confidence in Name of the LORD. Reflecting on the nature and character of God—his Presence, his might, his help, his upholding power—has led him to give thanks for the goodness of God.

So overwhelmed is he with the goodness of God that he must give public testimony to it. His stated reason for the freewill offering he will give is *the LORD's Name is good* (6). This offering was the highest end of the sacrificial journey into the Presence of God. The worshipper would gather with the people of God eating and drinking in the Presence of the God of Israel, recounting the stories of his goodness.⁴

Praise cannot and should not remain private. In the company, of the people of God, we must give testimony to the *goodness of the Name*. We must not rob God of his glory with muted praise.

Imagine the context in which the psalmist promised to give thanks for the goodness of God. He is on one side of the mountain. Saul is on the other side seeking his life. In that crisis, the psalmist reflects on the Presence, nature, and character of God, concluding that God is good.

He does not stop simply with the goodness of Name of God but moves deeper into his reasoning (7). The LORD's goodness means the LORD has delivered him from every trouble and his eye has looked in triumph on his enemies. This is what the psalmist infers from the goodness of the Name of the LORD.

The psalmist uses perfect tense verbs here not because he is talking about something that happened in the past but of the prophetic future. That is, he is speaking of the future as if it had already taken place. He is talking about what is sure to take place because of the Name—the nature and character of the God who is good and mighty and is the helper and upholder of his people. That God will turn our lament into praise.

ⁱ What makes the betrayals of the men of Keilah and the Ziphites so discouraging is they were, not only David's countrymen, but they were also his tribesmen. He, not Saul, was protecting them. Their betrayals were opportunistic, efforts to win favor with Saul or, at least, avoid his wrath. If David did not have the support of his tribe, how could he ever in reality be king? God must establish David's throne if he is ever to be recognized as king by Israel.

ⁱⁱ Perhaps this is the origin of Psalm 54.

ⁱⁱⁱ Wilson, NIVAC, 803-804