



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States



The Holy Book of Psalms

Psalm 140

Metropolitan Youssef



Introduction

- This Psalm is titled *To the Chief Musician. A Psalm of David*
- *The Chief Musician* is thought by some to be the Lord God Himself, and others suppose him to be a leader of choirs or musicians in David's time, such as Heman the singer or Asaph (1 Chronicles 6:33, 16:4-7, and 25:6)
- The Hebrew, and all the other versions of translation, attribute this Psalm to David
- The occasion on which it was composed is not indicated in the title; but it is clear from the contents of the Psalm that it was written at an early period of his life, in the time when he was subjected to persecution - most probably in the time of Saul



Introduction

- This Psalm and the three following Psalms are so similar
- They all portray, though in different ways, the godly response to trials
- All four are prayers and all four are written by David
- One of them is said to be his *Prayer when he was in the cave*, and it is probable that all the rest were composed about the same time
- The theme of Psalm 140 is similar to many of David's other Psalms, in which he cried out to God in a time of trouble



Introduction

- This trouble seems to be slander against him, perhaps when he was a fugitive escaping from Saul's court
- David appeals to God for protection, an appeal which gradually intensifies into a condemnation of his vicious enemies
- He expresses his personal confidence in the Lord as the Protector of the oppressed, and as his own God and Defender
- Psalm 140, is a lamenting plea for protection from the plans of evil, violent men and a call for divine justice



Introduction

- While facing the most violent and threatening attacks possible, we must believe that the Lord will never abandon His own afflicted people
- David may be very well considered in the Psalm as a type of Christ, for He was particularly so in His sufferings
- St. Augustine says, “I believe that, listening to this Psalm, you hear the voice of the church, dwelling among the wicked, complaining, groaning, and pouring a prayer to God; For her voice in every prophecy is that of every needy, who hungers and thirsts for righteousness; until she ultimately comes to enjoy the reward kept for her, according to the divine promise.”



Introduction

Psalm Outline

- David Prays Against His Enemies 140:1-5
- Praying to the God of Strength and Salvation 140:6-8
- David's Prayer Regarding the Wicked 140:9-11
- Confidence in God's Victory 140:12-13

David Prays Against His Enemies 140:1-5



- Many times in David's life, he suffered under the presence and pressure of *evil* and *violent men*
- This desperate Psalm came from such a time and shows its urgency by having no introduction of praise or contemplation
- David went straight to his plea
- The prayer is not directed against an individual, but against David's enemies generally
- They are *evil* and *violent men*
- The persecuted man turns to God in prayer
- Who can meet the evil man and defeat him but God?

David Prays Against His Enemies 140:1-5



- *violent men*, are those who have committed violence so often
- They are those who have so frequently done wrong, that this may be considered their characteristic
- This would apply well to the repeated acts of Saul in persecuting David, and trying to do him harm
- David's enemies were *evil men*; and so were Jesus Christ's; as Herod, Judas in particular, and the Jews in general
- And such are the enemies of God's people; the world, persecutors, and false teachers
- God's people ought to desire and pray to be delivered from enemy

David Prays Against His Enemies 140:1-5



- This makes this Psalm a prayer that any of us could pray to God
- Satan is after all of us who are trying to live a godly life
- The name of the violent man may not be the same in our case, but certainly there is a violent man in each of our problems
- St. Augustine says, “Not from one only, but from the class; not from the vessels only, but from their prince himself, that is, the devil. Why ‘from man,’ if he means from the devil? Because he too is called a man in a figure... Now then being made light, not in ourselves, but in the Lord, let us pray not only against darkness, that is, against sinners, whom still the devil possesses, but also against their prince, the devil himself, who works in the children of disobedience.”

David Prays Against His Enemies 140:1-5



- Those *evil men* were known by the *evil things in their hearts*
- Their evil actions reflect their true nature and heart
- *evil things* It was not a single purpose; the plan embraced many forms of evil, doing him wrong in every way possible
- They cannot be happy unless they are planning and conspiring
- Their hostility to which David was subjected arose from no fault of his, but from the *evil things in their hearts*
- They were always ready for conflict and *war*
- *They continually gather together*, They seem to have but one heart, for they are completely agreed in their malice

David Prays Against His Enemies 140:1-5



- They are organized for this purpose; they are constantly prepared for it
- Evil people have no peace; the only way they think they can satisfy their evil heart, is to bring war to those at peace
- They not only go to the wars, but dwell in them
- Their tongues inflict wounds which are as painful as poisoned wounds
- The desire for *war* and *evil things* is often expressed in sharp and poisonous words
- David felt both the sting and the poison of such men and their words

David Prays Against His Enemies 140:1-5



- The *asps*, are among the most poisonous serpents
- St. Paul quoted verse 3 in Romans 3:13 as part of his description of man's deep sinfulness, "*Their throat is an open tomb; with their tongues they have practiced deceit; The poison of asps is under their lips*" (Romans 3:13)
- In principle, St. Paul expanded the idea beyond David's original sense and applied the concept to *all* humanity in its fallen condition
- St. Jerome says, 'The psalmist warns us against the heretics, *The poison of asps is under their lips*, whose words bear amity on the surface, while they are actually loaded with deadly poison.'

David Prays Against His Enemies 140:1-5



- St. Augustine says, “Notice how he likens the evildoer with the serpent, that, among all beasts, has craftiness and deception to cause harm. Having no feet by which its approach could be heard; it smoothly crawls, yet not in a straightforward path. So are the evildoers who smoothly crawl, undetected, to do harm, who hide ‘the poison of asps under their lips.’”
- *Selah*, This word indicates some kind of pause, either for a musical expression or for careful thought and meditation – or both
- It is repeated three times in this Psalm, and here indicates that the deep sinfulness of man is worthy of our careful consideration

David Prays Against His Enemies 140:1-5



- In the first verse, David acknowledged the presence of *evil* and *violent men*
- He then requested of God, *Preserve me from violent men*
- He prays that they do not prevail to take away his life
- He also prays that God *Keep* him from doing as they do
- The more malice appears in our enemies against us the more earnest we should be in prayer to God to be under His protection
- According to St. Augustine, *Who have purposed to make my steps stumble* is Satan

David Prays Against His Enemies 140:1-5



- He says, “We cannot understand this in a non-spiritual way...He makes your steps stumble if he hinders your progress along God’s way -- the upright way; if he makes you fall along the way; draw you out of the way; let you stop; or let you go back to where you were.”
- St. John Chrysostom often talks about the dangers of the wicked, saying that the devil will never find a more effective tool than the use of the wicked against the righteous
- Yet, at the same time, what would come over the wicked himself through his deception of the righteous, is far worse than what would come over the righteous

David Prays Against His Enemies 140:1-5



- The evil, practiced by the wicked, would fill the cup from which he drinks
- St. John Chrysostom says, “Nothing is more oppressive against righteousness, than those who practice evil, who do wrong against themselves before doing it against the others.”
- *the wicked* hoped to make David trip over a series of hidden snares, *cords*, nets, and *traps*
- The hunter sets his snares for the animal he wishes to catch
- Such snares, when laid for animals, were hidden in long grass, or low shrubs, or rough ground

David Prays Against His Enemies 140:1-5



- *They have spread a net by the wayside, Where he may be expected to walk*
- They had not only made open war upon him, but they had sought to bring him into an ambush - to rush upon him suddenly when he was not on his guard, and did not know that danger was near
- David was not blind to the traps, but he had hope in God's help
- He prays to God to keep him from falling, and to grant him the spirit of discernment, wisdom, and strength; for there is no deliverance for him except by a divine intervention
- This character well agrees with the Scribes and Pharisees, who were proud and often laid snares for Christ to take away His life

David Prays Against His Enemies 140:1-5



- As well as with the enemies of the church and God's people
- The enemies of the church through their pride, persecute the people of God and use deceitful methods to trap them
- St. Augustine comments on *They have spread a net by the wayside*, and says, "Not on the way, but 'by the wayside'. The ways are the commandments of God; out of which I wish you do not go astray, to avoid falling into nets and snares by the wayside."
- *Selah*: When David considered the danger coming from those who opposed him, it prompted a thoughtful pause

Praying to the God of Strength and Salvation 140:6-8



- *I said to the Lord: "You are my God,* Here was David's hope
- He was assured that God was his God, he expressed that assurance, and he expressed it before God Himself
- He expressed it while he was in the midst of trouble and distress; in danger of falling into the hands of evil and violent men
- St. Augustine says, "What is the solution among such evils, in such temptations and dangers?...‘I said to the Lord, ‘You are my God’"
- He appealed to his God, who only could deliver him; and being his covenant God, he had reason to believe He would

Praying to the God of Strength and Salvation 140:6-8



- Thus Christ, *“Who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death.”* (Hebrews 5:7)
- David cried out to *God* his Master *Lord*, recognizing *Him* as the Lord of his life, and no other god
- When he looked back upon past dangers and deliverances, David felt that he should have perished had not the Lord held a shield over his head
- The true God could actually help David, being *the strength of his salvation*

Praying to the God of Strength and Salvation 140:6-8



- David knew many literal battles, but he also lived through many battles with lying and slanderous men
- David testified that God had been his protection, his shield, his armor in those battles
- God had covered David with a shield through which no sword of the enemy could possibly cut its way
- *You have covered my head*, Which, in a spiritual sense, is to a believer the hope of salvation, Ephesians 6:17; 1 Thessalonians 5:8; a defensive weapon to him; and protects him while he is engaging with his spiritual enemies in his state of warfare, sin, Satan, and the world

Praying to the God of Strength and Salvation 140:6-8



- St. John Chrysostom says, “Do you see the thankful spirit? He recalls former events, that God established him in security: this is the meaning of covered.”
- In recognizing the authority of God, David realized that if God *were* to help the *wicked*, then they would *be exalted*
- He prayed for God to work for His people and against *the desires of the wicked*
- David prays to God to bring the plans and plots of the devil; to no avail, the way He did with Ahitophel who desired the punishment and destruction of David the prophet and king

Praying to the God of Strength and Salvation 140:6-8



- The desires of such men are under the control of the Lord and they cannot fulfil them unless they have permitted by Him
- It is proper to pray that the purposes of the wicked may be defeated
- St. John Chrysostom says, “Notice the humility of this man. He does not say: ‘Do not forsake me on account of my worthiness, nor of my virtuous life’; but he says: ‘lest they be exalted’; lest they be more proud and become more foolish when they see that You have forsaken me.”
- *Selah*: When David considered the need for the wicked to be stopped in their evil plans, it prompted a thoughtful pause



David's Prayer Regarding the Wicked 140:9-11

- Since we do not know the exact occasion in David's life for this prayer, we don't know who he meant by *the head*
- It could have been Saul, who was David's long and persistent enemy
- It could have been Doeg, who was an evil, violent man who bore a false report against David (1 Samuel 21-22)
- If this prayer is about Saul, it is another significant example of how David would not violently strike against Saul even when he had the opportunity (1 Samuel 24:1-7, 26:7-11)
- David would not touch Saul; for all his sins and faults, Saul was God's anointed king



David's Prayer Regarding the Wicked 140:9-11

- When David was attacked by Saul, he would pour out his heart in prayer to the Lord, entrusting Saul's punishment to God, rather than taking it in his own hands
- While God shields and protects his head, theirs has no protection, but *the evil of their own lips* which *covers* them, not with defense and safety but with confusion
- St. John Chrysostom gave two examples to explain, *Let the evil of their lips cover them*: (1) Joseph's brothers, intending to make him a slave, they themselves fell into serious troubles; whereas he, even though he suffered servitude and near death, he eventually thanked them for what they have done to him



David's Prayer Regarding the Wicked 140:9-11

- (2) Absalom, likewise, plotted to destroy his father, David; yet he eventually fell the victim of his own plan
- *Let burning coals fall upon them*, David prayed that the same fire that wicked men poured out on others would be poured out on them
- David sees the wrath of God poured out upon his enemies, who are at the same time God's enemies - they are *cast into the fire* prepared to receive the wicked - and sank into deep pits where they find it impossible to rescue themselves
- He may have in mind the image of Sodom and Gomorrah, where burning coals fell on the cities



David's Prayer Regarding the Wicked 140:9-11

- According to St. Augustine, the fire here is a heavenly fire, that will turn man from cold black coal into burning coal ignited with the Spirit that would affect others as well
- Saul of Tarsus has been black coal, when he was a blasphemer, slanderer, and a persecutor; but once he had the mercy of the Lord, he got ignited with a fire from heaven
- The voice of Christ, took the blackness away from him, enflamed him with the fire of the Spirit which enflames others through him
- *a slanderer*, a man whom the tongue rules; a man of an unbridled tongue; a man who does not control his tongue, James 3:2-12



David's Prayer Regarding the Wicked 140:9-11

- David's request is, that such a man might not flourish or prosper
- These evil men hunted David, verses 4-6
- David prayed that the same would be returned to them – that the hunters would be hunted by their very *evil*
- He hunted the good men, and now his own evil shall hunt him
- All evil bears the element of decay within itself; because is it but corruption
- As we read in Proverbs: *"His own iniquities entrap the wicked man, And he is caught in the cords of his sin."* (Proverbs 5:22)



David's Prayer Regarding the Wicked 140:9-11

- St. John Chrysostom says, "After speaking of God's wrath, he shows once again that evil of itself is sufficient to destroy those affected by it. This in fact is no slight form of wickedness, being rash, not controlling the tongue...*Let not a slanderer be established in the earth*, that is, he will be upset, overturned, destroyed...such a person leads a dangerous life, attracting countless enemies from all sides, disturbing their own soul before others and not allowing it to be at peace, but rather awakening hostility and alarm within despite no one giving cause."

Confidence in God's Victory

140:12-13



- David remained confident that God would defend His *afflicted* people
- He doubtless refers primarily to himself, as having a confident belief that the Lord would maintain his *cause*, or would defend him
- At the same time he makes the statement general, implying that what would be done to him would be done to all in similar circumstances
- This would mean *justice for the poor* and others who suffer from the words and works of wicked men

Confidence in God's Victory

140:12-13



- God, in all His attributes, in all His providential arrangements, on earth, would be found to be on the side of the oppressed, the afflicted, and the offended
- He has no attribute that can take part with an oppressor or a wrong doer
- The wicked cannot come to Him with the belief that He will be on their side: the righteous - the oppressed - the afflicted – can
- St. John Chrysostom says, “By saying: ‘I know’, he means that the evildoers will surely not go unpunished, if they do not repent. And those he calls ‘poor’, are not the needy, but who are humble and remorseful.”

Confidence in God's Victory

140:12-13



- The Psalm ends on a note of confidence
- It begins in great trouble and sorrow, but ends in praise and triumph
- Though assaulted by the wicked, David put his trust in the Lord, and gave all his desire for retribution unto Him
- David believed that in the end, *the righteous* would be thankful and *the upright* would *dwell in Your presence* – the best reward of all
- The poor, the persecuted, the afflicted, if righteous, shall enjoy the favor and protection of God

Confidence in God's Victory

140:12-13



- God is on their side, and not on the side of the wicked who oppress them
- But the people should be *righteous* in order that they may find the favor of God and dwell with Him
- It is not poverty or riches that commend us to God
- It is faith, holiness, love, and obedience, in the condition of life in which we are placed
- According to St. Jerome, the upright shall dwell in His presence, namely, shall be established in Christ
- And according to St. Augustine, they will refer nothing to their own worthiness; but will refer everything to God's mercy

Confidence in God's Victory

140:12-13



- St. John Chrysostom says, "What does he mean by *the righteous shall give thanks to Your name*? For whatever happens, he is saying, they will give thanks, even if they see the lowly abused and the wicked elevated, they will not demand that accounts be settled. This, you see, is a particular mark of righteous people, always and in every circumstance giving thanks."
- And on *The upright shall dwell in Your presence*, he says, "that is enjoying help from You, having a mind always for You, being always with You, they will never desert You; whatever happens they will never complain, they will never find fault for what happens. This, in fact, is the mark of a soul untroubled, of a steadfast attitude."



Discussion

- How does this Psalm describe the Lord?
- What is this Psalm's central theme?
- How does the psalmist describe the wicked in this Psalm?
- What danger did David face?
- How did David demonstrate his confidence in the Lord?



Discussion

- What did David believe about God's character?
- How does the psalmist portray the power of words in this Psalm?
- How does this Psalm demonstrate dependence on God?
- As Christians, how should we view the injustice we see around us?