



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States



The Holy Book of Psalms

Psalm 141

Metropolitan Youssef



Introduction

- This Psalm has the title *A Psalm of David*
- This Psalm is generally attributed to David
- While the exact context and background details of Psalm 141 can't be determined with full certainty, it was surely written by David during one of his many times of life distress
- Perhaps, as some suggest, when David was in the wilderness being pursued by King Saul, or maybe while David was fleeing from his son Absalom
- Some suppose that he made it at the time that he thought and decided to go to Achish, King of Gath; 1 Samuel 26



Introduction

- Apparently, it is composed under circumstances similar to Psalm 140
- The Psalm shows David as a man of sensitive conscience, who asked God to deal with his own sin and weakness before addressing the wicked men who fought against him
- It shows that David was even more concerned about evil inside himself than he was about evil from others
- It is generally thought to be an evening prayer and the early Church used it at the beginning of the evening service
- It is one of the Twelfth Hour prayer of the Book of Agpeya



Introduction

- According to St. John Chrysostom this Psalm was used in his time as part of the evening liturgy in the Church, due to the reference in verse 2 to the evening sacrifice
- He says, “I believe it was not without purpose that this Psalm was prescribed for daily recital, nor on account of recital of the one verse, ‘lifting up of my hands in evening sacrifice’... they prescribed its recital as a kind of saving medicine and cleansing of sins so that whatever stain we incur throughout the day—abroad, at home, wherever we pass the time—we might on coming to the evening expunge through this spiritual air. It is, you see, a medicine that removes all these stains.”



Introduction

- Psalm 141 is, in many respects, an expanded and more detailed version of the Lord's Prayer, *And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil*, (Matthew 6:13)
- In this Psalm we have David asking God to keep him from sin and to protect him from those who sin against him
- David recognizes the seriousness of sin and he knows that he needs God's help in order to put sin to death
- As David prays for protection, both from sin and from other sinners, we have an example of how we should pray



Introduction

Psalm Outline

- The Acceptable Prayer 141:1-2
- A Prayer for Protection from Evil 141:3-5
- The Perfect Faith 141:6-10



The Acceptable Prayer 141:1-2

- David begins with an urgent call for God to hear his plea and declares his intention to present his prayer, with hands raised toward heaven, as incense and as the evening sacrifice, desiring that God accept it as such
- The first thing to note is the urgency of David's prayer
- His case was urgent, and he pleaded that urgency
- He prays and asks for God to hasten or to come quickly to his aid
- It seems apparent that for David, there is no time to waste in this effort against the sin of his heart



The Acceptable Prayer 141:1-2

- David loved prayer, and he beseechs God that his prayers might be heard and answered
- His crying to God signifies faith and stillness in prayer
- Others trust to themselves, but he cry unto God
- Prayer is a weapon the believer may always carry with him, and use in every time of need
- All he wants is God to hear his prayer and notice it, *Make haste to me! Give ear to my voice*
- *cry out to You* this is second time he talks of crying: prayer had become his frequent and his constant task



The Acceptable Prayer 141:1-2

- St. John Chrysostom says, “Why does David say, “I cry to You?” He refers here to a cry from within, which the ardent heart produced, and the contrite attitude... In other words, just as one who shouts exhausts all energy, so too the one shouting in the heart gathers together all powers of thought. God therefore looks for such a cry that brings together the movements of the heart, and allows no distraction or interruption on the part of the singer. Not only does He look for such a cry, but also the directing of prayer to Him: there are many standing for prayer who do not raise their shouting to God but, while their lips shout to God, their mind does not agree to the words. Such a one does not cry, even if shouting loudly; nor does such a one pray to God, even if seeming to pray to Him.”



The Acceptable Prayer 141:1-2

- St. Chrysostom continues and says, “He asks to be heard not from passion of his prayer but even from the offering of such a prayer as to be worthy of those unsleeping eyes. Now what kind of prayer is that? You are praying not against your enemies, nor for wealth and material advantage, nor for influence and reputation, nor for anything passing, but for those unending and immortal things. ‘Seek the kingdom of God,’ Scripture says, remember, ‘and all things will be give to you.’...remember the devil lies in waiting...he is anxious to drive us into indifference and incline our thinking so as to make us give up prayer without result...Aware of this we should throw up against his our zeal and never pray against our enemies but imitate the Apostles. They suffered countless calamities...Surely they did not say, ‘kill them’... Do you see prayer characterized by sound values, demanding no punishment of enemies despite such calamities?”



The Acceptable Prayer 141:1-2

- Using imagery from the Old Testament forms of worship David shows the sincerity of his prayer
- He wants his prayer to be like sweet smelling incense and like a sacrifice acceptable to God
- Incense was offered every morning and evening before the Lord, on the golden altar, before the veil of the sanctuary, Exodus 30:1 and was a symbol of of pure, holy, and fervent prayer
- The sweet smoke of the sacrifice or of incense rising towards heaven was a natural symbol of prayer ascending to God
- And as incense is continually arising so is prayers continually arising before God



The Acceptable Prayer 141:1-2

- Prayer is a spiritual sacrifice; it is the offering up of the soul, and its best affections to God
- His posture of prayer *the lifting up of my hands*, was a gift to God even as *the evening sacrifice* was a gift to God
- Revelation 5:8 says that the prayers of God's people are like incense, and Hebrews 13:15 describes praise as a sacrifice unto God
- *His prayer* is like *incense* because prayer rises to heaven even as the smoke of incense rises upward
- Prayer pleases God even as incense has a pleasing smell



The Acceptable Prayer 141:1-2

- Prayer needs some “fire” to be effective, (James 5:16) speaks of “...the fervent prayer”, and incense is activated with fire
- St. John Chrysostom says, “He is asking us to offer prayers that are pure and fragrant...the incense even if itself is fine and sweet smelling but gives particular evidence of its fragrance at the time when it is mixed with fire, So to is prayer fine of itself but becomes finer and more sweet smelling when offered with ardor and a glowing spirit, when the soul become a censer and lights a burning fire. The incense should not be added unless the brazier had been previously lit...Do likewise with your own mind: first light it with enthusiasm and then offer your prayer.”



The Acceptable Prayer 141:1-2

- Some relate this to Christ who has, *“given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma.”* (Ephesians 5:2)
- As St. Paul tells us, *“I desire therefore that the men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting.”* (1 Timothy 2:8)
- Our prayer, our entire relationship to God, is founded in the power of the Cross
- St. Augustine says, “This is understood of the Head Himself, as every Christian knows. For, by the advent of the evening, the Lord, was hanged on the cross, ‘laid down His life that He may take it again’ (John 10: 17); He did not lose it against His own will.”



The Acceptable Prayer 141:1-2

- John Cassian says: “We can understand in a still more spiritual sense that the true evening sacrifice is what was given by the Lord our Savior in the evening to the apostles at the Supper, when he instituted the holy mysteries of the church, and what He Himself offered up to the Father by the lifting up of His hands for the salvation of the whole world. The spreading forth of His hands on the Cross is quite correctly called a ‘lifting up.’ For when we were all lying in Hades, He raised us to heaven, according to the word of His own promise, when He says: ‘When I have been lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to Myself.’”

A Prayer for Protection from Evil 141:3-5



- These three verses (3-5) is a prayer for grace to resist the temptation to sin in word, thought, and deed
- David was concerned to pray that his own words and actions would be pleasing to God
- While we do not know the specifics of David's situation, it is clear that he felt the temptation to sin with his words, and so he asks for God's help
- The prayer here is that God would guard him from the temptation to say something wrong
- The imagery is clear, a guard being set to watch the doors of David's lips (Proverbs 21:23, 10:19; James 3:5-10)

A Prayer for Protection from Evil 141:3-5



- It would be a dishonor that the mouth that prays as if it were incense should ever be defiled with untruth, or pride, or wrath
- It will become so, unless it is carefully watched
- He asked God that his mouth would be kept as with a bridle, especially while the wicked were before him; lest he should say anything evil
- St. Augustine says, “He said not a barrier of restraint, but ‘a door’ A door is opened as well as shut. If then it be a ‘door,’ let it be both opened and shut; opened, to confession of sin; closed, to excusing sin.”

A Prayer for Protection from Evil 141:3-5



- And according to St. John Chrysostom a loose tongue is the cause of countless evils
- He says, “Just as there is no benefit in house, city walls, doors, gates unless guards are placed, who also know when to open and when to close, so too, neither tongue nor mouth is of any avail unless reason is entrusted with the task of closing and opening with precision and understanding, in the knowledge of what must be put out and what kept in.”
- David knew that it was more than his lips that needed protection; his *heart* could also be affected by some *evil thing*, resulting in *wicked works*

A Prayer for Protection from Evil 141:3-5



- This was David's way of praying what Jesus later taught, *do not lead us into temptation* (Matthew 6:13)
- David is not suffering from the hostility of the workers of iniquity, but dreads becoming infected with their sin
- David's desire is to honor God, so he asks God to keep his heart from pursuing evil
- He did not want to walk in the ways of *men who work iniquity*, so he didn't want to eat at their table either
- This may have been a literal situation for David, but the principle of not enjoying all the luxuries that the wicked partake of is always relevant to God's people

A Prayer for Protection from Evil 141:3-5



- The reference to *their delicacies* would seem to suggest that they were trying to show him the advantages which he would enjoy if he would join them
- The prayer is for protection of enjoying or desiring worldly comforts
- Sinners pretend to find *delicacies* in sin; forbidden fruit is pleasant to the eye, (Genesis 3:6)
- There is great power in company; even good men can be persuaded by association; so, one must try not to be with them
- Sometimes there are many advantages in an evil, wicked way and the godly person knows to avoid such advantages

A Prayer for Protection from Evil 141:3-5



- St. Jerome uses this verse to exhort us to follow the lead of the psalmist who feared to imitate the wicked who, instead of repenting their evil works, attempt to justify themselves by excuses that made them commit evil
- St. John Chrysostom says, "Saying: 'Do not incline my heart to any evil thing'; does not imply that God inclines the heart to evil things; Far from it! But it rather means: [Do not allow the heart to be inclined, or to pervert to evil thoughts; for the heart is the fountain of both the virtue and the iniquity.]"
- David rejected the *delicacies* of the wicked, but embraced the correction that came from *the righteous*

A Prayer for Protection from Evil 141:3-5



- He recognized that it would be *a kindness* to him
- Godly accountability is a good gift for those who gladly receive it, *“Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.”* (James 5:19-20)
- *“Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called ‘Today,’ lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.”* (Hebrews 3:12-13)

A Prayer for Protection from Evil 141:3-5



- David knew that rebukes from the righteous, offered in love, are one of the keys to personal purity and that such warnings would help his prayer life
- *“It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise Than for a man to hear the song of fools.”* (Ecclesiastes 7:5)
- He would rather be smitten by the righteous than feasted by the wicked
- And by *the righteous* David may mean *the righteous One*, God
- This will be like *excellent oil* on the head, a gesture of rich hospitality that he *will not* refuse

A Prayer for Protection from Evil 141:3-5



- Using the imagery of oil being poured on his head, David asserts the benefits of godly accountability
- As oil refreshes and perfumes, so does reproof when befittingly taken, it soothe and renew the heart
- *“Faithful are the wounds of a friend, But the kisses of an enemy are deceitful.”* (Proverbs 27:6)
- *It shall be as excellent oil*, The Vulgate Latin, and Arabic versions, render it, "the oil of the ungodly", or "sinners": meaning their flattering words, which, though smooth as oil, were deceitful; therefore, he condemn them, "let not the oil of the wicked" because they are hurtful and evil

A Prayer for Protection from Evil 141:3-5



- *Let my head not refuse it*, The idea is, "If such reproof comes on me for the faithful doing of what I regard as wise and best, I ought no more to reject it than the head would refuse the oil poured on it, to make the person healthy and pleasing"
- *For still my prayer is against the deeds of the wicked*, Many believe this refers to the righteous; that David is praying for them in their adversities
- When they go through such tribulations as those of which he had been involved, he would pray for them
- However, others think it refers back to the workers of iniquity

A Prayer for Protection from Evil 141:3-5



- He foresaw that his enemies would be in calamities, and that they would need his prayers; and he here declares he would willingly grant them
- And some interpret it as if he is saying, “Let me not hate reproof, and associate with the wicked, but let me continue to pray against their evil deeds
- This healing oil will strengthen him to continue to pray for his enemies, even though they still continue in their wickedness
- St. Jerome says, “*For still my prayer is against the deeds of the wicked;*” This means that despite being stirred up to foolishness, yet I still keep praying for their reform.”



The Perfect Faith 141:6-10

- Adversities and difficulties open the heart to receive instruction
- *Their judges* - i.e. the leaders - among David's enemies are visited with a serious and significant adversity, expressed metaphorically by them being *overthrown by the sides of the cliff*
- Some interpret it of Saul and his sons being killed on the mountains of Gilboa, 1 Samuel 31:1, which might be here prophetically spoken of
- The death of Saul made the nation look to David as the Lord's anointed; his words became sweet to them
- Many of those who followed Saul had spoken severely of David when he went to the Philistines



The Perfect Faith 141:6-10

- But to them he returned nothing but good will, loving prayers, and sweet speeches
- He, on his part, bore no resentment, but loved them
- David did not doubt that he would himself reign when Saul was overcome, or that the people would hear his words, and submit to him as king
- This may be taken more generally: even judges, great as they are, may come to be overthrown
- Oppressed cannot gain a hearing with those that live in pleasure, but when they come to be overthrown themselves they will have more compassionate thoughts of the afflicted



The Perfect Faith 141:6-10

- When they are in affliction, their ear will be open to instruction
- *they hear my words, for they are sweet*, Some think this refers to the surrendering that were in Saul's voice when he said, with tears, *Is this your voice, my son David?* (1 Samuel 24:16, 26:21)
- According to St. Augustine, the judges are the philosophers, and those of authority, who control their subjects according to their views and philosophies; yet, if compared to the true Rock; namely, to the Lord Jesus Christ, they would be overthrown to the ground
- According to St. John Chrysostom virtue may cause a temporary feeling of discomfort; but it will eventually bring forth happiness



The Perfect Faith 141:6-10

- St. Jerome says, “Even heretics, although they seem to despise the simplicity of the church, as compared with Aristotle and Plato; when they turn to the Scriptures, are swallowed up immediately by the Rock, that is, by Christ, and are converted to him.”
- St. John Chrysostom says, “Here he shows the vulnerability of sin and the problems of vice. Then, he is saying, the influential, the shakers and the movers, all perish. He did not say Perish, but ‘were swallowed up’ indicating that it happens to the extent that no trace of them remains, which is also what he said about the ungodly.”



The Perfect Faith 141:6-10

- St. John means to say that, as when a piece of rock is overthrown into the sea, will leave no trace; so, they will drown, and will be no more
- *Our bones are scattered*, Perhaps David used this word picture to describe how ruined he felt and his righteous companions were at the *deeds of the wicked*
- They seem to be weak, feeble, disorganized; they are in a condition which of itself seems to be hopeless: as dry bones scattered when they were buried
- The reference is to the condition of David and his followers as pursued by a mighty enemies



The Perfect Faith 141:6-10

- Or perhaps David is speaking on behalf of those with whom he is in sympathy, the godly who are the victims of persecution and oppression
- St. John Chrysostom says, “Despite our suffering extreme hardship, being all scattered and ruined like soil that is plowed, afflicted and dug, and arriving at the very gates of death, yet in spite of this condition we would prefer instruction and correction from the righteous to mercy from sinners. What ever happened, after all, we depended on hope in You, and would never be held back from looking to You.”



The Perfect Faith 141:6-10

- The final three verses of this Psalm speak of David's confidence in ultimate deliverance
- In verse 8 David boldly declared his confidence in God
- Such declarations of trust in God are very common in the Psalms
- David knew that the secret to persevering in trials is to fix one's eyes upon the Lord—not upon oneself, one's circumstances, or other men
- While David found himself in a difficult situation, he kept his eyes fixed on God and trusted Him to be his refuge



The Perfect Faith 141:6-10

- Without God's protection, he was at the mercy of his wicked enemies
- Not only the eyes of his body, lifted up to God in prayer, "*Jesus lifted up His eyes and said, 'Father, I thank You that You have heard Me.'*" (John 11:41); but the eyes of his mind, understanding, especially the eyes of faith and love
- In this time of distress, it is expressive of his affection to God, his confidence in Him, and humble hope and expectation of good things from Him
- According to St. Augustine, these words are uttered by the martyrs and those who suffer affliction



The Perfect Faith 141:6-10

- St. John Chrysostom says, “Even if countless troubles beset us—wars, battles, deaths, gates of Hades—we do not let go of the holy anchor; instead, we cling to the hope of Your assistance, and abandoning weapons and strategies we look to freedom from that source, Your grace.”
- And the final verses are a prayer for safety, help, justice and protection and he made two requests
- First, he asked that he not fall into his enemies’ traps (1 Samuel 18:21)
- It’s evident that David’s trust in God is steadfast unwavering



The Perfect Faith 141:6-10

- The enemies of David were determined to destroy him, and so they set many *snares*, *traps*, and *nets* for him
- He believes that God is the One who can keep him from the enemies' trap and lead him to safety
- He is asking God to let him discover it and to avoid it
- God can and will secure His people from being taken in it
- St. Jerome says, "The heretics, and the demons, will always set snares for us. As Iniquity is always close to virtue, they will set the snare beside the alms."



The Perfect Faith 141:6-10

- St. John Chrysostom says, “Here he is not referring simply to schemes but to hidden traps of the kind not easy to guard against and detect; hence they require in particular even grace from on high. For this reason he brings his theme to a close with a prayer, concluding with it as he had opened it, showing that on the one hand what is his to offer is this—hope in God, always looking to God, shunning their gatherings, hating they evil desire—and on the other hand what comes from God—help, assistance, rendering him proof against wiles difficult to detect. This is what virtue consists of, in fact: both application of our zeal and support from God’s assistance.”



The Perfect Faith 141:6-10

- Second, David prayed that his enemies might fall into their own traps
- Similar to the previous Psalm, he asks that the wicked be caught up in their own plotting (Psalm 140:5,9-10)—while he is set free into safety
- This prayer was answered
- His hope and assurance here expressed were not vain
- He escaped all the snares that were laid for him on every side
- Observe David's methodology in this Psalm
- While external trials were surely the pressing need that made him write the Psalm, he did not ask for victory until the final verse



The Perfect Faith 141:6-10

- Indeed, David's focus in this Psalm is rightly his own relationship with God
- St. John Chrysostom says, "Whose net will they fall into? God's very own. That is to say, they will be snared, they will be caught: the righteous, to the point of correction and awakening their sound values; sinners, suffering incurable ailments as they are, to the point of punishment, a retribution. "I am on my own until I pass on (escape)"
- St. John Chrysostom explains that this is security, protection, growth in virtue: shunning the wicked, being self-collected and disciplined for the whole of life



The Perfect Faith 141:6-10

- He continue and says, “Isolation does not constitute being alone, note, but an attitude of sound values. In this way people who live in the middle of cities, with their tumult and business, can be on their own by shunning the corrupt gatherings and devote themselves to the assemblies of the righteous—this is the safe way. Consequently, let the person who is capable of correcting others associate with the likely to accept the treatment, and make them better.”



Discussion

- How does David describe his prayers to God in verses 1-2, and what does this signify about his relationship with God?
- Reflect on verse 3. How can we apply David's prayer to our daily speech and actions?
- In what specific way did David want to remain pure before God?
- What does verse 5 reveal about David's openness to correction from righteous individuals?



Discussion

- What was the theme of David's prayers?
- How does verse 7 describe our weakness and brokenness?
- How does verse 8 highlight the importance of dependence on God for deliverance?
- On what temptation does this Psalm focus?