

## THE PROTECTOR

Psalm 141:1-10

In the environment in which we live we are constantly reminded that we need protection. It may be something as simple as using approved solar glasses for viewing an eclipse of the sun to something as complicated as eating the right combination of foods to protect our brains from Alzheimer's disease. There are companies that will sell you protection from credit card fraud, most computers need protection from viruses, we take immunization medications for protection from diseases such as influenza. Why do we have locks on our doors and fences around our yards or gardens other than something related to protection?

If we see the unrest in the world and hear various threats from people who are intent on destroying us, then we may have legitimate concerns whether or not we have adequate protection from harm. Having the most powerful military force on the planet did not keep the terrorists from flying airplanes into the World Trade Center buildings in the year 2001. The ability to retaliate is not the same as protection unless it provides a deterrent to those who would harm others. Deterrents don't always work as in the case of prison time for crimes committed.

It would seem that intervention and prevention are more effective than trying to correct the damage done or taking revenge if harm does come. Taking advantage of shelter is a lot easier than getting soaked by a rain storm. Wearing armor to stop the arrows of the enemy is a much better choice than a long healing process (or death) if we are shot. Also, recognizing and avoiding a trap is much better than getting caught in one.

David frequently found himself in situations that were potential deadly and certainly dangerous to him and his supporters during the time when King Saul was still alive and he considered David a threat to him. There are many historical accounts in First Samuel of situations where Saul and those loyal to him were literally trying to kill David. The prayer for protection that we will examine today is thought to have been closely related to one of those encounters that David had with Saul.

### The Plea – 141:1-2

<sup>1</sup> A Psalm of David. O LORD, I call upon You; hasten to me! Give ear to my voice when I call to You! <sup>2</sup> May my prayer be counted as incense before You; The lifting up of my hands as the evening offering. Psalm 141:1-2 (NASB95)

This prayer of David was thought to have been associated with what happened immediately following the encounter with Saul in a cave near Engedi. David and his men were hiding in the cave and Saul and his army were pursuing David to kill him. This situation occurred toward the end of Saul's reign. David had given up trying to be reconciled with Saul and was in hiding. David had received some bread and Goliath's sword from Ahimelech the priest at Nob. Saul learned about this and had ordered that all 85 priests of God at Nob be killed. He then went on and killed the entire population of Nob which included the women and children and all the animals. This was Saul's way of sending a strong message to the people of Israel that they should not support David and that if they failed to actively support Saul that he would bring severe retribution on them. He operated under the philosophy of "If they hit me, I will hit them back harder."

You remember the account when Saul went into the cave where David and his men were hiding to relieved himself and David could have killed him. Instead David simply cut off a piece of Saul's robe and after Saul had safely left, David came out of the cave and told Saul that his life had been spared. Apparently, this prayer was made before David spoke to Saul and his

army.

We see the urgency in David's prayer. He cried out to God to hurry to him and to listen to his requests. It almost seems as if David thought he had to get God's attention before he made his petition to God. This idea may be close to the mindset of the Israelites in that they envisioned that God resided above the Mercy Seat over the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle. David was as long way away from the Tabernacle. Since David could not go to the Tabernacle, then he asked God to come to him so that He could hear David's requests.

Prayers in the Tabernacle were typically made in associated with the morning and evening sacrifices. During these times, coals from the altar were brought into the Holy Place and placed on the smoldering incense on the Golden Altar of Incense that was the central piece of the furnishings of the Holy Place. When the live coals were stirred into the incense on the golden altar, the incense would flame up and the smoke would rise as prayers were being made by the people in the outer court. The prayers were the reality and incense smoke rising upward was the visual symbol of that reality.

Since David was many miles away from the Tabernacle where sacrifices were offered daily, he symbolically went through the motions of presenting a sacrifice to God by lifting up his hands. What did David have in his hands? Literally, it was nothing. Symbolically, it was himself that he was offering to God. This act of lifting up empty hands to God might remind us of the words in the third verse of the old hymn "Rock of Age" which reads "Nothing in my hand I bring, Simply to Thy cross I cling."

The symbolism of uplifted empty hands speaks volumes of our relationship with God. First it says that we have nothing that we can "add" that will benefit God since He is all sufficient. It also says that we have no power in and of ourselves to use what we do have in such a way that good will come from it. The message for all of us is that our truest worship of God lies not in our giving to God what we have achieved but in our receiving from Him His gracious gifts that transform our very being into an acceptable living sacrifice of self that is available for His use.

### The Requests – 141:3-7

<sup>3</sup>Set a guard, O LORD, over my mouth; Keep watch over the door of my lips. <sup>4</sup>Do not incline my heart to any evil thing, To practice deeds of wickedness With men who do iniquity; And do not let me eat of their delicacies. <sup>5</sup>Let the righteous smite me in kindness and reprove me; It is oil upon the head; Do not let my head refuse it, For still my prayer is against their wicked deeds. <sup>6</sup>Their judges are thrown down by the sides of the rock, And they hear my words, for they are pleasant. <sup>7</sup>As when one plows and breaks open the earth, Our bones have been scattered at the mouth of Sheol. Psalm 141:3-7 (NASB95)

If we are right about the situation in which David found himself when he prayed this prayer, it would seem that David would have been asking for deliverance from the overwhelming forces of Saul or praying for God to remove Saul as king so that David could be about what God had called him to be. Instead, David prayed that God would protect him from saying the wrong thing and from acting like those who did not know God. This was exactly what David needed because he was about to speak to Saul and the army of Israelites with Saul.

When we sense that someone in authority has treated us unfairly or is operating outside of what we understand to be God's will, then we might have a tendency to "speak our minds" or "tell the person exactly what we think" or to "let him or her have it" and tell everyone all the bad things they had done and how much we have suffered because of that bad behavior. David's prayer was that God would protect him from doing such a rant to excoriate Saul for all the evil

he had done. David realized that denigrating someone else does not cause us to be improved. You may remember that Jesus told His disciple in Matthew 10:16 that they were to be wise as serpents, but harmless as doves as they went out to minister to others in the area. David wanted to act wisely and harmlessly so he did not want to come across as sanctimonious by showing his exasperation with those who were trying to kill him. On the other hand, he did not want to respond to their evil practice with something that was just as evil. This approach sounds like 1 Peter 3:9 where we are advised “Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.” David realized that God had anointed him to be the king and that one day when he took on that role, he did not need any extreme speech to “come back” that would harm his reputation of being an honorable person.

The parallel idea to this request is found in verse four (do not incline my heart, etc.) which could be equivalent to “lead me not into temptation” that we find in the Lord’s Prayer. We can easily be tempted to “fight fire with fire” or to “answer a fool according to his folly” or think “what is good for the goose is good for the gander.” These are examples of “earthly” wisdom which all of us have witnessed that the practice of doing these things leads to more problems rather than healing of divisions.

The reference to not eating of the “dainties” is not related to avoiding chocolates. In the context of not participating in the practices and actions of the wicked, the dainties would be things that the wicked do that give them a lot of satisfaction. These might be things such as ridiculing a person who does not believe as they do. Bullying a person who might be considered to be a social misfit or mocking someone with a disability could be in this category. The dainties could be classified as the bait in the trap of temptations that ensnare those who do not guard their hearts.

Verse five is somewhat difficult to fit it into the context of the rest of this psalm. Sometimes the Hebrew texts are difficult to interpret. Joseph Addison Alexander (chairman of several departments at Princeton Theological Seminary in the mid-1800s) commented on the verse as follows:

This verse is so obscure as to be almost unintelligible. According to the English versions, it expresses his willingness to be rebuked by good men for his benefit. But this sense is not only hard to be extracted from the words, but foreign from the context.

He thought that the best interpretation of this was that our sufferings (even at the hand of the wicked) are chastisements allowed by a righteous God that are designed to draw us closer to Him and further away from the world and the wicked. If these things are viewed in light of the benefits to us, then we should view them as something positive (as ointment on our heads). This idea finds agreement with ideas expressed in the New Testament where Paul admonished his readers “In everything give thanks for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus.” It also could be considered to be similar to the idea of taking up our cross as we follow Christ.

This interpretation of the first part of verse five certainly seems to fit very well with the last part of this verse. Here, we see that David said that even though God could use the enemies’ opposition and persecution of David for David’s benefit, that he would not stop praying that these people would stop doing what was wrong. It was David’s desire that the judgments and bad opinions that those in leadership had of him would be cast off and thrown down or abandoned (among the rocks) after they had heard the pleasant words that would come from David as he told them that he had spared the life of Saul.

David had spared the life of Saul and had not berated him even after the terrible deed of killing the people of Nob because Saul thought they had befriended David. This is likely what

verse six is about with reference to “our bones being scattered” on the ground in a manner similar to what happens when the earth is plowed. The Ben Asher Morphological Hebrew Text translates that part of verse six that usually reads “at the grave’s mouth” as “by the mouth of Saul.” Other translations have added words to attempt to make sense of this verse by having it refer to those judges or rulers who were thrown down upon stones because of the pleasant words of David – which does not make a lot of sense in the context of what actually happened later when David was accepted by the princes and tribal rulers after the death of Saul.

Of the ten verses in this prayer of David, the first seven were focused on David being protected from himself and avoiding actions that might be contrary to what God would approve. In these verses we realize that David was determined to be gracious and not take revenge on Saul or the people who were supporting Saul. It is not abundantly clear that David realized that all the problems that he had from the time he was anointed by Samuel to be the king of Israel up until he became the recognized king were designed to transform him from being a keeper of sheep into a king. However, it is clear that David did realize that his focus needed to be on God for whatever situation he was in.

### The Promise – 141:8-10

<sup>8</sup>For my eyes are toward You, O GOD, the Lord; In You I take refuge; do not leave me defenseless. <sup>9</sup>Keep me from the jaws of the trap which they have set for me, And from the snares of those who do iniquity. <sup>10</sup>Let the wicked fall into their own nets, While I pass by safely. Psalm 141:8-10 (NASB95)

After David had prayed for God to protect him from himself and the natural human tendencies that lead to temptations to operate the way the world operates, he then prayed for God to protect him from his enemies. This is a lesson that we would all do well to learn. Our biggest problem is our self. If we can bring self under control and remain pointed in the right direction (toward God as revealed in Jesus Christ) then the rest should be comparably easy.

The middle part of verse eight is translated as “in you I trust” in many translations. One commentary pointed out that David was not focused on the promises or the wonderful attributes of God but on God Himself. The last of verse eight has words that are similar to Isaiah 53:12 which read “my soul is poured out unto death.” We recognize this as a Messianic verse that projects to the experience of Christ on the Cross. In essence, David’s prayer for protection was that he would not be killed by those who were pursuing him.

It is interesting that his concern was not about what might happen in armed conflict with Saul’s army. David’s group of fighting men was very capable even though they were greatly outnumbered. The greatest threat that concerned David was the hidden traps and snares that could make his fighting ability useless.

What are the traps and snares that hinder the ability of the church to carry out its mission? Possible snares are internal conflicts within a church, church leaders with egocentric personal ambitions, people being lulled into complacency, getting too focused on correcting societal issues rather than transforming lives, getting absorbed by arguments about physical rituals rather than focusing on the spiritual realities, and concerns about who get the credit or blame for what has happened in the past. Just as David prayed that he would escape those things we should be watchful that we don’t get trapped and become ineffective in what God has called us to do.