

“No One Cares for Me”

Psalm 142

Jan Fokkelman writes, “Because of their semantic density, poems are often hard to understand.”¹ I would agree. I have found books of poetry difficult (if not impossible) to wade through. What has helped me are books that weave poetry into someone’s story. Once I know the context of the larger story, poetic images leap off the page. We will begin our journey in the psalms of David, particularly those that have historical titles, in order that we might be able to locate them within David’s story. We aren’t given many historical titles to David’s prayers. In the psalms there are only fourteen, plus three are listed in the books of Samuel. For our studies I’ve chosen seven and placed them in chronological order so that we might trace the shape of David’s voice alongside his story.

Understanding the story behind David’s psalms will bring the images into greater focus. Then when we consider these psalms were further used by Israel for their prayers their horizon becomes even greater. And the height of their glory comes when we see the Greater David praying these prayers in His story. But God is not finished yet, for when God merges our story with Christ’s, these images can take on an even fuller sense (Col 1:24). John Felstiner, an English professor at Stanford, comments that the most a poem can do is to bring four worlds together.² These are the worlds of creation, history, spirituality, and the personal. When this happens a poem can be explosive.

We will begin with Psalm 142, which begins with “A Maskil of David, when he was in the cave, A Prayer. So David departed from there and escaped to the cave of Adullam” (1 Sam 22:1a NASB).” Caves are prominent in David’s story, but because of David’s metaphors of extreme aloneness, most scholars place its context as 1 Sam 22:1-5. David has just escaped by the skin of his teeth when he sought refuge from Saul in Gath (Ps 34), and now he flees to the cave of Adullam bereft of family and friends. How ironic that Saul, having been rejected by the Lord, lives in a palace, while David, God’s anointed, finds his sole refuge in a cave.

In May of 1994 I went on a mission to find this cave to recreate in my imagination what it must have been like for David. With four friends we set off in search of Adullam. We found the cave on the backside of a forested hill. From the top of the hill was the valley of Elah to the west (about 4 miles from David’s battle with Goliath). To the north-east one could see Bethlehem in the distance and even the tops of the buildings of Jerusalem (about 12 miles). This was probably familiar territory to David since his youth. We found a small opening to climb into the cave and as our eyes adjusted to the light we discovered the cave had three or four

¹ J. P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Poetry* (Leiden: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 50.

² This was a comment John gave at a lecture on Paul Celan’s poem “*Es Stand*” in John Felstiner, *Paul Celan, Poet, Survivor, Jew* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 268.

chambers divided by narrow passageways. The cave could indeed accommodate 400 men and keep them well hidden. Once we entered the cave, and descended into the depths of the earth, we were immediately engulfed in darkness. Psychologically we felt like we were in a grave (lined with bat dung no less!). For David this cave was symbol of rejection, he entered because there was no safety on earth. In that place we read Psalm 142, David's cry to God.

I. His Plea³

Psalm 142:1-3a

I cry aloud with my voice to the LORD;

I make supplication with my voice to the LORD.

I pour out my complaint before Him;

I declare my trouble before Him,

When my spirit was overwhelmed within me. (Ps 142:1-3a NASB)

Some scholars place the first major break (the Greek term is strophe or "turning"⁴) at the end of verse 3a (as does the JPS version). This division makes better sense of the grammar and poetic structure.⁵

Poetry of all literary forms poetry is the most difficult to translate because of its dependence on the sound of words as well as their meaning.⁶ But what comes across clearly in Hebrew poetry is the poet's use of repetition, which scholars call parallelism. The poet makes a statement and then repeats it or echoes it. So each verse is made up of what we might call two or three versets (or cola). What is important to note is that the repetition is seldom mere repetition, rather there is usually a subtle but significant development in meaning.⁷ Understanding these differences will help us trace the dynamic movement of David's voice in the psalms.

Let me make three observations about David's opening cry. First, note how intensely personal it is. In each of the five poetic lines (versets or cola) there are two "I" morphemes ("my

³ These titles are taken from Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150* (London: IVP, 1975), 473-74.

⁴ On the meaning of "strophe" Fokkelman comments, "So the poet turns and turns: in tone, genre, pace, address (from 3rd to 2nd grammatical person, e.g. speaking to God instead of about Him), verbal tenses, moods (indicative, calling, wishing, commanding, praying), or subject matter. The result being that in more than 95% of cases the strophe is either a unit of two or of three full poetic lines." Taken from a personal letter from the author.

⁵ This division makes better grammatical sense and poetic unity. The first strophe's "special characteristic is that each colon contains two I-morphemes...Strophe 2 makes its opening with an emphatic 'you' and places its cola in two threesomes around a double imperative." J.P. Fokkelman, *Major Poems of the Hebrew Bible, Vol. II* (Assen: Van Corcum, 2000), 307.

⁶ Northrop Frye comments on different magical qualities of poetry that seem to capture people, such as some "will seize on assonance and inner harmonies, such as Poe's much admired line, 'the viol, the violet, and the vine.' In the Bible the last quality of texture would be particularly significant for the Hebrew scholar able to respond to the flickering and dancing of pun and assonance in the Hebrew text." Northrop Frye, *Words with Power* (London: HBJ Publishers, 1990), 114.

⁷ On the dynamics of Biblical parallelism see Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 3-27.

voice, *I cry; I pour out, my complaint; my spirit, within me*, etc). Ten times in two verses we hear “I, my or me.” David is so overwhelmed by his aloneness that he has become self-consumed. It is from a state of extreme vulnerability that he begins his prayer. It is when his spirit has given out and he feels he is about to go over the edge that he gives expression of his voice to God. He doesn’t wait until he feels God-centered before he begins his prayer. God always meets us where we are, so David has the freedom to begin where he is.

The second thing to notice is that in that vulnerable state of being disoriented and overwhelmed, God seems distant to him. Because of this David can only speak about God in the third person (“Lord,” “Him”). He is not yet able to honestly address God as that personal “You.” In his weakness he is admitting that he is not where he wants to be, but is willing to begin the journey. Our weakness becomes the starting place of prayer.

Thirdly, as he verbalizes his pain before God, his voice becomes more articulate and his passions more acute. We can see this in the repetition both of the nouns and the verbs he chooses to describe his prayer. The first line of each verse expresses the intensity of his emotion, while the second shapes it making it more articulate and measured. In verse one, his loud “cry” (usually from acute distress) is sensitively shaped into an “appeal of grace;” in verse two, his bold “complaint” is carefully crafted into a detailed account of “distress.” The verbs intensify not just within the verses but also between the verses. The raw emotion of his “cry” in verse one is fully spent (“poured out”) in verse two. Hannah’s method of praying (1 Sam 1:15) now serves as the model way of praying for Israel’s king. Anguished sorrow must be fully spent before God for David to have the sense that he has been adequately heard. So passion is channeled through carefully structured forms, as each poetic line consists of just three [Hebrew] words.⁸

Thus, with a careful eye we observe that the repetition of the lines within the poem (“parallelism,” the defining element of Hebrew poetry)⁹ is hardly ever mere repetition, but rather contains subtle but significant differences. In these subtle differences we can trace the journey the poet makes within his own soul. For David, there is not only emotional movement, but also spatial progress (seen in repetition of the prepositions “to the Lord” and “before Him”). In the pouring out of his soul before God, David has been able to bridge the psychological distance he felt between himself in God. Having spanned that bridge, he is now ready to look God directly in the eye and speak to him as a personal friend.

We should never presume that if we are not in a good place, God will not hear our prayers. The starting place to getting to a better place is the admission you’re not in the right

⁸ Fokkelman points out that the entire poem is structured with great regularity since “20 of the 23 cola contain three words.” Fokkelman, *Major Poems*, 307.

⁹ For a historic study on Biblical parallelism see James Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry, Parallelism and Its History* (London: John Hopkins Univ. Press, 1981).

place. Remember the prayer of the father of the demon possessed boy in the gospel of Mark. When Jesus said all he had to do was believe and the impossible would become possible, he responded honestly with, “*I do believe; help my unbelief*” (Mark 9:24).

II. His Plight

Psalm 142:3b-4

But You know my path.

In the way where I walk

They have hidden a trap for me.

Look to the right and see;

For there is *no one* who regards me;

There is *no* escape for me;

No one cares for my soul. (vv. 3b-4)

Having made the all important journey into God’s presence, David now feels the freedom to address God directly with the very personal, yet bold “You.” Because of the urgency of the situation and depth of his sorrow, David seldom spends times in lengthy titles or flattery when addressing God. This is a God he knows well. And now that he has his attention, David has no hesitation expressing the tension within his soul. The second division is as carefully constructed as the first, which reminds us that voicing our emotions with great care makes us supremely human. Here David places two sets of three poetic lines (versets or cola) around a double imperative, “Look...and see!”¹⁰ These images are all visual. It is as if he is saying, “God, now that I have your attention, I want you to take a good look at my situation.”

What gives David a freedom we might consider irreverent is the fact that God had committed himself to this young man. David is God’s representative king on earth, and therefore if reality seemed contrary to God’s promises, God’s reputation was at stake. The psalms were not prayers drawn up by individuals merely seeking survival and well being (*shalom*) in a hostile world. They originated as the prayers of Israel’s anointed king (“God’s son,” Ps 2:7; 2 Sam 7:14) to further God’s rule on earth. God’s reputation therefore rested on the destiny of this king. In Psalm 2, which was the coronation Psalm later composed for David’s lineage, God invites the king to merely “Ask of Me, and I will surely give the nations as Your inheritance, And the *very* ends of the earth as Your possession” (Ps 2:7, 8). The privilege of prayer was the primary feature that defined the son’s (i.e. Israel’s king) relationship to the Father. And the answers to those prayers were the Father’s vindication of His relationship with the son. This gives us insight as to why David’s psalms were so essential in shaping the prayers

¹⁰ This is Fokkelman’s observation. Fokkelman, *Major Poems*, 307.

of his greater Son, Jesus. And it gives us warrant for us to pray these prayers as well, since we are “in Christ,” and are all now sons of the One Father (Gal 3:26; 4:6).

In that spirit of God’s son, David freely details his lament before God. To a God who knows all and sees all, he points out that the path he is being carried down is a dead end trap leading to exile. Here is Israel’s king, who just earlier was lauded as a national hero after slaying Goliath, now a homeless recluse. The painful “no one,” “no one” stings to the bone. At the end of the first strophe, David was at his end because of personal fatigue, here he is at an end because when he needs the help the most, there is not one friend to be found. The last phrase “no one seeks my soul” becomes the nadir of his grief and is the center line of the poem.

Reflecting on how David’s prayer must have effected our Lord, I wondered how it might have shaped his expectation for his ministry. When a scribe boasted that he would follow Jesus anywhere, his response was “The foxes have holes and the birds of the air *have* nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head” (Matt 8:20). To live with Christ is to go down the path of exile. And I wonder if Jesus saw Judas as the trap hidden in his path through which there was no escape? Did David’s images of aloneness prepare him for that dark night in Gethsemane, when he would look to his right and see not one friend willing to stand with him and pray through the darkness? Did David give him the insight that he would have to go the cross alone? It is so amazing to me how the anxious, agonized words of David shaped history. Could it be that this state of feeling utterly lost and alone should be the gateway through which we all must pass? As the author of Hebrews exhorts,

“So, let us go out to Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach.
For here we do not have a lasting city,
but we are seeking *the city* which is to come. (Heb 13:13-14).

III. His Portion

Psalm 142:5-6

**I cried out to You, O LORD;
I said, “You are my refuge,
My portion in the land of the living.”
Give heed to my [ringing] cry,
For I am brought very low;
Deliver me from my persecutors,
For they are too strong for me. (vv. 5-6)**

Having completed his lament, David now repeats his opening plea. His cry is identical to his first (*za’aq* – a cry of acute distress), but then develops into a ringing cry (*rinnah* – a loud shout or piercing cry) saturated with a profound sense of weakness (“*for I am brought very low*”) and inadequacy (“*for they are too strong for me*”). But within the agony something new has occurred. After giving full voice to his pain, God is surprisingly near and personal, and a new

confidence is born. Through the painful process of being forcefully disconnected from the world, his trust is solidified. God alone is his refuge. His soul is now buoyant in the turbulent sea. And pressed up against the breast of God he is reoriented with a new understanding of what his inheritance truly is.

The word “*portion*” (*cheleq*) is normally used for the divided share of land (or booty from battle) that was a tribe’s inheritance within Israel. Every tribe had a “portion” except the tribe of Levi, since the Levites were specially set apart for God’s service. As the LORD spoke to Aaron, “You shall have no inheritance in their land nor own any *portion* among them; I am your *portion* and your inheritance among the sons of Israel” (Num 18:20). Now that David is landless he has the sense that rather than being disenfranchised, he is actually being promoted by God to this privileged position like the Levites. This is eternal life at a substantial level. Earthly loss has brought heavenly gain. How ironic that pain of prison gives birth to heavenly Presence.

Yet we are instructed that even in the midst of this indescribable sweetness, David is keenly aware of the depths of his inadequacy. The term “brought very low” is used of someone miserably poor, powerless, close to bankrupt and therefore extremely vulnerable to injustice. Another graphic image comes from Pharaoh’s dream where it is used to describe the gaunt, emaciated cows in Egypt (Gen 41:19). This mixture of complete trust and severe weakness makes his cry (*rinnah*) to God more shrill. True spirituality doesn’t remove weakness, it increases dependence.

When we find our Lord being hunted in Gethsemane, his soul is filled with that same strange mixture of complete trust and absolute vulnerability. Thus he spoke to his disciples, “My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death; remain here and keep watch with Me” (Matt 26:38). And like David, we find Jesus repeating his request more than once (Matt 26:42, 44) in order to acquire the confidence and orientation he needed to cope with the terror that lay ahead.

IV. His Prospect

Psalm 142:7

**“Bring my soul out of prison,
So that I may give thanks to Your name;
The righteous will surround me,
For You will deal bountifully with me.” (v. 7)**

Now David reaches the crowning summit of his prayer. He makes his final request to God to be removed from this lonely prison where he is hemmed in and cut off from family and friends. The verb he uses (*yatza’* -“bring out”) is the one most often used to describe God’s action in bringing Israel out of Egypt in the Exodus. Just as Israel was brought out of slavery to worship God on Mount Sinai (Ex 3:12), so David follows the same paradigm. Once God rescues him, it will be his supreme joy to skillfully compose a psalm of thanksgiving detailing the miraculous way God delivered him. David can’t wait for the day when he can proclaim it in the

presence of His people, the day when the man who stood so alone will be surrounded by a righteous throng who will worship in his praise.

Right at this juncture, when David articulates his final request, he is given a vision of the future so strong that his inner man glories in it. "For you will deal bountifully with me!" The verb he uses (*gamal*) is one of those pregnant terms no one English word can fully convey. Here it probably carries the sense that David expects God to benefit him greatly and as a result he will be vindicated as God's son and representative on earth. Kidner captures it well when he says that "David who dares to visualize the day when he is no longer shunned or hunted, but thronged, or even crowned." He notes that from this word surround (*kathar*) "there arises a word for a royal crown (Est 1:11; 2:17; 6:8) and a further sense of the verb as 'to crown' (Prov 14:18)."¹¹ Calvin interpreted the image with this dual sense as well, that "the righteous will not only surround him, but also place a crown on his head." As we learned last week, by honestly articulating his pain, David is mysteriously able to taste the future while still living in the painful present (this is what scholars label as the "confidence" sections in lament psalms).

It did not take long for God to abundantly answer David's prayer. It seems that no sooner had David voiced his prayer that this desolate cave was soon buzzing with life.

**So David departed from there and escaped to the cave of Adullam;
and when his brothers and all his father's household heard of it,
they went down there to him (1 Sam 22:1)**

The family that initially rejected and despised their youngest is now seeking him. David's brothers and all of his father's house come to identify with him in the cave. Before David can even take it all in, an even more massive crowd appears on the horizon.

**And everyone who was in distress, and everyone who was in debt,
and everyone who was discontented, gathered to him;
and he became captain over them.**

Now there were about four hundred men with him. (1 Sam 22:2)

Reading the description of these folks who were stressed out and buried under huge debts and bitter life experiences gives a whole, new definition to the term *righteous*! But these are the one's that were mysteriously drawn to this cave in the Judean wilderness. This motley mob would form the nucleus of the new kingdom. For David this was a radical redefinition of what the term "family" meant. Family would no longer be based on "blood," but on faith in God's commitment to this fugitive king.

¹¹ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150* (London: IVP, 1975), 474.

David's story would set the paradigm for Jesus. His rejection by his immediate family (Mk 3:21; John 7:5) and the nation's leadership created a new family (Mark 3:31, 32) whose bonds were stronger than blood. David's voice shapes history.

Back in 1994 as the five of us sat inside the Cave and listened to David's voice, I thought of all these worlds coming together in this moment of time and a darkened pit was transformed into a holy place. How thankful I was that David gave voice to his pain. It would be years later however, before I would know what effect that voice had on the Father. My greatest longing in life was to be a "son," but my greatest joy is being a father. Over the years as my three daughters have grown, I have experienced the indescribable joy of watching God giving them a stage to share their voice. It has been especially moving when like David, they were able to speak freely speak of their pain or rejection and then to sit back and watch God create a larger family for them as they embraced their sorrow. This is an unexpected gift I never expected to receive as a father. Verging on elation I wrote:

This is something not granted
to fathers
angels yes,
but not fathers
at least until the day is done
and the night has come
and in that deep oboe sleep
a daughter speaks
of memories of what is gone.

It is then a father hears
that voice
and with it every articulate vowel of memory
everything for which he's been waking waiting
his whole life,
a daughter's voice,
his daughter's voice
shaping his dreams while he sleeps.

Who am I
that I should hear such sweet things
while I yet live?

Listening to voice of my three daughters has given me a taste of how our heavenly Father is moved we take time and effort to share our pain with Him. These moments have given new meaning to the David's phrase describing God as the Holy one who is "enthroned upon the praises of Israel." (Ps 22:3). Remember you are not alone in Adullam.