



# SAVED TO SING

SERIES: GIVE ME AN AUTHENTIC VOICE

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Psalm 57

Third Message

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In Psalm 142, David voiced his extreme isolation and loneliness in the cave of Adullam. As he did so God gave him a vision of the future: one day he would stand vindicated, with the righteous surrounding him in worship. In Psalm 57, David has fled to another cave and is about to face the confrontation of his life. This psalm teaches us how to pray when we face our greatest fears and there is no way of escape.

Saul had been in hot pursuit of David throughout the Judean wilderness, west of the Dead Sea. In the process of fleeing, David had delivered an entire city from the Philistine threat, restoring them with more wealth than they had lost at the hands of the invaders (1 Sam 23:5). But, rather than repaying David with kindness and providing him refuge, the majority of the city's inhabitants betrayed him into the hands of Saul. David had to keep moving. With spies everywhere, he and his men could not risk staying in one locale. The narrator describes David's fate, "they went wherever they could go" (1 Sam 23:13). Following several failed attempts by Saul to capture him, David fled to the limit of the territory, right to the edge of Dead Sea, into the strongholds of Engedi, a lush oasis fed by underground springs gushing forth from deep canyon walls. The place is replete with caves. It is a popular tourist spot today.

Near the ruins of the village of Chareitun, hardly five minutes walk to the east, there is a large cave or chamber in the rock, with a very narrow entrance entirely concealed by stones, and with many side vaults in which the deepest darkness reigns, at least to any one who has just entered the limestone vaults from the dazzling light of day. This is the largest cave in the district, if not the largest of all, and that according to Pococke the Franks call it a labyrinth, the Arabs Elmaama, i.e. hiding place, while the latter related how at one time thirty thousand people hid themselves in it "to escape an evil wind."<sup>1</sup>

Inside the dark recesses of one of these caves David took refuge with his men. In the meantime, Saul with his army of 3000 elite troops made their way to the entrance of the cave. David and his 600 men were outmanned and outflanked, with no possibility of escape. But, engulfed in darkness, this commander-in-chief is praying, not plotting. So expansive is his prayer—a mysterious mix of confidence and lament producing expansive praise—it is hard to visualize it emerging out of such a dark hole, yet it becomes an important paradigm on the dynamics of prayer that shaped the prayers of both Jesus and the apostle Paul (Phil 1:19-21).

David's prayer has two major stanzas (lament followed by praise) of three strophes, each of which is repeated in reverse order (an inverted structure: A, B, C, C', B', A'). Both stanzas end with a wondrous refrain (57:5,11) that becomes the poet's ultimate plea. [See page 4.]

## I. Under His Wings (57:1-5)

### A. David's Plea (57:1)

**Be gracious to me, O God, be gracious to me,  
For my soul takes refuge in You;**

## **And in the shadow of Your wings I will take refuge Until destruction passes by. (Psalm 57:1, NASB)**

Living hand to mouth for many months in a desolate wilderness has deepened David's dependence on God. Making his two-fold appeal for grace, his soul is anchored with a resolute trust, one that has been shaped over time and nurtured through several supernatural deliverances by a faithful God. In the previous chapter God had even used the Philistine army to deliver David from Saul (1 Sam 23:28). Though David has now sought refuge inside a cavernous rock, his trust is placed on one true Rock, God himself. Cornered in a pitch-black cave, through the metaphors of memory he miraculously travels to the heavenly throne of God. The irony is that though David had to flee the earthly sanctuary for safety at Nob (1 Sam 21:10), he is never denied access to the heavenly sanctuary. And as king, even though he could never enter the holy place of the earthly sanctuary, in the heavenly sanctuary he is invited into the very holy of holies. As Weiser points out, "The grace of God is revealed only to the man who trusts in God, and the feeling of being out of danger in the house of God, where Yahweh sits enthroned upon the wings of the cherubim, under the 'shadow' of which the worshiper has taken refuge."<sup>2</sup> How amazing, that in a darkest cavern in the earth, God can be found exceedingly near through the metaphors of memory.

Fortifying David's trust was not just his personal bank of memories of God's faithfulness, but Israel's too. The language David uses suggests that he sees this confrontation much like God's confrontation with Pharaoh in the Exodus: "When the LORD goes through (*avar*) the land to strike down the Egyptians, he will see the blood on the top and sides of the doorframe and will pass over that doorway, and he will not permit the destroyer to enter your houses and strike you down" (Exod 12:23 NIV). As the Jews took shelter under the blood of the doorposts until the Lord "passed by" (*avar*), so David will take refuge under God's wings until the "destruction" (*hawwa*, "an engulfing ruin," or "destruction") passes by (*avar*). At this point in his life, God must do a miracle for David on a par with Israel's first Exodus. The memory of that event feeds his trust.

This indicates why so many of the psalms rehearse God's acts of salvation for Israel. Remembering God's faithfulness in the past nourishes our trust in the present. We need to recover this in our contemporary hymn singing.

### B. David's Confidence (57:2-3)

**I will cry to God Most High,  
To God who accomplishes all things for me.  
He will send from heaven and save me;  
He reproaches him who tramples upon me. Selah.  
God will send forth His lovingkindness and His truth.  
(57:2-3)**

David's trust is further deepened by his complete confidence in God's character. The term "Most High" (*Elyon*) is a reminder to David of the life of Abraham, who also resided as

an alien, homeless in the land of promise. As Kidner writes, "God's exaltation as 'Most High' (2) does not make Him remote: only unhampered in sending help—a fact which the opening of the Lord's Prayer should also bring to mind."<sup>3</sup> The second line is better translated in the NIV as "to God, who fulfills [his purpose] for me." The verb (*gamar*) has the idea of bringing something to completion. Though bloodthirsty men "pant" (another translation for "trample") after David like ravenous beasts, he is confident that God will be faithful to his promised purposes for him and overrule them. David hangs his life on God's reputation and commitment to his king. The terms "lovingkindness" (*hesed*, "loyal-love") and "truth" ("faithfulness") are two of the most important in Old Testament theology. As God's best gifts to his people, together they drive salvation history from beginning to end. When all else fails the psalmist can always cling to these two qualities in the heart of God to survive any storm. After Jerusalem lay in absolute ruin it was only through the "loyal-love" of the Lord that the prophet Jeremiah was able to rebuild his hope out of the ruins of despair (Lam 3:22-23).

After David strengthens his faith and confidence through God's character, he then details his lament before him.

### C. David's Lament (57:4)

**My soul is among lions;  
I must lie among those who breathe forth fire,  
Even the sons of men, whose teeth are spears and arrows  
And their tongue a sharp sword. (57:4)**

As a shepherd, David often had to protect his flock from the dangers of wild beasts like lions and bears (1 Sam 17:34-35). These animals were common in the region known as the "Jordan thickets," where "the dense growth which covered both banks of the Jordan and had never...been cleared for farming...From here the carnivores emerged to hunt their prey, frequently among the flocks grazing in the desert between the Jordan thickets and the Judean hills."<sup>4</sup> David sees himself as prey to these wild man-eating beasts, who not only "pant" after him, but for weeks have encircled him and are now ready to tear him limb from limb with their sharp teeth. The stinging reality behind the metaphors is their words, which cut and penetrate as well as burn. These enemies burn with rage and set insidious fires among others. As Weiser observes, "Significantly, it is the offensive word which is continually stigmatized in the Psalms as the most dangerous weapon in human conflict."<sup>5</sup> These words were the poisoned arrows of betrayal that followed David wherever he went.

In the face of this terror, David closes his lament with the ultimate plea. He is aware that these are not insignificant, isolated acts of terror, but are acts of heavenly treason against God's anointed by a deposed king.

Everything in God's universe rides on what happens next, so David has no hesitation commanding the Author of life to take center stage.

### X. David's Refrain of Praise (57:5)

**Be exalted above the heavens, O God;  
Let Your glory be above all the earth. (57:5)**

This bold refrain sounds with the clarity of a ringing bell. David is requesting God to rise up above the heavens and cause the weight of his worth (*kavod*, "glory"; the root means "to be heavy") to be felt over the entire earth. David's worldview in the recesses of that cave is so expansive it is mind-blowing. He has the inspired sense that when God acts to deliver him from that dark pit it will be an earthquake of such magnitude that it will be felt around the world, and when it is over, God's name will be supremely magnified. Thus, as Kid-

ner suggests, God is not only all-powerful but also all-important. "David, wonderfully, looks up from his own urgent interests to his overriding concern: that God should be exalted. In such a crisis, this equivalent to 'hallowed be Thy name' was both a victory in itself (cf. John 12:27f.) and a weapon against the enemy."<sup>6</sup>

The refrain reshapes David's lament with a new confidence in what God will do on his behalf, and with it the poem turns from death to life.

## II. The Paean of Praise<sup>7</sup> (57:7-10)

### C' Answer to his lament: a vision of justice (57:6)

**They have prepared a net for my steps;  
My soul is bowed down;  
They dug a pit before me;  
They themselves have fallen into the midst of it. Selah  
(57:6)**

David sees that his enemies have well prepared traps strategically placed. Nets and pits were used to trap birds and wild animals. Against overwhelming odds, David's soul is "bowed down," which may evoke the image of "birds when terrified by the fowler and nets, which dare not move a feather, but lie flat upon the ground."<sup>8</sup> Or it could also be descriptive of David's low estate that leads him to "bow down" before God in worship (Mic 6:6; Ps 145:14). Prostrate before God, David is given a vision of his enemies' end. In the truest sense of justice, the wicked will fall into the very pits they have dug.

### B' Unrestrained singing to awaken the dawn (57:7-8)

**My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast;  
I will sing, yes, I will sing praises!  
Awake, my glory!  
Awake, harp and lyre!  
I will awaken the dawn. (57:7-8)**

This newborn hope gives David a stirring confidence to sing. The wicked may have "prepared" (*kun*, "fixed," "established") nets for his destruction, but David's heart is doubly prepared (*kun*) to sing praises. With steadfast purpose of heart he is able to look past the dark present to the glorious future. The vision so consumes him he is able to glory in it to such a degree that he wants to start his singing already, before the victory has even come. So he calls forth all that he is ("my glory" is an illusive metaphor; it can refer to his "inner" being, his "tongue" [Calvin]; or even his "state of mind" [Weiser]), and in a threefold crescendo of "awake, awake, awaken," his music resounds to the heavens and rouses the sleeping dawn.<sup>9</sup> As God's glory has so completely taken hold of David, so David's glory will not be satisfied until his music stirs the heavenly courts.

I wonder if Milton had this text in mind when he wrote:

*Oft listening how the hound and horn  
Cheerily rouse the slumbering morn.*

### A' Vow of public thanksgiving worldwide! (57:9-10)

**I will give thanks to You, O LORD, among the peoples;  
I will sing praises to You among the nations.  
For Your lovingkindness is great to the heavens  
And Your truth to the clouds. (57:9-10)**

Not only does David's praise span the heights of heaven, it spreads over the full breadth of the earth. He envisions himself recounting God's loyal-love before a congregation that includes not just Israel, but Gentiles too. Can you imagine David singing and entire Philistine cities weeping in the pres-

ence of God? It is difficult for us to comprehend the dimensions of his vision, for it is nothing short of universal. He had the inspired sense that his salvation from near death in the cave would not just ring the praises of angels in heaven, but would circle the globe. Lest we think this is merely hyperbole, let us remember that this story has been recounted in almost every known language in the world. But more than that, the apostle Paul understood that the breadth of David's voice given here in Psalm 57 was prophetic of the inclusion of the Gentiles as the people of God because of Christ's resurrection (Rom 15:9). Some churches continue the tradition, using this psalm for their services on Easter morning.

#### X Final Refrain (57:11)

**Be exalted above the heavens, O God;  
Let Your glory be above all the earth. (57:11)**

David ends the second stanza as he did the first, with a refrain of praise. But, while in the first instance he spoke it in bold defiance of his situation, here he speaks out of grateful love for something he has already tasted. The future and present mysteriously meet David in the pit.

Was David merely dreaming of wistful metaphors in the clouds, or was his heart naively set up for failure? We find the answer when we lay David's psalm alongside his story, in 1 Samuel 24.

### III. David's Prayer Fulfilled in his Story (1 Sam 24:3-22)

While David was concluding his prayer in rapturous praise inside the cave, disaster was lurking just outside. Saul had arrived with 3000 troops just "in front of the Rocks of the Wild Goats" (24:2) and discovered a cave by the sheepfolds, the very one in which David and his men were hiding. The tension mounts as Israel's demoted king enters the cave. As his tall silhouette steps slowly forward, David's men are frozen in silence. Then, in one of those amazing twists in Biblical narrative, the scene turns comic. Saul's bodily functions interrupt the spy game, and he digs his personal pit and sits in the darkness in his private "outhouse." There he sits, blinded by the light, vulnerable and alone. David's men waste no time encouraging their leader to seize the day.

**And the men of David said to him, "Behold, this is the day of which the LORD said to you, 'Behold; I am about to give your enemy into your hand, and you shall do to him as it seems good to you.'" (1 Sam 24:4)**

Slowly and silently, David edges his way toward Saul. Taking his knife, he secretly cuts off just the edge (*kanaph*, "wing," the same word as in Ps 57:2) of Saul's robe. But with the cutting of the robe his heart is smitten, and he returns to his men and rebukes them for their foolish counsel. Even though Saul was disobedient, he was still the Lord's anointed. David would never stretch out his hand against him. That was God's prerogative alone. With the backdrop of the events in the cave we get a new perspective on David's earlier lament that he had to lie down among lions whose teeth "are spears and arrows, and their tongue a sharp sword." The images that originally referred to Saul's slanderous spies can now be equally applied to David's men within his own ranks (1 Sam 26:7-17 might confirm this as the narrator recounts Abishai's desire to thrust his "spear" into Saul). David must work hard to combat the words of his misguided friends. This ought to warn us that the advice of well meaning but theologically immature friends can do more damage to our souls than the threats of our enemies. Prayer saves David from making a disastrous mistake. Taking refuge under the wings (*kanaph*) of God, David's conscience is made so sensitive it re-

bukes him in the slightest reach for the throne in his own strength (by cutting off the "wing" of Saul's robe).

Rather than striking Saul in the dark, David takes full opportunity to expose him in the light. He leaves the cave just as Saul entered it, alone and vulnerable. This disarms Saul emotionally. With the "wing" of Saul's torn skirt in hand, David exposes his innocence and Saul's guilt in the light of day.

**"Behold, this day your eyes have seen that the LORD had given you today into my hand in the cave, and some said to kill you, but my eye had pity on you; and I said, 'I will not stretch out my hand against my lord, for he is the LORD's anointed.' Now, my father, see! Indeed, see the edge of your robe in my hand! For in that I cut off the edge of your robe and did not kill you, know and perceive that there is no evil or rebellion in my hands, and I have not sinned against you, though you are lying in wait for my life to take it." (1 Sam 24:10-11)**

Then, just as David perceived through his prayer, this was a matter of much greater import than personal injustice. Saul was committing treason against the Sovereign One, the supreme Judge and ruler of all. Therefore David makes his final appeal to that court.

**"May the LORD judge between you and me, and may the LORD avenge me on you; but my hand shall not be against you." (1 Sam 24:12)**

With a touch of humor, David forces Saul to look at the supreme stupidity of the situation.

**"After whom has the king of Israel come out? Whom are you pursuing? A dead dog, a single flea?" (1 Sam 24:14)**

It all looks a little ridiculous: the king and all his divisions in search of a dead dog, or worse yet, a single flea on a dead dog in the wilderness. From a human viewpoint it looks a little like overkill. But then again, David is confronting Saul with the deeper issue: "Why am I a threat to you?" David's searching words will also be found on the lips of Jesus when he is apprehended (John 18:7).

Bombarded by the truth from all sides, Saul finally breaks down emotionally and confesses his sin.

**When David had finished speaking these words to Saul, Saul said, "Is this your voice, my son David?" Then Saul lifted up his voice and wept. He said to David, "You are more righteous than I; for you have dealt well with me, while I have dealt wickedly with you. You have declared today that you have done good to me, that the LORD delivered me into your hand and yet you did not kill me. For if a man finds his enemy, will he let him go away safely? May the LORD therefore reward you with good in return for what you have done to me this day. Now, behold, I know that you will surely be king, and that the kingdom of Israel will be established in your hand." (1 Sam 24:16-20)**

Saul weeps. Brueggemann aptly comments, "Beneath both tragedy and failure there is the inconsolable, inarticulate, unmeasured pathos of a life gone empty. Saul must weep. He must weep before God and before David. When he has wept, then he can speak. It is his honest, unrestrained weeping that permits him to yield to the now irresistible and obvious future, which is David."<sup>10</sup> Saul makes a full confession of David's innocence, admits his own guilt, and blesses David for the establishment of his kingdom.

Who is this God who makes even his enemies bow down at the feet of his anointed? Who is this king who will not take his own vengeance? We can almost hear the heavenly cry

from Psalm 2, "He who sits in heaven laughs, the Lord scoffs at them...But as for Me, I have installed My King upon Zion, My holy mountain" (Ps 2:4, 6). In answer to David's prayer, God has risen above the heavens and made his glory felt over the earth. God had so orchestrated David's story that everyone, Jonathan, Michal, the women, the people, Saul's servants, the Philistines, the priesthood, and now finally Saul himself, recognize and pay tribute to God's new anointed. This is but a foretaste of what we can ultimately expect as the STORY is repeated and intensified in Christ: "at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:10-11).

Why should we fear as servants of God in his kingdom? Rather, let us sing and awaken the dawn! As Paul wrote in a prison of his own with no escape, "for I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayers and the provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, according to my earnest expectation and hope, that I will not be put to shame in anything, but that with all boldness, Christ will even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Phil 1:19-21).

What wondrous things happened in this cave—  
encircled by destructive darkness,  
pursued, outmanned and outflanked,  
cornered with no escape,  
but God  
sent from heaven his loyal-love  
that gives the poet's heart an anchor and wings  
to reshape the dimensions of his universe,  
one for which harps and lyres now play  
to overpower spears and arrow tongues  
and awaken the dawn.

Amen.

1. C.F. Keil & F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament, Vol. 2* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 234.
2. Artur Weiser, *The Psalms*. TOTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), 426.
3. Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* (Leicester: IVP, 1973), 206.
4. Nogah Hareuveni, *Desert and Shepherd in Our Biblical Heritage* (Lod, Israel: Neot Kedumim, 1991), 36.
5. Wesier, *Psalms*, 427.
6. Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 206.
7. This is Kidner's title, *Psalms 1-72*, 207.
8. Calvin's Commentaries, online, [http://www.ccel.org/c/calvin/comment3/comm\\_vol09/htm/xxiii.ii.htm](http://www.ccel.org/c/calvin/comment3/comm_vol09/htm/xxiii.ii.htm)
9. The images, "awake, harp and lyre" are found in the first line of a German hymn by Joachim Neander (1650-1680). The English translation we know as "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation."
10. Walter Brueggemann, *1 & 2 Samuel* (Louisville: John Knox, 1990), 172.

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## Literary Outline

A Petition for grace with complete trust in God (57:1)

B Confidence in God's *loyal-love and truth* from heaven (57:2-3)

C Lament: his "soul" surrounded by the devouring speech of the wicked (57:4)

X Refrain of Praise: may God rise up above the heavens and manifest his glory over all the earth (57:5)

C' Answer to his lament: his "soul" bowed down in worship; wicked fall into their own pit (57:6)

B' Unrestrained praise to have his singing awaken the dawn (57:7-8)

A' Vow of public thanksgiving for the gift of *loyal-love and truth* (57:9-10)

X Refrain of Praise: may God rise up above the heavens and manifest his glory over all the earth (57:11)