

PSALM 56- TRUST IN THE MIDST OF TROUBLE

by

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Thesis Statement: In order to fully understand the teaching of psalm 56, one must study the background of the psalm, establish the text of the psalm itself, look at the principles taught in the psalm in light of other scripture and the covenant relationship, and apply these truths to everyday life.

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PSALM 56 - TRUST IN THE MIDST OF TROUBLE

As long as one lives in this fallen world and society, there will be troubles, enemies, and calamities on all sides. This is not uncommon today and was common also in the Old Testament times. Because of the activities of enemies, the Hebrews cried out to their God and some of these prayers are recorded in the Psalter. One of these psalms is psalm 56 which speaks of trust in God in the midst of enemies. In order to fully understand the teaching of psalm 56, one must study the background of the psalm, establish the text of the psalm itself, look at the principles taught in the psalm in light of other scripture and the covenant relationship, and apply these truths to everyday life.

The background of this psalm can be studied in two areas, first the occasion of the psalm, including authorship, date and historical setting, and the psalm type and relation to other psalms. The ancient title of the psalm reads "...Of David. A miktam. When the Philistines had seized him in Gath." This most likely refers to the events recorded in I Samuel 21:10-15, where David fled to Gath to escape king Saul but was forced to fake insanity in order to escape Achish king of Gath. There is no specific mention of these events in the body of Psalm 56 but there is possible connection. David's descriptions of enemies in this Psalm may have been in reference to Achish and the Philistines. The Hebrew words translated "praise" in Psalm 56:5,11 and "act like a madman" in I Sam 21:13 come from the same Hebrew root HLL. The word translated "fear" in Ps 56:4,5,12 and in I Sam 21:13 is the same Hebrew word.¹ This is by no means conclusive evidence that David himself wrote this psalm as a result of this encounter in Gath, but the possibility remains

¹ Word Biblical Commentary, p. 69.

open. All the generalizations made of enemies in this Psalm must have been learned in specific events.²

There are other views regarding the occasion of this Psalm stemming from the fact that the word translated "of David" in NIV may possibly mean "to, for, belonging to, by or about David"³ These other views give really no hypothesis on authorship of historical occasion but mostly concentrate on the date of authorship. Some scholars show that a post-exilic date is probable, saying that a belief in a record book, v. 8, suits a post-exilic date.⁴ Still others believe the similarities between vss. 2,3,7,8 and other royal psalms "corroborate the view of those identifying the suppliant as a king. Thus the Psalm is Pre-Exilic, though nothing more specific regarding the date can be inferred from its contents and language."⁵ Thus there is no real consensus as to the occasion of this Psalm although the ancient title gives a reasonable occasion.

This Psalm is in Book 2 of the Psalms and in a collection of Psalms associated with David, (51-72). In this collection there are many Psalms dealing with prayers of deliverance from enemies such as 54,55,56,58,59. Psalm 56 fits the pattern and genre of these Psalms, called a lament or prayer of deliverance. This was probably written as an individual prayer but may have been used as a community petition.⁶ This prayer was a petition for the help of God in a specific situation described, that may be taken up by others in the temple.

² Interpreters Bible, p. 292.

³ Word Biblical Commentary, p. 5.

⁴ Interpreters Bible, p. 293.

⁵ Anchor Bible, p. 41.

⁶ Word Biblical Commentary, p. 67.

Just as the occasion of the Psalm is uncertain, many portions of the text itself are uncertain, making translation difficult.⁷ This leads to many divergent translations. In the title are a few obscure or uncertain words. First is the word LaMNaTSeH which the NIV translates "For the director of music." This word comes from the Hebrew root NTSH which means "to shine" thus "to be preminent/distinguished" and thus, "director, chief musician, choirmaster." The Hebrew root also has the possible meaning of "endurance, everlasting" and so the Septuagint translates this word eis to telos- "regarding the end." It is also possibly related to the word NiGeN which means "to play on stringed instruments"- hence "for the director of strings" or "for stringed rendition."⁸ Most modern translations translate this as "to the chief musician" as KJV, "to the choirmaster" as RSV, "For the choirmaster" as JB, "for the leader" as NAB and "for the director of music" as NIV.

The next textual problem is also in the title, the phrase "To the tune of 'A Dove on Distant Oaks.'" The exact meaning of the phrase is unsure and some versions just transliterate the phrase "according to Jonath elem rehokim." a NASB and KJV. The literal meaning could be "according to a silent dove (or dove of speechlessness) of distant ones."⁹ The dove may refer to Yahweh, cf. Ps 68:14 and the next word means "muteness" if pointed 'elem, but means "gods" if pointed 'elim.¹⁰ The last word of the phrase may mean distant ones or "terebinths", translated oaks in NIV. As to the meaning of

⁷ Word Biblical Commentary, p. 68.

⁸ Word Biblical Commentary, p. 4.

⁹ Word Biblical Commentary, p. 65.

¹⁰ Anchor Bible, p. 41.

this phrase, "the best guess is that the expression refers to some sort of tune or recitative pattern for use with the psalm."¹¹

The meaning of the word miktam is also uncertain. It most likely means "inscribed" in an enduring manner, such as in stone.¹² This would be interesting in light of the "well documented motif of the divine bookkeeper"¹³ in verse 9.

The next textual uncertainty is in verses 1 and 2 regarding the meaning of the word Sa'aP. It has 2 possible meanings, "to crush and trample" or "to pant and pursue", this uncertainty is compounded by its few occurrences.¹⁴ The translations are divided almost evenly between the two with some taking the idea of "swallowing up" as KJV and NKJV.

The word translated "pride" in NIV in verse 2 has also been varied in translation. The basic meaning of the word MaROM is "height", or "aboveness."¹⁵ It may have the connotation of "exalted" or "aboveness" which some translations take to be a designation for Yahweh and translate "Most High."¹⁶ The figurative usage of "self-exalting" or "pride" leads to most modern translations.

In verse 6 there is another word with disputed meaning. The word translated "conspire" by NIV may be from YaGURU which means "they strive," "assail," but it may also be possibly from

¹¹ Word Biblical Commentary, p. 65.

¹² Word Biblical Commentary, p. 66.

¹³ Anchor Bible, p. 41.

¹⁴ Expositor's Bible Commentary, p. 398.

¹⁵ BDB, p. 929.

¹⁶ Word Biblical Commentary, p. 65.

YaGODDU, which means "to Gather together", or "to conspire, band together."¹⁷ Most versions follow Jerome in taking the meaning to be "conspire" of his enemies that gather together against him.

The next question regarding the text comes from verse 7 where the variant readings PaLLeT- "deliver" or PaLLeS- "recompense" are disputed. The first meaning is taken in RSV, "recompense them". The second meaning is taken in NIV as "on no account let them escape." The Expositor's Bible Commentary gives a possible translation as "on account of their iniquity can they escape?"¹⁸

Verse 8 contains two words with uncertain meanings. The first word NoDiY may come from the root NWD that has the meaning "lament", or from the root NDD that has the meaning "wander" or "tossings." Some translate like NIV as "record my lament", while others follow the second reading such as RSV "Thou hast kept count of my tossings" with the connotation of tossing and turning in sleepless nights.¹⁹ The next word is No'D which almost all agree is a wineskin or bottle which in this case was used to capture the tears of the supplicant. So Verse 8 would have to do with God recording the tossings and keeping the tears of the Psalmist in a bottle as a remembrance.²⁰

The text of Psalm 56 based on the NIV, with variations based on the disputed phrases would be as follows:

For the director of music. According to "A Dove on Distant Oaks." Of David. A miktam or inscription. When the Philistines had seized him in Gath.

¹⁷ Expositor's Bible Commentary, p. 400.

¹⁸ Expositors Bible Commentary, p. 400.

¹⁹ Interpreters Bible, p. 294.

²⁰ Ibid.

1. Be merciful to me, O God, for men hotly pursue/crush me; all day long they press their attack.
2. My slanderers pursue/crush me all day long; many are attacking me in their self exalting pride.
3. When I am afraid, I will trust in you.
4. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I will not be afraid. What can mortal man do to me?
5. All day long they twist my words; they are always plotting to harm me.
6. They conspire together, they lurk, they watch my steps, eager to take my life.
7. Recompense them/On no account let them escape; in your anger, O God, bring down the nations.
8. Record my tossings; keep my tears in your wineskin, are they not in your record?
9. Then my enemies will turn back when I call for help. By this I will know that God is for me.
10. In God, whose word I praise, in the LORD, whose word I praise
11. In God I trust; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?
12. I am under vows to you, O God; I will present my thank offerings to you.
13. For you have delivered me from death and my feet from stumbling, that I may walk before God in the light of life.

The Psalm itself is naturally divided into five parts. An outstanding feature of this Psalm is the refrain in vss. 3-4 and repeated in slightly different form in vss. 10-11. These refrains encircle the main description of the enemies and the imprecation for God to act. The Psalm starts with a brief lament and ends with confident thanksgiving. So the general outline of the body of the Psalm is as follows:

- A. Lament- 1-2
- B. Trust in God (Refrain)- 3-4
- C. Affliction and imprecation- 5-9
- B'.Trust in God (Refrain)- 10-11
- A'.Thanksgiving- 12-13²¹

The Psalmist wastes no time but pours out his heart to God. The Lament itself begins with a prayer for mercy. This cry for mercy is an important word and concept. The plea CHoNNeNi, "be gracious to me," appears 19 times in the Psalms. Most notably are in Ps 25:16, 51:1, 86:3, and

²¹ Expositor's Bible Commentary, p. 398.

119:58. The word itself means "to be gracious, considerate, to show favor, esp. in deliverance from enemies."²² The Old Testament word for "grace", CHeN, is derivative from and akin to CHoNNeNi. This is a key Biblical concept because all of God's dealings with man including the covenant are on the basis of his grace and mercy. This favor is always "an action from a superior to an inferior who has no real claim for gracious treatment."²³ The Psalmist first appeals to God on the basis of his covenant favor and graciousness, bringing nothing that would merit God's favor but asking that his favor be bestowed on account of his graciousness.

This cry for mercy is caused by the enemies attack. The identity of the enemies is never given but the amount of this type of complaint in the Psalms gives us an idea of the treacherous environment of the time.²⁴ The petition for justice in verse 7 on the "peoples.nations" could mean either foreign powers or domestic groups of evil people.²⁵ The enemies did not have to be specifically named to make the lament useful.

The laments were intended to be used in different situations and consequently had to use language general enough to be applicable in all of them. We need not suppose that each lament arose from and was intended only for use on one occasion.²⁶

The ambiguity of the enemies allowed the individual worshipper to use the Psalms in a general way and tailor the prayer to his own personal situation. The Psalmist describes his enemies as those who hotly pursue/crush him all day long and press their attack. The same phrase is repeated in

²² Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words, p. 100.

²³ Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, p. 302.

²⁴ Interpreters Bible, p. 292.

²⁵ Word Biblical Commentary, p. 70.

²⁶ Word Biblical Commentary, p. 63.

verse 2 with slight modifications. The enemies are there called "slanderers" and they are said to attack in their self-exalting pride. The word translated "attack" in NIV is LaCHaM, a word that means both to battle and to eat, giving it the same connotation as "to devour ones enemies." "Pursue" and "press" are legal terms, but "attack" is a war term.²⁷

Next the Psalmist moves into the refrain, stating his trust in God in the midst of fears. This section revolves mostly around two words that are put in opposition, fear and trust. The word YaRe' and the concept of fear are important in the Old Testament Revelation. The TWOT lists the use of YaRe' in I Sam 21:12 of David's fear of Achish as "the intellectual anticipation of evil without emphasis upon the emotional reaction"²⁸ although emotional fear is not absent. The introduction of the concept of fear came as a result of the fall. When God called to Adam after the fall, he answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid." (Gen 3:10). The shame and fear of punishment was introduced as well as the fear of death. This is a sign of the broken relationship with God and creation as a result of sin. Man was at enmity with his creator and his environment and so a prevailing sense of fear was given for man's protection.

When God started to reveal himself in redemptive activity to Abraham to reverse the effects of the curse, one of the effects he started to overturn was fear. In Genesis 15:1, God said to Abram, "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward." Members of the redeemed community are able to say "The LORD is my light and my Salvation- whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life- of whom shall I be afraid?" (Ps 27:1) and "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me" (Ps 23:4). It is

²⁷ Expositors Biblical Commentary, p. 398.

²⁸ TWOT, p. 400.

this concept that the Psalmist picks up on in Psalm 56 when he deals with his fear on the basis of trust.

The word BaTaCH, to trust, is also a very important word in the Old Testament, it is one of 3 Old Testament words for the Biblical concept of faith. BaTaCH is defined as "to Trust, be confident or sure, trust in, feel safe, be confident."²⁹ The Septuagint translates this word as elpizo- "to Hope." "The Cause for hope is not in one's merit with God...but only because of God's chesed, his unswerving loyalty, his gracious kindness."³⁰ "This hope in God is not a sort of querulous wishing, but a confident expectation...the Hebrew religion knew a God whose chief characteristic was faithfulness and trustworthiness."³¹ The Psalms speak often of this trust, most notably, "In you our fathers put their trust; they trusted and you delivered them"(Ps 22:4) and "To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul; in you I trust, O my God. Do not let me be put to shame, nor let my enemies triumph over me."(Ps 25:1-2).

Twice these two words are contrasted in the first refrain. First the Psalmist says that "When I am afraid, I will trust in you"(v. 3). Then he reverses the order to show that trust overcomes fear when he says, "in God I trust, I will not be afraid."(v. 4). The reason that fear is overcome is not the trust itself, but the object of the trust. Twice in the refrain the Psalmist uses the phrase "in God". The LORD himself is definitely the source of assurance and trust but also in his word which the Psalmist "praises". "Trusting in the LORD requires a prior commitment to the revelation of God in his

²⁹ Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible, entry #982.

³⁰ TWOT, p. 102.

³¹ Ibid.

word."³²The praise to the words of God are not further defined, but are possibly referring to the promises of God in a general sense, or to an expected oracle of salvation.³³ The Hebrew word DaBaR means the "word of God as a divine communication in the form of commandments, prophecy and words of help used to his people."³⁴ "The form of the text favors the idea of seeking divine aid or guidance in the form of a specific response from God."³⁵ This idea would fit with the fact that the Psalmist makes petition for a response from God regarding his situation in vss. 7-9.

In light of all this, the Psalmist then says, "What can mortal man do to me?"(v. 4) The Psalm contrasts the almighty God with men and the trust in God with the schemes of men. All Three Old Testament synonyms for men, 'eNoSH- "men", BaTSaR- "flesh", and 'aDaM- "mankind" are used. Throughout the Bible, trust in God is put above trust in man or anything else. "In view of these facts: God's sovereign control of man's destiny and God's total dependability, putting one's confidence in anything but God is seen to be utterly groundless."³⁶ In the case of this particular Psalm, David could not trust his own countrymen or the Philistines, but had no choice but to trust God, who is the only trustworthy one. "What can men do?" cuts to the bottom line. There is a part of life that only ones self and God can access, men cannot harm that part. No wonder Jesus said, "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul" (Mt 10:28).

³² Expositor's Biblical Commentary, p. 399.

³³ Word Biblical Commentary, p. 69.

³⁴ BDB, p. 182.

³⁵ Word Biblical Commentary, p. 69.

³⁶ TWOT, p. 102.

The Psalmist follows "What can mortal man do to me?"(v.4) with a list of what they are trying to do (vss. 5-6). They twist or pervert his words. "Twist" is from the Hebrew word Y^eaTSeBU which is a laborious, toilsome, unrewarding act.³⁷ The enemies are being industrious, going out of their way for the Psalmist's downfall as expressed by their actions.

Trampling men are those whose physical exertion is far beyond the leisurely or casual stage. To their pursued quarry they are like dogs on a hot scent, so avid for success that they press the chase to the utmost limits of their strength. It is an unrelenting pursuit.³⁸

Their activity involves conspiracy, ambush, and surveillance.³⁹ They are continual (all day long), varied (pursue, press, slander, lurk), and hostile (attack).⁴⁰ They are always plotting, and conspiring, and lurking, they are always watching his steps, "eager to take my life"(v.6). The Psalmist is very general in his description of their actions but makes it clear that they are actively pursuing his life.

On account of these actions of his enemies, the Psalmist makes his petition. In verse 7, he prays that God would not let them escape, that he would bring down the nations in his anger. He evokes the God of justice to justice, including the covenant community and the "nations" or "peoples".⁴¹

His next request is that God "record" his tossings and "put" his tears in a wineskin (v.8). The Hebrew word for record is SaPaR and means to "enumerate", "count", and "keep track of".⁴² The

³⁷ Expositor's Bible Commentary, p. 399.

³⁸ Interpreters Bible, p. 293.

³⁹ Interpreters Bible, p. 294.

⁴⁰ Expositors Bible Commentary, p. 398.

⁴¹ Expositors Biblical Commentary, p. 400.

Hebrew word for "put" is SUM and just means "to put, set, or place." The Psalmist is assured that nothing is so trivial to escape the notice of God, even his tears and turnings. He is also assured that these things will never be forgotten because they are in God's record (or book). They are permanently stored in both God's book and in his wineskin.

His plea is based on these two factors, his trust in God (v.3), and his tossings and tears (v.8). This leads to an assurance that "my enemies will turn back when I call for help" (v. 9). This response is spoken of as sure, even though it is not seen, but a response from God is expected.⁴³ Even in the midst of this trust, "he makes it clear that he would like to see this trust confirmed by a positive response from God."⁴⁴ The psalmist looks for God to act, so he may know of God's care, as a proof of covenant relationship.⁴⁵

Next the Psalmist states the refrain of trust in God again. This Psalm expresses the swing between despair and faith in the Psalmist's own heart and life. "Fear and faith struggle together in this Psalm. But faith seems dominant, and the Psalm's message is one of confidence in God."⁴⁶ It is the:

presentation of a suppliant who expresses strong faith but who has not yet experienced the fulfillment of the requests made in prayer. The speaker walks a middle way between the pole of deep complaint and bitter petition, one with

⁴² Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words, p. 163.

⁴³ Word Biblical Commentary, p. 70.

⁴⁴ Anchor Bible, p. 41.

⁴⁵ Expositor's Biblical Commentary, p. 400.

⁴⁶ Word Biblical Commentary, p. 71.

confidence in the intervention of God, but who has not yet experienced deliverance.⁴⁷

The second refrain is exactly like the first refrain with two exceptions. In the second refrain, verse 3, "When I am afraid, I will trust in you." is not repeated. This may possibly be because of the trust and assurance has taken out the fear, so the Psalmist is no longer afraid.

More striking however, is the addition of the line, "in the LORD, whose word I praise". This is exactly parallel with the line before and reiterates the same thought with one exception, the substitution of the divine name YHWH for 'eLoHiYM. This is unusual because in book two of the Psalms, the title "God" is used almost exclusively instead of the divine name YHWH. This use in Psalm 56 is unusual but is by no means accidental, and its use is most important⁴⁸. The Psalmist reiterates that his trust is not in just any God, but in YahWeh, the covenant LORD of Israel with all the divine attributes of trustworthiness, covenant love, mercy, faithfulness, sovereignty, etc. He was putting his trust on the most solid foundation ever imaginable, on the character of the covenant Lord of Israel. "The reason for hope in God's justice lies in his divine nature and in his promise to vindicate his children."⁴⁹ When the Psalmist used the name YHWH, he was saying a mouthful and drawing in all the theology and revelation of the Old Testament into his declaration of trust and petition for justice.

In light of this solid ground of assurance, it is no wonder that the Psalm immediately leads into the final section of thanksgiving and worship. Someone has said that "all Theology leads to

⁴⁷ Word Biblical Commentary, p. 69.

⁴⁸ Word Biblical Commentary, p. 71.

⁴⁹ Expositors Biblical Commentary, p. 400.

Doxology" and so the Psalmist declares his thanks. The Psalm concludes with ringing thanksgiving and victory.⁵⁰ Verses 12 and 13 are the outcry of a heart prepared for worship.⁵¹ In anticipation of deliverance, he makes a vow for a thank offering, not as a payment for deliverance, but as an offering signifying devotion.⁵² He speaks of the deliverance as already taken place, saying, "you have delivered me from death and my feet from stumbling" (v. 13). The result of this deliverance and the continued desire of the Psalmist is a "walk before God."⁵³ The Biblical concept of "walk" was a euphemism for a total lifestyle and dedication. In Genesis 17:1, God said to Abraham, "I am God Almighty, walk before me and be blameless".

The application of this Psalm comes in the same flow of the Psalm itself because many of the situations of the Psalm are relived in everyday life. In modern times, there is never a lack of adversaries or enemies, who scheme, conspire, and plot against us all day long. Human nature lends itself to competition and enmity. If that were not enough, in the Spiritual realms, we are faced with the unrelenting opposition from adversaries and the Accuser himself. This environment naturally leads to fear and apprehension. The ambiguity of the Psalm lets us apply the concepts to our own particular situation. The Psalmist was honest in his lament over his situation. We too may be honest with God in our assessment of our situations and hopelessness in situations.

With the Psalmist however, we may overcome fear through trust in God. The New Testament says that "perfect love drives out fear", and identifies this love as the covenant Lord by saying in the

⁵⁰ Expositors Biblical Commentary, p. 401.

⁵¹ Interpreters Bible, p. 295.

⁵² Expositors Biblical Commentary, p. 401.

⁵³ Interpreters Bible, p. 295.

same passage that "God is love" (I Jn 4:16-18). When we put our faith in God, based on his attributes and character as Yahweh, and in his promises in his word, as the Psalmist, we may move past our circumstances in hope, trusting God and not fearing man.

Then we may use this Psalm as a model in properly petitioning God for assistance against our enemies and situations. We may appeal to his justice, rest assured that he has kept accurate account of our tossings and tears and be assured that he will undertake. This assurance is picked up in the New Testament when Paul writes, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Rom 8:31). The writer of Hebrews writes, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?" (Heb 13:6).

The result of our petition should be the same as the Psalmist's: Thanksgiving and worship. We must be a people of praise and thanksgiving to God (I Thes 5:18). When God delivers us from our foes and situations, or as with the Psalmist, from death and stumbling (Ps 56:13), it is for the purpose that we may "walk before God in the light of life." This is a mandatory way of life for the Christian.

The world around us resounds with the cry of "in God we Trust", but only in the kind of trust spoken of in Psalm 56 will we have hope of deliverance from enemies and desperate situations. Only when we rely in this way on our covenant Lord will we be truly assured of deliverance. We are much richer because Psalm 56 has given us a model and example of this kind of trust for us to work out in our own lives.

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