

Psalm 60

“It Is God Who Will Tread Down Our Foes”

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Ordinary Time

Listen now to God’s word from Psalm 60, which is printed on the back of your order of worship if you’d like to read along.

Psalm 60

To the choirmaster: according to Shushan Eduth. A Miktam of David; for instruction; when he strove with Aram-naharaim and with Aram-zobah, and when Joab on his return struck down twelve thousand of Edom in the Valley of Salt.

- 1 O God, you have rejected us, broken our defenses;
you have been angry; oh, restore us.
- 2 You have made the land to quake; you have torn it open;
repair its breaches, for it totters.
- 3 You have made your people see hard things;
you have given us wine to drink that made us stagger.
- 4 You have set up a banner for those who fear you,
that they may flee to it from the bow. Selah
- 5 That your beloved ones may be delivered,
give salvation by your right hand and answer us!
- 6 God has spoken in his holiness:
“With exultation I will divide up Shechem
and portion out the Vale of Succoth.
- 7 Gilead is mine; Manasseh is mine;
Ephraim is my helmet;
Judah is my scepter.

8 *Moab is my washbasin;
upon Edom I cast my shoe;
over Philistia I shout in triumph."*

9 *Who will bring me to the fortified city?
Who will lead me to Edom?*

10 *Have you not rejected us, O God?
You do not go forth, O God, with our armies.*

11 *Oh, grant us help against the foe,
for vain is the salvation of man!*

12 *With God we shall do valiantly;
it is he who will tread down our foes.*

Thus far the reading of God's word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in heaven loves you.

Blessed Lord, who caused all the holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear this portion of your word, and to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest these words, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

In its title, we're told that Psalm 60 is given "for instruction," or as some versions have it, "for teaching."

This title is unique in the psalter, and it tells us that this is a psalm that is written by David specifically that the people might read it and pray it and sing it, and by doing so, by reflecting on this text, they might grow in wisdom.

And indeed, as we might expect for wisdom literature, this is a complicated psalm - it twists and turns more than most psalms do. It

requires a close and careful reading, and a clear understanding of its historical context.

Psalms 60 is like a riddle in that it demands something of us. This psalm requires that we pull apart its threads to uncover the wisdom that it both conceals and, with the help of the Spirit, reveals.

But although this psalm is complicated and knotty, the wisdom that it reveals is simple and straightforward. Or at least it *appears* simple and straightforward.

"Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding," Solomon tells us near the beginning of his proverbs, and he expands this thought a few verses later, writing: *"Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil."*

This, it turns out, is the heart of biblical wisdom - fear of the Lord, demonstrated by submission to his will and obedience to his commands coupled with a distrust of our own capacities, our own strength, our own wisdom.

It's so simple and straightforward, and yet so hard to hold onto in the complexities of our lives.

There are so many difficult things we want to accomplish, so many things that require wisdom.

We want fix ourselves, mend our own hearts, make our lives go the way we hope.

Even more challenging, we want fix our loved ones, we want to heal them and help them and protect them and give them happiness and joy and contentment.

And then, of course, there's the world, with its myriad of problems, its innumerable challenges.

How do we do these things? What is the wisdom that we need?

Sometimes we're tempted to believe that if we can just develop a perfect game plan, if we can just make the right list of pros and cons, if we can just enact the right habits or disciplines, we can do it - we fix ourselves, we can fix our loved ones, we can fix the world.

Or maybe, if not fix these things, at least improve them, at least better them in some significant way.

But what is wisdom, scripturally speaking?

"Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding"... "Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil."

Biblical wisdom is so simple, so straightforward, and yet so hard to hold onto.

Calvin writes and says: *"If only this sentiment [of trusting the LORD and leaning not on our own wisdom] were effectually engraven upon our hearts!"*

Indeed, we need this sentiment engraved on our hearts. Otherwise it slips out of our grasp as soon as we walk out the door.

Well, beloved, this psalm, Psalm 60, is given to us for our instruction, that we might have this written on our hearts: *"The salvation of man is in vain — it is God who will trample down our foes."*

Or, to put it another way: *"Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding."*

The introduction to Psalm 60 gives us its context.

It is a psalm of David, written after he has received the throne of Israel and begun the work of defeating Israel's enemies - particularly the Edomites, the sons of Esau, who had plagued Israel ever since her entrance into the land of Canaan.

One of the sometimes overlooked facts about David's kingship is what a disaster Saul's reign had been for Israel - and what a difficult situation David inherited.

Remember, Saul, in his hatred of David, had slaughtered nearly all the priests of Israel because of fear that they were conspiring against him (a common suspicion of Saul's), and as God abandoned Saul, he was defeated again and again by the enemies of Israel, bringing ruin to the kingdom as they were oppressed by their peoples of the land - just as they had been during the time of the judges.

Israel's decline under Saul reached its ugly climax at the battle of Mount Gilboa, where Saul and Jonathan were both slain in battle and the Philistines won a decisive victory over Israel's armies and captured many of its cities.

As 1 Samuel puts it, *"When the men of Israel saw that Saul and his sons were dead, they abandoned their cities and fled. And the Philistines came and lived in them."*

This is the context in which David became king. It was a time of chaos and weakness for Israel. But what David rightly understood is that all of these disasters had come upon the people of God because God had turned away from them.

David rightly understands that the devastation that has come upon Israel in his time isn't because Saul didn't have a professional training program for his military officers, it wasn't because he didn't make enough spears or swords - no the reason for Israel's fall is because they had been rejected by the Lord.

Listen to how David describes Israel's situation in the first three verses:

O God, you have rejected us, broken our defenses... You have made the land to quake; you have torn it open... You have made your people see hard things; you have given us wine to drink that made us stagger.

The language David uses here for his people's suffering is visceral and poignant - and he identifies God's hand as behind all of their suffering.

Israel's defenses broken by God's own hand - for he has rejected them. God has shaken the land and torn it open. God has made his people to see suffering, and not let them turn their eyes away from the horror - he has made them inebriated and defenseless against their enemies.

And likewise, David knows that the path for Israel's healing isn't through his own military genius or strength. Rather he sees the life of his people as solely dependent on one thing - the Lord must turn his face to them again.

"You have been angry," David says to God: *"Oh, restore us."* And then he cries out to God to repair what has been broken.

This psalm, remember, is written for our instruction, and what David is doing here is demonstrating a deeply theological interpretation of his circumstances.

David understands that what is driving all the chaos and difficulty for God's people isn't Israel's weakness in warfare or a lack of a well-balanced economy.

God has done this. God has brought about this devastation. And only God can fix it.

You see, what David is doing here is demonstrating for us what it means to trust in the Lord and lean not on our own understanding.

He is showing us what it means to rightly identify not only the source of our problems, but also the only source of a solution - and he is arguing, for our instruction, that the only solution available to us to apply to whatever is broken, whatever it is that we long to be fixed, is the mercy and grace and healing of the Spirit of God.

In verses 4-8, David then points to source of healing, the only hope that he sees for God's people - which are the promises and character of God.

It's important to remember that David is writing this psalm in an immediate context of success. His warriors have just won a great battle against the Edomites. Yet still, David points the attention of his people away from their own strength and toward the promises of God.

If healing is to come, it will come only in this way, David says - because the Living God will keep the promises he has made.

In verses 4-5, David writes:

*4 You have set up a banner for those who fear you,
that they may flee to it from the bow. Selah*

*5 That your beloved ones may be delivered,
give salvation by your right hand and answer us!*

God has set up a banner, David says, for those who fear him to flee to, that they might be delivered and saved.

The image of a banner is important here. In a time of trouble or confusion, a banner lifted high in the air becomes a place where those who are afraid can flee to. It marks a safe place, a place where those are in trouble can run towards.

In a time of crisis, a banner lifted high in the air is a north star, a way out of confusion, a place where strength and refuge are offered to all to come.

David is saying that in this time of chaos for Israel, this time of despair that is depicted in verses 1-3, God has raised a banner so that those who are afraid will have a place to turn.

But what is this banner? What is this safe place? It is God's own promises.

In verses 6-8, David focuses our attention on God's voice, on what God has said. This is the banner that God has set up for his people to flee to.

6 *God has spoken in his holiness:
 "With exultation I will divide up Shechem
 and portion out the Vale of Succoth.*
7 *Gilead is mine; Manasseh is mine;
 Ephraim is my helmet;
 Judah is my scepter.*
8 *Moab is my washbasin;
 upon Edom I cast my shoe;
 over Philistia I shout in triumph."*

Here David is reaching back into Israel's history, back to the time hundreds of years before when God promised that he would in fact give the land of Canaan to Israel, that he would elevate the tribes of the sons of Israel — Manasseh, Ephraim and Judah, and he would bring down the nations of the land - Moab, Edom and Philistia — just as we heard in our second reading this morning.

This is the banner, David is saying, that we must flee to, that we must put our trust in. Not in our swords, not in our strength, not in our own wisdom.

No, David is saying, this is our banner - this is our one shot for the healing that we need - that the God who promised to be faithful will actually in fact be faithful.

Our only hope for healing what is broken is that God will actually show up and keep his promises.

And beloved, the same is true for you.

Whatever it is that is broken in your life, whatever is broken in your own heart, in the hearts of those whom you love, whatever is broken in the world — you don't have a chance of fixing that on your own.

You can't even fix yourself, much less your parents or your spouse or your siblings or your friends or your children.

The only one who can help you is the Lord.

And the banner that God has set up for you to run to is the banner of his promises - his promises that he is in fact good, that he is in fact trustworthy, that his steadfast love actually does endure forever - and all of this has been revealed to you in nothing less than the death and resurrection of his Son.

In verses 9-12, David takes all the themes of his psalm and brings them to a conclusion.

David leans into his dependence and vulnerability here, and begs the Lord to help his people once again.

9 Who will bring me to the fortified city?

Who will lead me to Edom?

10 Have you not rejected us, O God?

You do not go forth, O God, with our armies.

Listen to those questions. David is placing himself into the Lord's hands. He is saying that without God to lead him against the fortified cities, against the armies of Edom, his situation is hopeless. He cannot bring peace to the land, he cannot fix what ails Israel. Only God can accomplish this work.

*11 Oh, grant us help against the foe,
for vain is the salvation of man!*

*12 With God we shall do valiantly;
it is he who will tread down our foes.*

If you know the story of David, then you know that this psalm has a happy ending, so to speak. Or at least a happy ending for a time.

For it was during David's reign that Israel came the closest that it ever came to fully conquering the land that God had given to her. David pushed the boundaries of Israel broader and wider than they had ever been before.

David lived to see Moab and Edom and Philistia all defeated, at least during his lifetime. And what David conquered, his son Solomon then reigned over and built up in glory.

Though it did not last, due to the sins of her kings and the sins of her people, the eighty years in which David and Solomon reigned over Israel really was the closest she ever came to a golden age in all of her history.

Her enemies were defeated. Her people prospered. There was wealth and prosperity and blessing that flowed out of Jerusalem to the lives of all of Israel and even to the nations around them.

If you read chapters of First Kings that describe the early days of Solomon's reign, you get a sense for what this was like - the glory of it, the wonder, the lavishness of the king's table, the beauty of the temple, the peace and prosperity that all Israel enjoyed - a peace and a prosperity that was the envy of the nations around it.

But what this psalm shows us is that all of these blessings, all of these successes came to David and Solomon not because of their own skill or wisdom or cunning.

No, all of this came only because of the blessing and favor of God. There was no other explanation for it.

No other explanation for how a struggling confederation of tribes pushed back their enemies and accumulated enough wealth to build one of the most glorious structures in all the world.

No other explanation than the kindness and favor of God who was keeping his promises to his people.

The secret, so to speak, of Israel's success during that period of her life is disclosed to us in this psalm. It was not David and Solomon who did all these things.

No, it was God who treaded down all their foes.

And beloved, there is a lesson here for you, if you will but hear it.

Whatever is broken in your life, whatever it is that needs healing, you cannot accomplish that. You can't. You can't figure it out. You're not capable of it.

All you can do, the only hope you have, is to run to the banner that God has given you in his promises.

All you can do is confess that only the Lord himself can help you, only he can restore and repair what is broken - only he can tread down your foes.

All you can do is run to the banner that he has raised and trust him to deliver you and fix what is broken.

Because beloved is what it means to be wise.

To trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding.

This is the wisdom of David and Solomon.

This is the wisdom that knows that the banner of God's promises that we run to is nothing less than his crucified and risen Son - who lives now for us that we might flee to him.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.