What Can Man Do To Me?

Psalm 56

Being a man after God's own heart comes at great cost. David counts that cost and though on the run for his life, he knows the Lord has him. With God on his side, what can man do?

Structure & Summary

Psalm 56 is chiastically structured around David's prayer that the Lord will cast his enemies down in anger:

A **vv. 1-3** *Prayer for mercy and trust during fear*
B **v. 4** *In God I trust*
C **vv. 5-6** *I am a marked man*
D **v. 7** *Cast down the iniquitous people*
C' **vv. 8-9** *You collect my tears and hear me*
B' **vv. 10-11** *In God I trust*
A' **vv. 12-13** *Vows to praise You for deliverance*

Psalms 56-60 are called "Miktam" in their superscriptions, and this one is set to the tune "A Silent Dove Far Away", composed when David was captured by the Philistines in Gath. He fled from his own persecuting king to be captured by another persecuting king. He cries out for mercy because man would swallow him, fighting against him all day "from high places" or "in arrogance", better translations than "O Most High" (vv. 1-2). He states that whenever he is afraid, he'll trust in God, praise His word, and not fear: What can flesh do to me?" (vv. 3-4). This refrain is repeated almost verbatim in verses 10-11. His enemies unrelenting twist his words, plot evil together, track him and seek his life (vv. 5-6). He asks a question, "Shall they escape by iniquity?", and answer it with prayer for God to thrown them down (v. 7). The Lord numbers his wanderings, gathers his tears in a bottle, and are they not written in His book (v. 8)? He knows God is on his so his enemies will turn back (v. 9). He'll praise His word, again he says it, because his trust is in God he won't be afraid of man (vv. 10-11). David binds himself to praise God for delivering him from death (v. 12). This is why he walks in the light of the living (v. 13).

Unrelenting Oppression

Psalm 52 recalls when Doeg and Saul slaughtered Ahimelech, the other priests, and the people of Nob in pursuit of David (1 Samuel 21:1-9). From there David flees to Achish, king of Gath, who know all about him: "Is this not David the king of the land? Did they not sing of him to one another in dances, saying: 'Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands'?" (1 Sam. 21:11). Remember that at Nob, after eating the showbread, David took the Goliath's sword—the very one he used to behead him in the Valley of Elah (1 Sam. 21:9)—which he now carries into Goliath's hometown of Gath. Achish and the Philistines know him so he fears for his life and pretends to be insane, scratching at the gate and drooling down his beard. Achish has a great line: "Look, you see the man is insane. Why have you brought him to me? Have I need of madmen, that you have brought this fellow to play the madman in my presence?" (1 Sam. 21:14-15). This ruse works and David flees from Philistia to the cave of Adullam, then to Moab where his parents join him for protection (1 Sam. 22:1, 3). Everyone wants him dead: Saul because of envy; Doeg because of blood lust; Achish because of power. They would all swallow him up and so hound him every day (vv. 1-2). They deliberately twist his words and track his steps in order to murder him (vv. 5-6). Singing the psalms teaches us how to deal with oppression and sets the expectation that we will in fact have to. After getting stoned at Derbe, Paul returns to the churches in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra and exhorts, "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22).

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Freedom From Fear

In the previous psalm we saw courage not as the absence of fear but the right response to it. David had a lot of opportunity to exercise this muscle. Verse three literally says, "The day I am afraid I will trust in You." Derek Kidner comments, "Faith is seen here as a deliberate act, in defiance of one's emotional state." Fear could lead to freaking out, faithlessness, or foolishness. But David commits to faith—believing God is with him and for him (cf. Heb. 11:6). We can say that God allowed him to be hunted by his enemies so that through fear he would trust God. And he gave us this psalm to sing so that we would do the same. David shows us how and tells us why in the refrain (vv. 3-4, 9-11):

> Whenever I'm afraid,
> I'll trust in you.
> In God (I'll praise His word),
> In God I have put my trust;
> I will not fear. What can flesh do to me?

Once was not enough, and in the second refrain he praises the Lord's word twice (v. 10). Love the word and love the Lord through the word. David commits to using fear—whatever day it comes--to trust God, which he will do by praising His word, which leads to settled trust, which leads to freedom from fear: What can flesh do to him? This is a commitment, a plan, a practice, a result, and a liberty from the fear of man. This psalm strengthens the weak and fearful through five questions (vv. 4, 7, 8, 11, 13).

Not a Wasted Tear

David takes comfort that God knows where he has been and where he is going, which is good because he has no idea. The Lord *counts* his wanderings. He gathers David's tears into a bottle and jots them down in His book (v. 8). David honored Saul, loved Jonathan, mourned over Ahimelech and brethren at Nob. He feared for his wife Michal and his parents' lives and was often a step away from death. Perhaps his faking madness came easily because was on the verge of it. Unlike the selfish, bloodthirsty, and distant gods of the pagans, Yahweh is near with His tender mercies and loving-kindness. Many people go through the shadow of death and conclude that God isn't with them. But He is. You have to trust Him to know it, and when you do, you know that He is for you. This is why you can cast your cares upon Him (Ps. 55:22; 1 Pet. 5:7), rest that not a hair falls from your head apart from His will (Matt. 10:29-31), and believe that He is on your side (v. 9). This incredible statement of faith is a beacon of light in the deepest darkness. If you were there you would see David scratching the gate and drooling in his beard by day and weeping at night. Without faith, he was pathetic and finished. By faith, he was preparing to ascend to the throne. Only by faith can you see the world this way. Every tear that Jesus shed—for Lazarus, Jerusalem, in terror and Godforsakenness upon the cross—was collected by the Father and received as obedience to Him in our place to fulfill all righteousness: "He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed" (Is. 53:5). Augustine said, "Whatever oppression the saints may endure, let them turn their thoughts to this psalm and recognize themselves in it." Though not yet to the shedding of our blood (remember the unborn), we do face growing oppression in our state and nation. We must believe that God is for us, that we have a secure hope in Jesus Christ, and therefore boldly proclaim the good news of Jesus' life, death, burial, resurrection. His rules and reigns over this world. This will be costly in many ways, but so what? What can man do to us? Ultimately nothing.