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Psalm 142

A Maskil of David. When he was in the cave. A Prayer.

(NRSV)

A Maskil (mahs-KEEL) may be a liturgical term or refer to a specific musical setting, no one really knows. It may be a poem or an ode which is intended to instruct or to be an example of how to pray. Read at least 1 Samuel 22:1-2, where David before he was king found refuge in a cave when he was an outlaw.

Vv. 1-3a

- ¹ With my voice I cry to the LORD** (Yahweh, the gracious covenant God);
with my voice I make supplication to the LORD.
² I pour out my complaint before him;
I tell my trouble before him.
³ When my spirit is faint (When I am utterly discouraged),
you know (keep loving watch over) **my way** (what I am doing
and where I am going).

Twice, in parallel form, the Psalmist says he prays “with my voice.” This means that it is not a silent prayer which he is offering, but one in which he speaks aloud. It does not mean that he is shouting. “When my spirit is faint” could perhaps even be read, “When I am about to die.” Yet, even before he pours out his emotional lament, God already knows and understands his needs (compare Matthew 6:32).

Vv. 3b-4

- ^{3b} In the path where I walk**
they have hidden a trap for me.
⁴ Look (O LORD,) **on my right hand and see—**
there is no one who takes notice of me;
no refuge remains to me;
no one cares for me.

In the threat posed by his enemies, the Psalmist feels utterly abandoned by friends. He has no protector on his right hand. There is no place he can go for refuge. His situation is desperate.

Vv. 5-6a

- ⁵ I cry to you, O LORD;**
I say, "You are my refuge (a place of safety),
my portion (what is mine and what I need) **in the land of the living**
(in this life)."
⁶ Give heed to my cry (Listen to my plea, and act),
for I am brought very low (I am completely dejected).

Without earthly helpers the Psalmist relies more on Yahweh. The Psalmist is the prototype of all who cry out in the words of the familiar hymn of Henry Lyte, "When other helpers fail and comforts flee, Help of the helpless, oh, abide with me."

Vv. 6b-7

**^{6b} Save me from my persecutors,
for they are too strong for me.
⁷ Bring me out of prison,
so that I may give thanks to your name.
The righteous will surround me,
for you will deal bountifully with me.**

The Psalmist prays for deliverance from unspecified persecutors who are too strong for him. The fact that these persecutors are unnamed acts as a kind of blank line, inviting anyone who prays this Psalm to fill in the blank with his/her own nemeses. Verse 7 would seem to indicate that the Psalm was written by someone who is in prison, but it is far from clear whether the plea to "Bring me out of prison" should be understood literally or metaphorically.

The Psalmist, like so many of God's People ever since, feels as though he were imprisoned, and longs to be able to thank God for rescue. He anticipates that, once saved from his enemies, he will be surrounded by righteous friends who will rejoice with him because of the LORD's generosity. The righteous are not necessarily those who are already morally pure, but they are God's People for whom God intends moral purity eventually, and who themselves join their wills and desires to His for such purity.

Notice how in the last verse there is a deep confidence that the LORD will indeed not abandon him, but that the LORD will surely come to his aid.

The LBW prayer to accompany Psalm 142:

Lord Jesus, hanging on the cross and left alone by your disciples, you called on your Father with a mighty cry as you gave up your spirit. Deliver us from the prison of affliction, and be yourself our inheritance in the land of the living, where with the Father and the Holy Spirit you are blessed now and forever. Amen.

Guide for Reflection:

This Psalm should be prayed also by Christians. For one thing all of us have felt ourselves, and repeatedly continue to feel ourselves, in the grip of despair, when no one seems to understand our plight, when we feel abandoned by friends and utterly alone in the world. And often enough that feeling of dejection is not simply a shift in our fickle moods with perhaps a psychological explanation, but it is actually caused by real external circumstances: troubles with others in our church life, overwhelming demands placed upon our sense of obligation to others, job uncertainty, impending lawsuits, physical ailments, etc. That is so universally human that, when someone from the far distant past cries out in distress, we in our day can instantly relate to it. But also, the Psalmist is our ancestor in faith. We belong to the same People of God of which he was a member, and we live under the same God as he did; for the gracious LORD (Yahweh) to whom the Psalmist called out is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who for Jesus' sake is also our gracious God and Father. That points to a third dimension of meaning for us. Our Lord Jesus Christ is the perfect Israelite; he is Israel reduced to One. Jesus is the beloved messianic Son of the Father (recall Psalm 2), the embodiment of the People of God. He is the One who was tempted in all points like as we (Hebrews 4:15). He too is one who prayed this Psalm, as The One among the People of God, as The One who reconstitutes the People of God, as The One who invites us into the People of God as the Body of Christ, and as The One in whose name and with whom we may pray this Psalm.

So when we pray this Psalm, we need to pray it in multiple dimensions:

1. We should think first of all of David way back then and there, who was the designated king of Israel, but who thereby made an enemy of king Saul, and was made an outlaw before he became king.
2. We should then think of ourselves as among the People of God who often with good cause feel abandoned and threatened and find here words to pray in our own personal situation.
3. We should then think of our Lord Jesus who for us and for our salvation also was hounded by those who wanted to frustrate God's plan of salvation. Think, for example, in Lent about the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus was captured and delivered over to his enemies. You might also recall how on the cross he suffered abandonment even by God without surrendering confidence that God would yet deal bountifully with him and surround him with righteous friends who together with him would give God everlasting thanks. And those righteous friends are those who pray this Psalm with him. We have met Jesus' righteous friends and they are -- WE.
4. So we should finally also think of ourselves as being "in Christ," prepared therefore to encounter some of the same opposition as Jesus did; for to line up with Jesus and to publicly confess that you are his disciple could direct to you some of the same hostility that he faced.

But the whole point of the Psalm is to build in us that faith and confidence in the LORD (Yahweh, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and now also our God and Father) that He is our Refuge and Portion, and that in the company of The Righteous One and the righteous He will surely deal bountifully with us.

The LBW prayer to accompany Psalm 142 points to Jesus as the one who was abandoned by even by his friends, and who in that abandonment called out to God his Father. It also seems to be following the alternative interpretation of verse 3. The alternative interpretation is a reference to dying, so that the entire Psalm has in mind the aloneness of the dying process, where no earthly helper can hold back the inevitable outcome of the struggle with the foe of death, and where God alone can be our refuge. Then the imprisonment is that of the grave, from which again only Yahweh can rescue. Then the land of the living is the land of the eternally living in the resurrection, where the Psalmist expects to be surrounded by the finally and forever righteous, and where we shall give thanks to God everlastingly.

You might also look at Hymn, Abide with Me (LBW #272 or LW #490). Stanzas 1 and 2 are more generalized, before stanzas 3, 4, and 5 shade over into the final hour of our weakness and mortality. You have to reach back to The Lutheran Hymnal #552 to add also its very appropriate stanza 6:

**I need Thy presence every passing hour:
What but Thy grace can foil the Tempter's power?
Who like Thyself my guide and stay can be?
Through cloud and sunshine, oh, abide with me.**

which has -- alas -- been deleted from the newer hymnals.

There is a fine medieval Christian aphorism which states: *Lex credendi lex orandi*. Sometimes I have seen it reversed: *Lex orandi lex credendi*. It says that the principle of your faith is the principle of your prayer, or conversely, the principle of your praying is the principle of your believing. In other words, your faith comes to finest expression in your praying, and your praying gives shape to the faith of your heart. That why I keep on encouraging you to write your own personal prayer to accompany, in this case Psalm 142, the prayer of David and the prayer of Jesus and the prayer of all the other righteous friends.

Walter E. Keller

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