

# PSALM 56

## Overview

- I. Clarification of the Author's Original Meaning
- II. Insights about God and His Ways from the Text
- III. Application of the Theological Insights to Our Context

<b>Psalm 56 (NIV)</b>	<b>Psalm 56 (NLT)</b>
<p>For the director of music. To the tune of "A Dove on Distant Oaks." Of David. A <i>miktam</i>. When the Philistines had seized him in Gath.</p> <p><sup>1</sup> Be merciful to me, O God, for men hotly pursue me; all day long they press their attack.</p> <p><sup>2</sup> My slanderers pursue me all day long; many are attacking me in their pride.</p> <p><sup>3</sup> When I am afraid, I will trust in you.</p> <p><sup>4</sup> In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I will not be afraid. What can mortal man do to me?</p> <p><sup>5</sup> All day long they twist my words; they are always plotting to harm me.</p> <p><sup>6</sup> They conspire, they lurk, they watch my steps, eager to take my life.</p> <p><sup>7</sup> On no account let them escape; in your anger, O God, bring down the nations.</p> <p><sup>8</sup> Record my lament; list my tears on your scroll— are they not in your record?</p> <p><sup>9</sup> Then my enemies will turn back when I call for help. By this I will know that God is for me.</p> <p><sup>10</sup> In God, whose word I praise, in the LORD, whose word I praise—</p> <p><sup>11</sup> in God I trust; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?</p> <p><sup>12</sup> I am under vows to you, O God; I will present my thank offerings to you.</p> <p><sup>13</sup> For you have delivered me from death and my feet from stumbling, that I may walk before God in the light of life.</p>	<p><i>For the choir director: A psalm of David, regarding the time the Philistines seized him in Gath. To be sung to the tune "Dove on Distant Oaks."</i></p> <p><sup>1</sup> O God, have mercy on me, for people are hounding me. My foes attack me all day long.</p> <p><sup>2</sup> I am constantly hounded by those who slander me, and many are boldly attacking me.</p> <p><sup>3</sup> But when I am afraid, I will put my trust in you.</p> <p><sup>4</sup> I praise God for what he has promised. I trust in God, so why should I be afraid? What can mere mortals do to me?</p> <p><sup>5</sup> They are always twisting what I say; they spend their days plotting to harm me.</p> <p><sup>6</sup> They come together to spy on me— watching my every step, eager to kill me.</p> <p><sup>7</sup> Don't let them get away with their wickedness; in your anger, O God, bring them down.</p> <p><sup>8</sup> You keep track of all my sorrows. You have collected all my tears in your bottle. You have recorded each one in your book.</p> <p><sup>9</sup> My enemies will retreat when I call to you for help. This I know: God is on my side!</p> <p><sup>10</sup> I praise God for what he has promised; Yes, I praise the LORD for what he has promised.</p> <p><sup>11</sup> I trust in God, so why should I be afraid? What can mere mortals do to me?</p> <p><sup>12</sup> I will fulfill my vows to you, O God, and will offer a sacrifice of thanks for your help.</p> <p><sup>13</sup> For you have rescued me from death; you have kept my feet from slipping. So now I can walk in your presence, O God, in your life-giving light.</p>

## I. Clarification of the Author's Original Meaning

### A. Psalm Title & Historical Setting

1. According to the psalm title, this composition was born out of the time David was arrested at the Philistine city of Gath, modern Tell es-Safi: "When the Philistines had seized him at Gath." The story of David's arrest is presented in 1 Samuel 21:10-15:

- a. <sup>10</sup>That day David fled from Saul and went to Achish king of Gath. <sup>11</sup>But the servants of Achish said to him, “Isn’t this David, the king of the land? Isn’t he the one they sing about in their dances: “ ‘Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands?’” <sup>12</sup>David took these words to heart and was very much afraid of Achish king of Gath. <sup>13</sup>So he pretended to be insane in their presence; and while he was in their hands he acted like a madman, making marks on the doors of the gate and letting saliva run down his beard. <sup>14</sup>Achish said to his servants, “Look at the man! He is insane! Why bring him to me? <sup>15</sup>Am I so short of madmen that you have to bring this fellow here to carry on like this in front of me? Must this man come into my house?”
  - b. When David was released, he hid in the cave at Adullam, near the border between Israel and Philistia, hoping to avoid capture by Saul’s men (1 Sam 22).
2. The meaning of the untranslated word *miktam* in the psalm title is uncertain. Early speculation is that a *miktam* referred to a poem containing short sayings, though other possibilities have been suggested. The word is found in five other superscriptions (Pss 16, 57, 58, 59, and 60).
  3. Nothing else is known about the melodic indicator, “A Dove on Distant Oaks,” but the reference to a specific tune, and also to “the director of music,” would seem to indicate that the composition was originally intended to be sung.

#### B. Summary

Psalm 56 is a *petition* to God to rescue the psalmist from his enemies, who seek to capture and kill him, combined with a general description of the difficulty and a statement of trust in God.

#### C. Literary Arrangement

The psalm is possibly arranged in a 7-part chiasm (cf. Dorsey):

**a Opening appeal to God for help (1-2 [2-3])**

**b Statement of trust (3-4 [4-5]):** “*In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I am not afraid; what can flesh do to me?*”

**c Enemies relentlessly hound me, seeking to kill me (5-6 [6-7])**

**d CENTER: Bring down my enemies; remember my suffering (7-8 [8-9])**

**c’ May God turn my enemies back (9 [10])**

**b’ Statement of trust (10-11 [11-12]):** “*In God, whose word I praise . . . in God I trust; I am not afraid; what can flesh do to me?*”

**a’ Vow to praise God because of his help (12-13 [13-14])**

VanGemeren finds a 5-part chiasm with the same verse divisions, except that he regards vv. 5-9 [Heb. 6-10] as a single, central unit, whereas Dorsey breaks them out into three distinct units.

#### D. Comments & Clarifications

1. v. 1a: “**Be merciful (*hānān*) to me**” = be gracious to me, be kind to me; graciously help me (even if undeserving; i.e., unmerited favor).

2. v. 1a: “**hotly pursue (*šā’āp*) me**” = verb has three meanings: (1) pant, gasp; (2) trample, crush; (3) pester, be a nuisance. (Cf. Isa 42:14; Jer 2:24; Ezek 36:3; Job 7:2). NLT: “hounding me”; JB: “they harry me”; ESV, NASB: “trample.”
3. v. 1b: “**press their attack (*lāhās*)**” = (1) press, push, squeeze; (2) oppress, torment.
4. v. 2a: “**My slanderers (*šōrēr*)**” = the NIV is unlikely here; better: enemy, foe, adversary, one who is hostile. (The NIV may have inferred an etymological connection to the Akkadian word *šāru*, which sometimes means to accuse).
5. v. 2b: “**in their pride (*mārôm*)**” = usually means an elevated site or mountain top. Hence, JB: “countless are those who attack me from the heights.” Some, however, regard it as a figurative way to speak of pride. Hence, ESV: “many attack me proudly”; NASB: “many who fight proudly against me.” NLT uses “boldly.” The meaning here is uncertain. The LXX omits it.
6. v. 3b: “**I will trust (*bāṭāh*) in you**” = rely on, have confidence in. Judges 20:36: “they *relied* on their ambush”; Proverbs 3:5: “*Trust* in the LORD with all your heart.”
7. v. 4a: “**In God, whose word (*dābār*) I praise (*hālāl*)**” = it is unclear what “word” from God is being “praised” here (i.e., is it a general or specific law, teaching, promise, revelation, message, or oracle?). Notice the “leap” made by the NLT at v. 4a.
8. v. 5a: “**All day long they twist (*āšāh*) my words (*dābār*)**” = the word for “twist” here usually means to hurt, pain, grieve, sadden, or injure, which is probably why the ESV translates *dābār* as “cause,” rendering the phrase, “they injure my cause.” But to hurt or injure someone is to distort that person in some way, so twisting the psalmist’s words may be what is meant.
9. v. 6: “**They conspire (*gūr*)**” = the verb usually means attack, provoke, incite, oppose, treat with hostility, or be an enemy. In some contexts it may mean to gather together or conspire.
10. v. 7b: “**O God, bring down the nations (*’ām*)**” = people; the human beings of a particular nation, clan, community, or group. The psalmist likely refers here to his foes, not all the nations of the world. Hence, “O, God, bring them down” (NLT); “cast down the peoples, O God!”; “put down the peoples, O God!” (NASB).
11. v. 8a: “**Record my lament (*nôḏ*)**” = (1) moving back and forth, wandering, as of an aimless fugitive; (2) lamenting, mourning. The first sense yields the translation “my tossings” (ESV, NRSV) and “my wanderings” (NASB); the second sense yields the translation “my sorrows” (JB, NLT) or “my lament” (NIV).
12. v. 8b: “**List (*šim*) my tears on your scroll (*nō’ḏ*)**” = set, put, place, install; set down, arrange. But where are the tears “placed” or “set down”? The word *nō’ḏ* usually refers to a leather bottle (i.e., a wineskin or waterskin), hence the NIV footnote and other translations: “**Put (*šim*) my tears in your wineskin (*nō’ḏ*).**” But some have suggested that in this occurrence, *nō’ḏ* should be translated “scroll” or “leather scroll” because (1) there is a documentation/record keeping motif in the three lines of this verse, with the word “scroll” being a corresponding element to the word “book” in the next line of the parallelism; and (2) there is no record from the ancient biblical world of a practice of keeping tears in a bottle.

To these objections, one could reply that (1) the word *nō’ḏ* is translated as “scroll” nowhere else in the Old Testament; (2) there is a poetic quality to the image of “tears in a bottle” that would need no literal attestation for it to be valid; (3) recording tears *on a scroll* would be just as poetic as putting tears in a bottle—“tears” being a metonymy for all kinds of negative

personal thoughts and feelings that God records; indeed, tears are poetically “in the book/record” in the next line of the parallelism; and (4) HALOT cites a later use of “the little vase for tears mentioned in fairy-stories, Meuli *Romanica Helvetica* 20 (1943):763ff.” The psalmist is asking God to transform his situation in the first verse of the center section; might he not also be asking God to transform his thoughts and emotions in the second verse of the center section—just as liquid is transformed into wine inside a wineskin?

- “List my tears on your scroll.” (NIV)
- “You have kept a list of my tears.” (NCV)
- “You have kept a record of my tears.” (TEV)
- “Put my tears in your bottle.” (ESV)
- “Put my tears in Your bottle.” (NASB)
- “You have collected all my tears in your bottle.” (NLT)
- “Collect my tears in your wineskin.” (JB)

13. v. 9a: “**Then (’āz) my enemies will turn back when I call for help**” = the word ’āz can be a temporal marker, as it is here in the NIV (then, before, since, thereupon, etc.), or it can introduce an imperfect tense (the “future” or “wish” tense), in which case the sense of the phrase would be, “*May* my enemies turn back when I cry out.”
14. v. 9b: “**By this (kī) I will know that God is for me**” = the NIV is unlikely here, not to mention potentially misleading. Better: “This I know: surely (kī) God is (lit., to/for) me.”
15. v. 13b: “. . . **that I may walk (hālāk) before God in the light of life**” = a telic (purpose) clause; the composition begins with the psalmist being *hotly pursued* by those who seek to kill him, and it ends with him *walking* with God “in the light of life.”

#### E. A Sharpened Translation of Psalm 56 in Light of Our Clarifications

For the director of music. To the tune of “A Dove on Distant Oaks.” Of David. A *miktam*. When the Philistines arrested him in Gath.

##### a Opening appeal to God for help

<sup>1</sup> Help me, O God, for men are trying to destroy me; they hunt me relentlessly. <sup>2</sup> Relentlessly my enemies seek to destroy me; many take pride in hunting for me.

##### b Statement of trust

<sup>3</sup> When I am afraid, I put my trust in you; <sup>4</sup> in God, in whose word I delight, in God I put my trust; I am not afraid. What can mortal man do to me?

##### c Enemies relentlessly hound me, seeking to kill me

<sup>5</sup> They continually twist my words and plot my destruction. <sup>6</sup> They hunt me; they lie in wait; they stalk me, seeking to kill me.

##### d CENTER: Bring down my enemies; remember my suffering

<sup>7</sup> On no account let them escape; in your anger, O God, bring these men down. <sup>8</sup> Keep a record of my weeping; collect my tears in your wineskin—are they not in your record book?

**c' May God turn my enemies back**

<sup>9</sup> May my enemies be turned back as I appeal to you for help. For this I know:  
Surely God is for me.

**b' Statement of trust**

<sup>10</sup> In God, in whose word I delight; in the LORD, in whose word I delight—<sup>11</sup> in God I put my trust; I am not afraid. What can man do to me?

**a' Vow to praise God because of his help**

<sup>12</sup> I will keep my promise to you, O God; I will present my thank offering to you. <sup>13</sup> For you will surely deliver me from death, and my feet from stumbling, that I might walk before God in the light of life.

**II. Insights about God and His Ways from the Text**

- A. Assuming that God inspired the writing of this psalm, and assuming that it accurately represents his own ways, values, thinking, character, etc., one can learn many things about God from this psalm. What we learn about God is called a “theological insight.”
- B. Whenever possible, begin each insight with, “God . . . .” Also, try to avoid first-person references (such as “I,” “me,” “my,” “we,” “us,” etc.) in stating a theological insight from an OT passage (i.e., don’t write “God wants *us* to . . .” or “God cares about *my* . . .”). It is more accurate to make observations like, “God wants *his people* to . . .” or “God is delighted when *an individual* . . . .”
- C. In stating your theological insights in this way, your observations will apply both in its original biblical setting and in the contemporary setting as well, assuming, of course, that God does not change. An example of a theological insight from Psalm 22 might be: “God may allow a person whom he loves to feel utterly abandoned by him” (Ps 22:1).
- D. Caution: one must always keep in mind what has already been discovered about God from the rest of Scripture. If a proposed insight about God is counter to what is known from elsewhere, the “insight” may be erroneous.
- E. From Psalm 56, the following insights about God would seem to be both logical and legitimate:
  - 1. God approves of individuals requesting that he intervene in their lives to rescue them from suffering (vv. 1-9), *contra* the Stoic philosophy, for example, which encourages one to accept whatever fate the gods have decreed for him or her, rather than trying to get the gods to reconsider or intervene in order to be spared the fated suffering.
  - 2. God may allow a beloved servant of his to be misunderstood, hated, rejected, persecuted, arrested, and to endure much suffering. David has lost his reputation, his job, his home, his security, etc.
  - 3. God does not condemn an individual for being afraid of danger; nor does he condemn a person for expressing that fear to him (v. 3).
  - 4. God wants people to place their ultimate trust in him. If a person is in danger, God would want that individual to put his or her trust in him for safety (vv. 3-4, 10-11).
  - 5. God can enable people in mortal danger to be fearless (i.e., to not experience profound,

debilitating fear), knowing that God is almighty and good, and that he is ultimately in charge of all that happens on this earth and to each person (vv. 3-4, 10-11).

6. God is almighty; his power far exceeds that of mortal men. Ultimately, human beings can do nothing without God's permission—such that a son or daughter of God is totally protected from all harm from humans except that which God allows, presumably for his own good purposes (vv. 4, 11).
7. God may allow his children to find themselves in a dangerous or frightening situation in which they will be harmed or killed unless God intervenes to save them (vv. 1-4).
8. God wants his servants to turn to him and place their trust in him when they are in frightening and dangerous situations (vv. 1-3).
9. God will punish wrongdoers who seek to harm his child. He will eventually right all wrongs (v. 7). [Note: Psalm 56 takes place after David's anointing and before his ascendancy as king.]
10. God will never forget any aspect of suffering endured by one of his sons or daughters. God keeps perfect records of every tear shed and every pain experienced by his child, transforming them in due course to something good (v. 8). Even if no one else remembers, God knows and cares (v. 8).
11. God appreciates expressions of gratitude from individuals when he rescues them from difficult circumstances (vv. 12-13).

### III. Application of the Theological Insights to Our Context

- A. In light of what I learn about God and his ways from this psalm, what modifications should I make in my own daily life?
- B. In expressing a *practical application* of a theological insight, it is now appropriate to use the first person (e.g., "In light of this particular insight about God, I may need to reexamine how I regard the struggles and difficulties in my life.").
- C. So, in light of what I have learned about God and his ways from Psalm 56, what two or three things can I change this week in my thinking and in my actions? I might resolve, for example, that:
  - 1.
  - 2.
  - 3.
- D. When it comes to Psalm 56 and Christ, we can note that Jesus' experience on the cross may have *paralleled* David's experience when he was seized by the Philistines in Gath, though we would be hard pressed to demonstrate that Psalm 56 intended to *prophesy* that experience.