

Many despise God because they do not know Him as the wonderful Savior of sinners that He is. “God is love” (1 Jn 4.8); how could anyone hate love? They doubt His love. These beautiful words were allegedly composed by a rabbi and found on a prison wall a thousand years ago: “Could we with ink the ocean fill, / And were the skies of parchment made; / Were every stalk on earth a quill, / And every man a scribe by trade; / To write the love of God above / Would drain the ocean dry; / Nor could the scroll contain the whole, / Though stretched from sky to sky.” A testimony to God’s love that is even greater is found in John 3.16, 17.

Ancient evidence says David wrote Psalm 143 “when his son Absalom pursued him” (LXX title). That sad providence was a judgment on David’s sin (2 Sam 12.9-13, q.v.). This is the last of seven “penitential psalms” (6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143). The psalmist is a humble sinner seeking grace and mercy from God, not strict justice. Some pray confidently from a sense self-righteousness; God hates their prayers. Others, “God be merciful to me, a sinner;” their prayers please God and will be answered. All boasters will be shamed but the humble penitent will be exalted (Luke 18.9-14).

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Knowing the Lord as the Savior of sinners inspires my prayers for His mercy.

Two main parts: a prayerful lament (1-6) and particular requests (7-12).

- I. I NEED THE SAVIOR OF SINNERS (1-6). He knows his own emptiness and the Lord’s fullness—the soil in which true prayer grows. John the Baptist said of Jesus, “Of his fulness have all we received” (Jn 1.16).
 - A. He hears sinners such as I am (1, 2). The supplicant begs the Supplier. The “servant” petitions the covenant “LORD.” “The ground for answered prayer is the Lord’s commitment [promise, the gospel] to His people” (VanGemeren). The sinner “not justified” [in himself; cf. Rom 3.20] asks a favorable answer of mercy from the Lord who is “faithful” and “righteous” (1 John 1.9). Faithfulness and justice kiss at the cross, the vindication of mercy.
 - B. He cares about sufferers such as I am (3-6). A lament mentioning an enemy, persecution, injury, darkness, deadness, feeling overwhelmed, utterly wretched and unhappy (3, 4). In this state, he remembers/meditates/muses upon the Lord as showers of blessing in salvation history, and prays like parched ground (5, 6). So we pray to the Lord Jesus Christ, the Fount of every blessing.

“O how good and sweet Thou art, Lord Jesus, to the soul that seeks Thee, Jesus, Redeemer of the captives; Savior of the lost; Hope of the exiles; Strength of those that labor; Repose of the anxious spirit; dear Solace and sweet Refreshment of the tearful soul that runs toiling after Thee; Crown of them that conquer; sole Reward and only Joy of the citizens above; full Fountain overflowing with all graces; glorious Offspring of great God; Thyself great God” (*Saint Anselm’s Book of Prayers and Meditations*, 9.49).

- II. I PETITION THE SAVIOR OF SINNERS (7-12). Now he gets particular. This man of faith has huge real life problems. Each verse rehearses one. Instead of trying to save himself from this quicksand, he cries out to the Lord. All his hope is in being drawn out of misery by the Savior.
 - A. For urgent favor in my despair (7). “Answer me soon” (alt.). He is on the edge of the pit of despair. God “hiding His face” seems to be an idiom for indifference, like passing a beggar without help.
 - B. For wisdom in my ignorance (8). To “hear” God’s “lovingkindness” is to have daily answers to prayer. “The way wherein I should walk” is the righteous way of His revealed will wisely applied. Conscience is insufficient. The Bible and the Holy Spirit are indispensable.
 - C. For protection from my enemies (9). An ongoing need in this present life while enemies to God’s people are inevitable. Innocence entails vulnerability; we entrust ourselves to God.
 - D. For faithfulness in my danger (10). Extreme circumstances a huge temptation to sin. Asks not only to “know” (8c) the righteous way, but the grace to “do” it (Jas 4.17). We are not naturally inclined to do God’s will; sin makes us rebellious. True godliness and good works are only possible through the indwelling Holy Spirit (10b) and is His fruit in us (Psa 119.32). “Delight in righteousness is a gift of God. With it we are not cramped by fear in the observance of his commands but led into the broad freedom of love” (Augustine).
 - E. For vitality in my trouble (11). “Give me life” (alt.), whether physical or spiritual, he looks to God as the source of life. We have too little appreciation of our dependence on Him for life. He hears our prayers to survive and thrive for His “name’s sake,” His glory, to put His “righteousness” on display in saving us, for His praise.
 - F. For relief from all oppressors (12). Looks forward to the final end of this present age when divine judgment falls without mercy upon the wicked persecutors of Christ’s body, His church. “Mercy to the Lord’s oppressed children, and justice against their enemies, go together; and the work of justice on persecutors, is a work of mercy to the oppressed” (David Dickson, in loc.). This is the heritage of all who can truly, sincerely, say, “I am thy servant.”

APPLICATIONS

1. Not your supposed righteousness but God’s grace qualifies you to pray for His mercy. Come humbly and He welcomes you (Jas 4.6). We come to God through Christ but we come to Christ directly. “All the fitness He requireth is to feel your need of Him” (TH 393). “On God’s grace we have no claim, / Yet to us His pledge is given; / He hath sworn by His own Name, / Open are the gates of heaven. / Take to heart this word and live: / ‘Jesus sinners doth receive’” (TH 394).
2. Patiently await your deliverance. The psalmist remained a while in the crucible of suffering. “Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning” (Psa 30.5). The morning is almost here. Praise God! Ω