

I hope that you noticed the refrain:

“Each evening they come back, howling like dogs and prowling about the city.”

Have you ever experienced this?

Have you ever experienced the relentless pursuit of someone who has it in for you?

There was one boy in junior high –

I dreaded the very sight of him,

because I knew that as soon as he caught sight of me,
the taunts and insults would start.

What do you do when they keep coming back?

I would suggest that you sing Psalm 59!

In light of the title of this Psalm,

“when Saul sent men to watch his house in order to kill him,”

David is originally referring to assassins.

I don’t suppose that a large percentage of Christians can sing Psalm 59 that way!

Have you ever been stalked by assassins?

But when the Levitical choirs sang this Psalm in the temple,

the people would have heard the story of God’s faithfulness to David and to his house.

And then when the people of God returned to their homes,

they would have remembered God’s faithfulness to David –

and because God is faithful to David, he would also be faithful to them.

And so, even though they might not fear *assassins*,

they could sing this Psalm to one another,
because God is our fortress and strength.

There were many who plotted against our Lord Jesus.

And they kept coming back –

prowling about, looking for some way to trap him.

And ever since the resurrection of Jesus,

ever since Jesus ascended to the right hand of the Father,
the devil prowls around like a roaring lion,
seeking whom he may devour.

Because your enemies are stalking you.

The world, the flesh and the devil keep coming back, howling like dogs.

What do you do when they keep coming back?

Psalm 59 is a great song to sing in the face of temptation –
because the lusts of the flesh, the lusts of the eyes, and the pride of life
are indeed seeking to destroy you!

Psalm 59 consists of two parts:

a cry for help in verses 1-10,
and a song of confidence in verses 11-17.

The two parts are connected by vocabulary and themes.

The opening cry for deliverance speaks of how his foes lie in wait for him

“for no transgression or sin of mine”

while the song of confidence speaks of “the sin of their mouths.”

Likewise, the opening cry declares that “you, LORD God of hosts, are God of Israel,”

while verse 13 wants the peoples to know “that God rules over Jacob.”

Each part also has a middle section – a refrain – that focuses on the return of the dogs.

“Each evening they come back, howling like dogs
and prowling about the city.”

And then each part concludes by speaking of God as my strength, my fortress,

and highlighting God’s *hesed* – his steadfast love –

first, in the future “God *will* meet me in his steadfast love,” (v10)

and then in the present, “for you, O God, are my fortress,

the God who shows me steadfast love.” (v17)

The inscription helps us think through the purpose of the Psalm:

To the choirmaster:

In other words, from its earliest placement in the canon of Scripture,

this Psalm was designed for corporate worship.

While we should sing it with David and Saul in mind,

we should never turn it into David’s private devotions.

This is a song for worship.

according to Do Not Destroy.

As we saw last time, there are four Psalms that are written “according to Do Not Destroy” –

Psalms 57, 58, 59, and 75.

The phrase “Do Not Destroy” occurs twice in the OT before this:

1 Samuel 26:9 – when David and Abishai creep into the camp of Saul,
and Abishai asks permission to strike down Saul,

but David tells his cousin,
“Do not destroy him,
for who can put out his hand against the LORD’s anointed
and be guiltless?”
and Deuteronomy 9:26 – when Moses asks God
“do not destroy your people and your heritage,
whom you have redeemed through your greatness”

David has great confidence that no matter how bad Saul may be,
God has promised that he will not destroy his people –
and so therefore David can endure great personal and corporate injury,
trusting that God will, in his time, remove Saul.

These four Psalms “according to Do Not Destroy”
all share that same confidence.

And finally:

A Miktam^[a] of David, when Saul sent men to watch his house in order to kill him.

1 Samuel 19:11 records this episode.

David’s wife – Saul’s daughter Michal – helped him escape,
and Saul’s son Jonathan covered for him when he fled.

There are a couple of moments in the Psalm that do not connect well with this story –
scholars often struggle with the references to the nations (verses 5 and 8)
and the ends of the earth (v13);
if David is talking about Saul and the internal dynamics of his reign,
then why does he have this international focus.

I would suggest that the theme of “Do Not Destroy” helps us understand this.

Why does David not want to destroy Saul?

Because Saul is the LORD’s anointed.

And God’s purposes for history are centered around his Messiah.

1. My Cry for Help (v1-10)

a. Deliver Me, O God of Israel, for I Have Not Sinned (v1-5)

*59 Deliver me from my enemies, O my God;
protect me from those who rise up against me;
2 deliver me from those who work evil,
and save me from bloodthirsty men.*

Verses 1-2 start with four clear requests:

deliver me, protect me, deliver me, save me!

and equally clear is “from whom” he wants protection:
“from my enemies...from those who rise up against me...
from those who work evil...and from bloodthirsty men.”

Psalms 59 begins with a clear picture of my situation:

I have enemies –
what is more, these enemies have risen up against me –
they are not merely passive “forces,” but active agents –
and more specifically they are “those who work evil” –
they are “evil-doers” – those who do nasty things to others –
and finally, they are bloodthirsty:
they are “men of blood.”

Remember that while this is David talking about Saul’s henchmen,
it is also “to the choirmaster” – for Israel to sing about their foes.
And so, while this is the song of our Lord Jesus Christ, as he prayed in Gethsemane,
it is also our song, as the church asks God to deliver *us* from those who would destroy us.

Verses 3-4 then declare our innocence:

³ *For behold, they lie in wait for my life;
fierce men stir up strife against me.
For no transgression or sin of mine, O LORD,
⁴ for no fault of mine, they run and make ready.*

I have often pointed out that the Psalms frequently have “kiys” –
the Hebrew word translated “for” or “because” is the Hebrew word “kiy.”
Verse three starts, “kiy hinneh” – “for behold” –
which calls attention to what follows:

they lie in wait for my life

And it’s not my fault.

Sometimes people want to say that this is only *really* true for Jesus.
Only Jesus was innocent.
Everyone else is guilty.

Dave Ramsey contributes to this mindset every time he says,
“better than I deserve!” in reply to the greeting, “how are you?”

That is *not* what the Bible says.
It is true that the wages of sin is death – and so everyone deserves death!
So if God operated according to strict justice,

then Adam and Eve would have been struck dead in the Garden,
and there would be nothing else to say.

Plainly, God does not operate according to that sort of justice!

David does not say that he is utterly sinless.

Rather, David says that *in this case*, he is innocent.

David has done nothing worthy of Saul's assassins.

If you are riding a bus in Mexico,
and the police arrest you because they find marijuana under your bus seat,
if you had nothing to do with it,
you may certainly say, "for no transgression or sin of mine, O LORD,
for no fault of mine, they run and make ready."

And so David calls on the LORD to "wake up"!

There are times when it seems like God is sleeping.

If God is my fortress and my stronghold – the one who protects me from my foes –
then there are times when he seems not to be doing his job very well!

Awake, come to meet me, and see!

David has great confidence that if God would come to meet him –
if God would *see* for himself what is going on –
then God would *do something* to save him.

You might think, "it's easy for David to say this – he's the LORD's anointed!"

But then David writes, "to the choirmaster":
people of God, you need to learn how to sing this!

How do you come to God, and say, "God, you need to wake up, come to meet me, and see"?

Well, that's why verse 5 is there:

⁵ *You, LORD God of hosts, are God of Israel.*

In Hebrew there are very few pronouns.

Usually all you need is a suffix to the verb (or noun) to tell you which person is talking.
So when you see a pronoun, it is usually there to highlight something.

And three times in Psalm 59, you see a pronoun at the beginning of a sentence.

Verse 5 – "but you, O LORD"

Verse 8 – "but you, O LORD" (the two verses start exactly the same way)

and verse 16 – “but I”

The key to calling on God the way that David does in Psalm 59
is to keep in mind who are “you” and who am “I.”

You, O LORD God of hosts, are God of Israel.
This is your land.
These are your people.

And You have promised to be faithful to you people –
so therefore, I cry out to you:

*Rouse yourself to punish all the nations;
spare none of those who treacherously plot evil. Selah*

Why does he say “all the nations”?

Yes, in one sense, David is dealing with Saul – an internal Israelite squabble.
But from the book of Judges (and from the book of Samuel, for that matter),
we know that “Israel” at this time is both surrounded by other nations
(the Philistines, the Moabites, the Edomites, etc.),
and permeated by other nations
(in Judges we are told that Israel didn’t actually drive out the nations,
but the nations continued living together with Israel).
[Archeology demonstrates that there was very little disruption in the time of Joshua.
There do seem to be some religious/cultic changes in the land,
but very little disruption of peoples and cities.
But when you read Joshua/Judges carefully,
you realize that only three cities were burned with fire,
and while there were a few major battles that resulted in Israelite victories,
the general report of Judges 1-2 is that the Canaanites remained in the land.
Indeed, the number of non-Israelites both in Saul’s and in David’s administrations
suggests that “Israel” was indeed a mixed multitude.]

But David asks God to “spare none of those who treacherously plot evil.”

How specific should we be?
What about the bully at school?
The politician whose policies you dislike?
The co-worker who seems to have it in for you?

We need to be really careful!
After all, the ninth commandment says,

“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.”
If you are badmouthing the innocent to God,
then you *become* a treacherous plotter!

Remember back in Psalm 52, that David only sang his song of cursing to Doeg
after Doeg betrayed him to Saul and slaughtered the priests.
That’s the level of evidence you need.

Verses 6-7 then provide the first refrain:

b. The Howling Dogs, Prowling about the City (v6-7)

⁶ *Each evening they come back,
howling like dogs
and prowling about the city.*
⁷ *There they are, bellowing with their mouths
with swords in their lips—
for “Who,” they think, ^[b] “will hear us?”*

In ancient Israel, dogs were rarely seen as “pets.”
They could be useful animals for protection or hunting,
but there are no references to dogs as pets in the Bible.

Here, they are plainly a nasty pack of scavengers.
If you are going for a walk *today*, in a neighborhood with lots of pet dogs,
and you hear a lot of barking and howling down the street,
you may think twice about walking down that street.
Now, just imagine going for that walk in a city where there are no pet dogs –
only guard dogs, hunting dogs, and stray dogs.

Enjoy your walk!

That’s where David is.
He hears the howls of Saul’s assassins.
Walking down the street of Gibeah, Saul’s city,
David knows that at any moment a dog could leap out of the shadows.

“Who will hear us?”
Certainly Saul will turn a deaf ear to their bloodshed!

c. My Strength/Fortress Will Meet Me in His Steadfast Love (v8-10)

⁸ *But you, O LORD, laugh at them;
you hold all the nations in derision.*

David has been listening to the dogs – watching their movements as they prowl around the city.
If he keeps watching them, he will forget the most important thing:
“But *you* O LORD”

Verse 8 is our second “but you.”

When he watches and listens to the dogs, he can begin to despair.
And so he turns his eyes and his ears to the heavens,
and he hears the laughter of God.

Oh, that’s right.

Yahweh laughs at the dogs.
You hold all the nations in derision.
There is a later tradition that connects dogs with Gentiles.
Perhaps Psalm 59 played a role in that connection.
Yahweh laughs at the dogs – all the “goyim” – the nations.

If verse 8 focuses on what David hears,
verses 9-10 focus on what David will see:

⁹ *O my Strength, I will watch for you,
for you, O God, are my fortress.*
¹⁰ *My God in his steadfast love^[c] will meet me;
God will let me look in triumph on my enemies.*

Strength

Fortress

when the dogs are chasing me, I need a strong place to take refuge!

Notice again all the “you” and “I” in these verses:

*O my Strength, I will watch for you,
for you, O God, are my fortress.*
*My God in his steadfast love will meet me;
God will let me look in triumph on my enemies.*

Why does David have such confidence?

Because of God’s *hesed* – his “steadfast love” (v10).
Hesed is about covenant loyalty – not just a perfunctory sort of “fidelity to a contract,”
but a genuine and gracious concern and commitment.
The King James translators couldn’t find an English word for this, and so made one up:
Lovingkindness.

The ESV and other modern translations wanted to bring the covenantal aspect of the word
into the mix, and so went with “steadfast love.”

We can cover part two of the Psalm much more briefly,
since it echoes the same basic structure of part one.

2. My Song of Confidence (v11-17)

a. For Their Sin, Let Them Know God Rules Over Jacob (v11-13)

Verse 11 starts with a strange statement:

¹¹ *Kill them not, lest my people forget;*

In light of verse 10 – “let me look in triumph on my enemies,”
one would expect “Kill them” (and especially with the “consume them in wrath”
that comes in verse 13).

But David says, “Kill them not.”

And the reason appears to be similar to what Judges 2-3 says
about why God left the nations to test Israel.

“Lest my people forget.”

If God removes all trial and testing,
then a fate worse than trial and testing may come!
My people may forget the LORD.

So, don’t kill them, O Lord, but:

*make them totter^[d] by your power and bring them down,
O Lord, our shield!*

¹² *For the sin of their mouths, the words of their lips,
let them be trapped in their pride.*

For the cursing and lies that they utter,

¹³ *consume them in wrath;
consume them till they are no more,
that they may know that God rules over Jacob
to the ends of the earth. Selah*

So what’s the difference between killing them and consuming them until they are no more?

If God kills them, then they are out of the picture and gone.

But David is not asking God to be *merciful* to them.

David is asking God to make an *example* of them.

He wants God to demonstrate what happens when you forget God.

When you forget God, you become proud and arrogant.

You start to think that no one will hear you when you speak lies and curses.

You start to speak and act as though no one will do anything to stop you.

And David wants God to use these assassins – these evildoers –
as examples to Israel, that they might remember the danger of forgetting God.

And so David returns to the refrain –
now reminding *us* what these dogs are like:

b. The Howling Dogs, Prowling about the City (v14-15)

¹⁴ *Each evening they come back,
howling like dogs
and prowling about the city.*
¹⁵ *They wander about for food
and growl if they do not get their fill.*

The word “wander” in verse 15 is the same word translated “totter” in verse 11.
David had asked God to make them totter/wander.
Now in the second refrain, David says that is precisely what they are doing.
They are wandering aimlessly around.

The same dogs who were so frightening in verses 6-7
are still prowling the city –
they still come back every evening –
but they no longer strike fear into my heart,
because I know that God is in the process of trapping them in their pride
and consuming them –
bringing them to nothing.

And that’s why after a pair of “but you, O LORD”s,
David now says, “But I”

c. The God Who Shows Steadfast Love Is My Strength/Fortress (v16-17)

¹⁶ *But I will sing of your strength;*

When I remember who you are –
when I hear you laughing at the folly of my foes –
when I watch for you, my fortress and my strength –
then I can sing!

I will sing aloud of your steadfast love in the morning.

The dogs come back every evening.
I lie down and sleep – and (what do you know!)
I sing aloud every morning of your steadfast love – of your *hesed*.

*For you have been to me a fortress
and a refuge in the day of my distress.
17 O my Strength, I will sing praises to you,
for you, O God, are my fortress,
the God who shows me steadfast love.*

Notice how in verse 16 you have the same three key words of verses 8-10 –
“strength,” “fortress” and “steadfast love” –
and again in verse 17 you have the same three key words as well!

John Brown (PODIM), “While I sing, let me think of the opposition made to David’s Lord,
and of the unrelenting vengeance which hath overtaken his enemies, Jewish and heathen,
and shall overtake his antichristian and the opposers –
While his honours are trampled under foot,
let me wait, and trust in God, that at last I may join in the hallelujahs of his
people,
when the smoke of his enemies’ torment ascendeth up forever and ever” (146-47).

Brown is reflecting on Revelation 19,
when the great multitude in heaven hears that Babylon is cast down and destroyed,
they cry out,
“Hallelujah [which means in Hebrew, Praise the LORD!]
Salvation and glory and power belong to our God,
for his judgments are true and just;
for he has judged the great prostitute who corrupted the earth with her immorality,
and has avenged on her the blood of his servants.” (Rev. 19:1-2)

Revelation 22:15 speaks of the New Creation –
and how outside of New Jerusalem “are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral
and murderers and idolaters” –
fitting nicely with the perspective of Psalm 59.

But this is where we always need to be careful.
Do not presume that you know where a particular individual may fit!
Remember that Canaanite woman in Matthew 15?
Not just any old Gentile,
but a Canaanite woman from the region of Tyre and Sidon –
Jezebel’s old stomping grounds.
Her daughter was oppressed by a demon,
and so she came to Jesus crying out, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David!”

He didn’t answer her.

His disciples begged him, “Send her away!”
He said, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”
She came and threw herself at his feet,
“Lord, help me!”

He answered,
“It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.”

Maybe Jesus wasn’t thinking specifically of Psalm 59,
but there are no nicer meanings of “dog” in the OT!

Jesus is saying, “you have no place here.”
And yet –
 he does not send her away!
 he is saying this *to her*.
And she replied,
 “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”

Okay, Lord, I can be a dog –
 if I get to be your dog!

Rarely in the gospels does someone else beat Jesus in a word game!
And it is easy to see that Jesus was pleased to be beaten!
 “O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.”

A Canaanite woman from Tyre and Sidon with a demoniac daughter
 is not the sort of person the disciples had expected in Jesus’ family.
But Jesus had just taught them in the previous verses that it is not the external,
 but the internal, that defiles.

So when they keep coming back –
 howling and prowling around the city –
 and you are singing Psalm 59 giving praise to God for his steadfast love –
don’t be surprised if one of the dogs winds up in the family!