

Lord, Help Me

Psalm 54:1-7

By [Dr. J. Ligon Duncan](#)

January 28, 2004

If you have Bibles I'd invite you to turn with me to Psalm 54. We are continuing through the Second Book of the Psalms now on Wednesday evenings. We started last autumn working through the Second Book of the Psalms at Psalm 42, and we made our way through to Psalm 51, and then we took a break. And then we began again in January on Sunday evenings, and now this past Lord's Day evening Derek has done the second of his messages on the gospel of Mark. And, Lord willing, we'll continue through the gospel of Mark for the rest of the spring and into, perhaps, part of the summer. And so our study of the Psalms will move to Wednesday night and we are in the 54th Psalm. Now the last time we were together in this book we were looking at Psalm 52. Now just keep that in the back of your mind. Joe Holland preached us through Psalm 53 on Sunday evening just a couple of weeks ago. It's a companion Psalm to a Psalm which we had studied earlier in the Psalter in our study of the First Book of the Psalms. It's a Psalm in which God reveals His condemnation of the man who lives as if there is no God. And when we turn to Psalm 54 we see a direct connection, not with Psalm 53 but with Psalm 52. Psalm 52 was a Psalm about David being betrayed, in that case by an Edomite, by a descendent of Esau, by one who was of the nation of Edom. This Psalm is also about David being betrayed, but it has a bitter poignancy; because whereas in Psalm 52 he was betrayed by an Edomite, in Psalm 54 he has been betrayed by his own tribe. Now, before we turn to Psalm 54 and read it and hear it proclaimed, let's look to God in prayer and ask for God's Spirit to illumine our hearts as we hear His word. Let's pray.

Our heavenly Father we bow before You and we acknowledge that Your word is truth. We also acknowledge the dullness of our own hearts, and so we ask by Your Spirit that we would see Your truth and receive it. Speak to us of Christ. Speak to us of the hope we have in Him. Speak to us of the greatness of Your name as we study this, Your word. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Hear God's word. Psalm 54:

For the choir director; on stringed instruments. A Maskil of David, when the Ziphites came and said to Saul, "Is not David hiding himself among us?" 1 Save me, O God, by Thy name, and vindicate me by Thy power. 2

Hear my prayer, O God; give ear to the words of my mouth. 3 For strangers have risen against me and violent men have sought my life; they have not set God before them. Selah. 4 Behold, God is my helper; the Lord is the sustainer of my soul. 5 He will recompense the evil to my foes; destroy them in Thy faithfulness. 6 Willingly I will sacrifice to Thee; I will give thanks to Thy name, O Lord, for it is good. 7 For He has delivered me from all trouble, and my eye has looked with satisfaction upon my enemies.

Amen. And this is God's word. May He add His blessing to it.

This Psalm is fairly straightforward. It comes to us in three parts, and perhaps you've already noticed those parts as we've read through it. The first three verses constitute the petition that David lifts up to God. They also tell us something of the circumstance in which He lifts up that petition to God. Then in verses 4 and 5 David turns from his petition to God to meditate on the person of God and on the work of God, the deeds of God on his behalf. And then in verses 6 and 7, after a resolution brought about by God after God's own deliverance, David gives praise, free praise to God, unconstrained praise to God. And so there is a petition in verses 1 through 3; there is a meditation on the person of God in verses 4 and 5; and then there is this declaration of freely given worship in verses 6 and 7. Let's look through the Psalm together then tonight and I want you to see three things. First of all, this Psalm teaches us that we are to plead God's promises in whatever circumstances. Secondly, it teaches us that we are to preach the person of God to ourselves in prayer. And, thirdly, it teaches us that we are to praise God gladly for who He is and what He does.

I. David pleads the promises of God.

Let's start off with the first one. We are to plead the promises of God to us in prayer in whatever circumstances. The petition and the occasion are described for us both in the heading of the Psalm, which is part of the first verse in the Hebrew Bible, and also in the final verse of this first section, the third verse. Both of those give us something of the occasion of this prayer of David, and we see David here pleading for God's help even in light of the fact that God has promised to spare David. Think about that for a minute: God has made a promise to David to spare him from his enemies. He has made a promise to David to sit him on the throne, and yet here we find David in dire circumstances praying that God will spare him, praying that God will deliver him from his enemies. Now think about that. That's actually, I think, a main point of this first section. Even in light of these dire circumstances, David is pleading for God's help in accordance with the promise of God. The context of this Psalm is again the mortal danger that David finds himself in as Saul tries to track him down. In Psalm 52 David had gone to the priest at Nob and had been given a weapon and had been given food for himself and for his men, and then Saul had slaughtered the priests of Nob.

Perhaps that gives some explanation for why David's own tribesmen will act like they do in this particular Psalm. If you remember the parallel passage in 1 Samuel chapter 23, not only do they go to Saul and tell him that David is hiding in their midst, they virtually give Saul a map back to exactly where David is. They even tell him what hill David is on. And so the Ziphites, even though David had delivered one of their border towns from the Philistines, even though they were tribesmen of David from his area, from his neck of the woods, as it were—they go and turn him in to Saul...and this must have been particularly bitter. David wouldn't have been surprised at all at an Edomite turning him in, but it would have been particularly acute to David's heart to be turned in by a group of people that he had risked his own life to help liberate from the hands of the oppressors of his people, the external nation of the Philistines. And so David is in mortal danger in this Psalm, having been ratted out by the Ziphites as they go to Saul and betray him or attempt to betray him into Saul's hands.

And so verse 1 gives us David's response to this circumstance. It's a prayer for two things: David wants rescue and David wants vindication. He wants rescue because now he's in danger from Saul and his forces. You remember how David gets out of this circumstance? The Philistines attack again and Saul can't follow up. He's after David. He's hot on his heels, but the Philistines attack again and Saul has to take his army and go take care of the Philistines. By the way, isn't that another picture in the Old Testament of the sovereignty of God? God moves even in the enemies of His people in order to spare the king of His people from His people that He might reign over His people. It's a glorious picture of God's sovereignty. And so in this Psalm David is in danger from Saul and his forces, and so he prays for rescue. But he also prays for vindication because he doesn't deserve to be treated this way. He hasn't done anything wrong. David is the most reluctant usurper that ever lived, if I could put it provocatively. He's really not a usurper, is he? He's been anointed by God as king, but he is determined not to snatch that kingship away from Saul. He is determined to let God give the kingship into his hands. And so if ever there was a person to pull off a palace coup with integrity, it was David because he won't raise a hand against the man whom God has told him he has been anointed to replace on the throne of Israel. And so David wants some vindication here. He's being accused by Saul. His name is being run down in all of Israel as a man of no integrity, as a man who is a traitor against his people, even though David is in this position simply because of God's choosing. And so David not only wants rescue, he wants vindication. And what does he base it on? Well, you see it right there in verse 1, "Save me, O God...Vindicate me by—" what? "By Your name and by Your power." In other words, David asks God for rescue and vindication based upon God's name: that is, His character, His attributes, His reputation. The name of God stands for what God is like and who God is. His name reveals Himself. It says something about Him. And David prays to be saved in accordance with God's name and to be vindicated by the power of God. Now it's very interesting that Jesus may be alluding to this very Psalm or to the substance of it in His high priestly prayer. Do you remember what He prays in the high priestly prayer? Turn forward with me to

John chapter 17 for a moment and look at verse 6. What does Jesus say to His heavenly Father in John 17:6? "I manifested Thy name to the men whom Thou gavest Me out of the world." And then look forward to verse 11, "And I am no more in the world; and yet they themselves are in the world, and I come to Thee. Holy Father, keep them in Thy name, the name which Thou hast given me, that they may be one even as we are." Jesus prays here to His heavenly Father and He says, 'Father, I manifested Your name.' In other words, 'I showed these, my disciples, the ones that You had given me...I showed them Your name. I showed them what You were like.' You remember in the very context of John 17...just a few verses before back in John 14, Phillip had said to Jesus, "Jesus, show us the Father; that will be enough." And you remember what Jesus' said, "If you have seen Me, you have seen the Father." He had manifested the name of God. He had shown them what God was like. And He was praying that they would be kept in that name by whom they had been called and the name which Jesus had revealed to them. And here's David appealing to God to deliver him, to rescue him, based on the name and the power of God.

David in verse 2 lifts up a strange plea. It sounds fairly formal, doesn't it? "Save me, O God, by Your name, vindicate me by Your power. Hear my prayer, O God, give ear to the words of my mouth." That sounds fairly formal. It sounds like a stilted phrase that was sort of utilized in numerous places in a vocabulary. But you'll find in the Old Testament when those sorts of phrases are used—"Hear my prayer, O God," "Give ear to the words of my mouth"—they are designed to indicate the urgency of the need. So when someone stands up and says, "Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears," that may sound a little stilted and idiomatic but it's designed to say, 'Hey, I'm getting ready to say something very important.' "Give ear unto my prayer, and hear my cry, O God," is a phrase which is designed to indicate the urgency of what David is asking, and it shows David in the posture of a dependent supplicant. Though he is anointed by God to be the rightful king of Israel, everything that he has comes from the hand of God and he is utterly dependent upon God to provide it.

And that is exactly where we are. We may not realize that's where we are all the time, but we are always in that position of being dependent upon God. William Plumber, the great Southern Presbyterian commentator on the Psalms, says this, "Whatever makes us feel our entire dependence upon God is good for us." Now that phrase is easy to say and hard to believe. You mean, a straying child who keeps me on my knees before God is good for me? You mean a marriage that's struggling that keeps me on my knees before God is good for me? You mean vocational challenges that keep me on my knees before God are good for me? You mean that that cancer diagnosis that I just got is good for me? And the Psalmist's answer is, "Whatever makes us feel our entire dependence upon God is good for us," because we are always entirely dependent upon God. It's just sometimes we wake up and realize it, and unfortunately some of the few times that we wake up and realize it is when we are in those sharp circumstances. And here David, in the midst of a sharp circumstance, feels his entire dependence

upon God and he expresses it, 'Hear, O God. I need you. If You won't hear my prayer, I am done for.' And he pleads to God to hear and listen to him. And he expresses the circumstance of it in verse 3. "Strangers have risen against me, violent men have sought my life; they have not set God before them." And so here's the circumstance. These violent men, these men who are godless, they don't know God; they are not seeking God's will. They're seeking their own ends. They are against Him, and they are seeking his life...and so he pleads to God.

Now let me pull back again and say, David is here pleading promises that God has already made to him. God's already said, 'David, I'm going to set you on the throne. David, I'm going to protect you from your enemies.' But here in a tight spot, David is lifting up a prayer back to God that God will do what God has already said that He would do in His word. Now is that a contradiction? The answer is, "No, it is not a contradiction at all." God is sovereign and David is responsible to plead God's promises back to the sovereign God.

In fact, I want to assert to you that our view of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility will always manifest itself in the way we pray. If we believe in God's sovereignty in such a way as to discount the fact that God who is sovereign uses means, we will probably not be energetic in prayers. We'll say, "Well, God's sovereign. He'll take care of that," and we won't be very energetic in prayer. If we believe that we are responsible and that prayer is an instrument of God's purposes but we don't adequately believe in God's sovereignty, we'll begin to think that our prayers changed the mind of God in the course of history apart from God's will. But if we are biblical and we believe in God's sovereignty and man's responsibility, we will remember that though God appoints His purposes in His decree, He chooses to work out that decree in accordance with means. And one of the greatest means He says in His word that He uses to work out His will is prayer.

So, David is promised that He will sit on the throne, and yet prays to God that God will spare Him in this circumstance. Which of those is right? Both of them are right. God is sovereign but He uses prayer as His instrument for bringing about His will. And so what you think of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility will manifest itself in the way that you pray. And here David prays by pleading God's prior promises back to Him. "Lord, save me...Vindicate me." You've promised that You would do this.' And that is always a healthy practice for us in prayer.

There are sometimes when we do not know how to pray, but we always know how to pray when God has made us a promise. And so when we are having to pray one of those prayers where we don't know quite what to ask for, it is always helpful for us, along with asking God to show us what we don't know what to do right now, to pray along with that the things that God has already shown us that He will do for us. When we pray, 'O Lord, receive me at the end in Jesus' name,' we can pray in confidence because He has promised to do so. When we pray, 'O

Lord, sanctify me by Your Spirit. Sanctify in Your truth. Your word is truth,' we can pray that in confidence because God has said so in His word. And so when we are wrestling with specific circumstances where we don't know exactly how to pray, it is important that alongside of that we are lifting up prayers in which we do know exactly what to pray for and exactly what to expect God to do because He's already promised us in His word. And so we plead for God's help in light of His promise in every circumstance.

II. David preaches the person of God to himself.

Secondly, in verses 4 and 5 we see David's meditation on the person and deeds of God. And here, David is taking confidence in God's person and power. So he's pled God's promises, now He is going to preach the person of God to himself in prayer. And that is a practice which we need to make a regular practice in our prayer, preaching the person of God to ourselves in prayer. David in this section turns to the character of God, and he begins to remind himself of who God is. David has the king of his people hot on his heels. He has armies after him, and David has his little band of supporters. And David pauses to remind himself that 'Him who is with me is greater than the one who is against me,' just as the prophet would see the armies of the Lord surrounding him and could say to his servants that "More are those who are with us than those who are against us."

David now needs to remind himself who it is that's on his side. And he does that in four parts, and you'll see those four parts in verses 4 and 5. First of all, he reminds himself that God is his helper. Now that is a glorious term in the Old Testament. It is a term which comes right out of the world of the military. God is the One who is coming to your aid. He's your ally, as it were. The helper, the aid of a nation was its ally who would come to the rescue at the last moment.

You remember when Napoleon's armies were pounding all day long at Waterloo against Wellington and his 70,000 multinational troops that had been gathered at the spur of the moment to fight against Wellington? Wellington's whole strategy was to hang on until his ally Otto Von Blucher, the prince of Bismarck, arrived with those sixty something thousand Prussian troops. And he waited all day long until finally Blucher got there. His aid, his helper, his ally came and when he came he rolled up Napoleon's forces.

Well, in the Old Testament this idea of helper comes right out of that military imagery. God comes as the helper of His people. And David is reminding himself who it is who's my ally. It's not the Philistines. It's not the Syrians. It's not the Egyptians. My ally is God. He's the God of heaven and earth. He's the God of hosts. That's my ally. It's like Paul saying to himself, "If God be for us, then who [pray tell] can be against us?" What does it matter what is arrayed against us if God is for us? And David's reminding himself of that right here: 'God is my helper.' And we need to remind ourselves of that. When we're facing

circumstances that are beyond our control we are right where God wants us. because that's when He can say, 'Now, you can't figure your way out of this mess so you're going to have to depend on the only One who can—Me, your helper! But remember it's Me, your helper. It's God who is your helper. I can do anything. Nothing is impossible to Me.' And David's having to remind himself of that because he's in a circumstance where he sees no human possibility.

Secondly, he continues to reflect on the character of God in verse 4, "The Lord is the sustainer of my life." Now this is a glorious phrase. David is reminding himself that his life is literally in the hands of the Lord. Now that's so important for David to remember right now because it would be very easy for David to think, 'My life is in the hands of Saul. I'm as good as dead because Saul's forces are coming after me.' But he's reminding himself, 'No, no, no, no my life ultimately is in God's hand.' You remember the minister who said, "We are all immortal until our work is done"? And what he meant by that is, 'Our lives are in God's hands and God will protect us to work in us His will.' And David is reflecting on that great truth. He goes on in verse 5 and he says, "He will recompense the evil to my foes." He's continuing to reflect on the character of God, and he's reminding himself that God Himself is the One who is going to recompense evildoers. It's God who's going to bring about the visitation of justice on those who do evil in the world.

And, finally, in verse 5 he goes on to pray directly to God, "Destroy them in Your faithfulness." Now this is a continuing reflection on the character of God. He's reminding himself that God's destructions of His enemies is an act of God's faithfulness to His promise to David. David is reminding himself that God has already promised to destroy his enemies, and so he's saying, 'Lord, be faithful to what you've already promised to me.' If a believer is to have confidence in prayer and in life, that confidence has to be rooted in knowing who God is. And don't you see what David is doing here? Surrounded by all his foes, he's saying, 'God, You're my helper. God, my life is in Your hand. God, You will visit out justice. God, You will destroy my foes because this is what You're like. You're the aid of Your people. You hold life in Your hand. You are just, and You are faithful to what You promise.' He's beating it into his head. He's pressing it into his heart. He's trying to say, 'Heart, believe this. Heart, believe this. Heart, believe this,' because his heart is having a hard time believing it. He's preaching God to himself in these dire circumstances.

Friends, do you see how we need to do that ourselves everyday? Because when trouble comes it's like we forget everything we ever knew about God sometimes. A dear lady wrote me just a couple of days ago. She teaches women's Bible studies, and writes women's Bible studies material for ladies all across the country. And she's had a long attachment with this congregation. She lives in another state now but she asks a very good question. She said, "If you had to tell a group of people what the three most important questions to ask for a good Bible study are, what would those questions be?" Now, ooh, that's a tough

question. I can only give three? Now that's hard. Here's what I came up with. I said, The first question for Bible study is to ask, "What does this passage teach me about my God?" The second question is, "What does this passage teach me about God's plan of redemption?" And the third question is, "How am I to respond personally to the truth set forth in this passage?" Well, I don't know whether that's the best answer to a really good question that she asked, but it did strike me as I was reading this passage today that that's exactly what David does. He meditates on the truth of who God is. He meditates on God's plan of redemption and then he responds to God.

III. David praises God gladly for who He is and what He does.

And that response you'll see in verses 6 and 7 where we see this declaration of freely given worship, freely offered worship David gives for the divine deliverance. So David pleads the promises of God; he preaches the person of God to himself; and he praises God gladly for who God is and what He does. "Willingly I will sacrifice to You," he says. "I will give thanks to Your name, O Lord, for it is good." In other words, David is saying, 'I'm going to give free will sacrifices to You, O God.' You remember some sacrifices were offered up in the Old Testament on the occasion of a person making a vow? A person would say, 'O Lord, if you will deliver me, I vow to do this.' David as far as we know in this Psalm made no such vow. He simply said, 'Lord deliver me.' He didn't say, 'Lord, on the occasion of Your deliverance of me, I'll offer up a goat, or I'll offer up a ram, or I'll offer up some sort of burnt offering or thank offering or praise offering.' But in this passage David says, 'Lord, though I didn't make that vow, I'm going to offer that sacrifice anyway. I am freely, unconstrainedly going to worship You from a heart of gratitude that glories in giving praise to the God who has delivered.'

And in verse 6 David tells us that he is going to give thanks to God because of His name. We're right back to the name again. In the beginning of the Psalm David appeals to God to hear him because of God's name, His character, His reputation; now he praises God because of His name, His reputation, and character, and he says, "Your name, O God, is good." And in verse 7 he gives thanks to God because God has delivered him from trouble and enemies. Now David is teaching us here that we ought to have to restrain ourselves from the spontaneous desire to worship God for who He is and what He's done for us. David can't wait to offer free and willing unconstrained worship to the living God, because God has answered His prayers.

And the only reason I can think that people would not come into the house of the Lord with the people of God, Lord's Day after Lord's Day, almost bursting at the seams wanting to praise God is because we ourselves don't realize how much God has done for us and who He is for us in Jesus Christ. When David realizes who God is and what He's done, he can't help but want to worship. That ought to

be the way we are when we come into the house of the Lord. David is saying, 'Lord I didn't make a vow, but I want to sacrifice to you anyway. I didn't say, "Lord, if You'll do this then I'll do that," but I want to worship You anyway. I want to praise You anyway because of who You are and because of what You've done.' David pleads God's promises; he preaches the person of God to himself; and he praises God gladly for who He is and what He does. And in so doing he's given us the pattern. This is how we're to respond in all the difficult circumstances of life. Let's look to God now in prayer.

O Lord God, teach us the rhythms and patterns of this Psalm. Engrain them into our own hearts. When troubles come, help us to preach Yourself to us. When troubles come, help us to plead Your promises to You. When troubles come and in Your mercy You either deliver us from those troubles or You enable us to bear up in and through those troubles, teach us to praise you and the God who sustains us, because You are good and You help Your people. These things we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Would you stand for God's blessing? Grace to you, and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

©2013 First Presbyterian Church.

This transcribed message has been lightly edited and formatted for the Web site. No attempt has been made, however, to alter the basic extemporaneous delivery style, or to produce a grammatically accurate, publication-ready manuscript conforming to an established style template.

Should there be questions regarding grammar or theological content, the reader should presume any website error to be with the webmaster/transcriber/editor rather than with the original speaker. For full copyright, reproduction and permission information, please visit the First Presbyterian Church Copyright, Reproduction & Permission statement.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our Theological Editor.

Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine*

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).