

Psalm 141 • Help me stay on the right path

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Psalm chapter 141 – another Psalm of David. As is typical, David is once again asking for God's help and protection. But in this Psalm, he also asks God to help watch over his own heart – because whenever we're in a situation where we're being attacked, or we're in a difficult season, there's always the temptation that we're going to bow to the level of those who are coming against us.

You know what I mean? Some people can stoop pretty low to attack us, but that's not your responsibility. Your responsibility is not to stoop as low as they do. In other words, not to get as low or not to— if they attack you with words, you're not to attack them back. If they come at you with bitterness and hatred, you're not to give bitterness and hatred back.

But that's an incredible temptation, isn't it? I mean, it's very difficult. Our flesh wants to retaliate – at least mine does. And when somebody says something hurtful to me, and painful, you just want to get mad. It feels good to get mad, and it feels good in your flesh to say something really creepy back to him. You know what I mean? So don't fool yourself by thinking that it doesn't feel good. It does feel good. Sinning often feels really good - for a while; and then, we have to pay the consequences of it. Right?

In this Psalm, David is not only going to ask God for protection from his enemies, but he's going to present his heart to the Lord as well – because again, in the midst of the battle, our hearts are vulnerable.

And so, he begins by saying in verse 1:

“O LORD, I call upon you; hasten to me!” (ESV)

And that means, hurry, I need You to quickly respond to me in this. He says:

“Give ear to my voice when I call to you!”

That's a poetic way of saying, please, Lord, hear me when I call to You.

Verse 2:

*“Let my prayer be counted as incense before you,
and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice!”*

A couple of interesting things here is David asks the Lord that his prayer might be seen as the sweet incense that rises before the altar of the Lord during the evening sacrifice.

And this idea that incense in the Old Testament is a picture of prayer, is common throughout the Bible. It's actually given to us in a clearer sort of a visionary form in the Book of Revelation.

Let me show you a passage on the screen from Revelation chapter 5. It says:

Revelation 5:8 (ESV)

And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.

And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, (and then look at this) and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.

John is given this picture of the prayers of the saints coming before the throne of God. But how is it depicted? It's depicted as incense. And so, even in the Old Testament, God had the priests go in and burn incense regularly in the area of where the Ark of the Covenant was. This was this picture of the constancy of God recognizing our prayers.

Have you ever thought about your prayers? Incense has this incredible way of filling a room with just this sweet aroma, and it doesn't go away quickly.

If you've ever burned incense—back in the 70s, for those of you that remember the 70s, remember when burning incense was really big? For a while, everybody was buying incense and these little dish metal dishes that you would burn incense in. I assume there was probably some of that went along with drug use and stuff, but I kind of missed all that. I just played hippie for the most part, but that never got really serious about it. But we burned incense, and some of it smelled really good. Some of it didn't smell that great; some of it was kind of

cheap. But boy, I tell you, when you burned incense, you smelled it for a long time.

And I like the idea or the picture of my prayers coming before the Lord and like a fragrance that fills the presence of the Lord and remains. David asks the Lord to allow his prayers to be just that way.

And now he begins— as it goes on here in verse 3, David prays that God would help him in his own righteousness as he walks out these challenging times. He says in verse 3:

*“Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth;
keep watch over the door of my lips!”*

Now, see, this is the thing. When somebody's talking smack to you and slander or lying – outright lying, oh, it's so easy, isn't it, just to let something come out of our own mouth that is just as hurtful and just as damaging. And so, David prays and says, Lord, help me to *“keep watch over the door of my lips!”* Because he understands the great potential that our mouth is for evil.

And we have to remember that—and when I say, we, I mean Christians, born-again Christians, people who love the Lord, know that you know that you know that you are going to heaven, we can say some really nasty things sometimes. James talks about the tongue in his New Testament letter.

Let me put it on the screen from James chapter 3. He says:

James 3: 7-10 (ESV)

For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.

For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, (they) can (all in some way, shape or form) be tamed and (in fact have) been tamed by mankind, but (you know what he says here?) no human being can tame the tongue. (Just can't do it. Here's why.) It is a restless evil, (and it's) full of deadly poison. (He goes, check it out:) With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with (that same tongue) we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. (He

says:) *From the same mouth come blessing and cursing.* (And then he says:) *My brothers, (that) these things ought not to be so.*

That ought not to be. That kind of duplicity not ought to be. David understands that same danger. So, he's praying here the Lord would help him. Help my words to be honoring to You. Look what he says in verse 4. He continues to pray and says:

*“Do not let my heart incline to any evil,
to busy myself with wicked deeds
in company with men who work iniquity,
and let me not eat of their delicacies!”*

And that's a very poetic way of saying, Lord, help me not to love the things they love – because the whole idea of whatever wicked people run after can be pretty tempting, can look pretty attractive. That's why he says, *“let me not eat their delicacies.”* Let me not run after the things that they run after.

And then he talks about if the Lord is going to rebuke him for anything. Check out verse 5. This is very interesting. He says:

*“Let a righteous man strike me—it is a kindness;
let him rebuke me—it is oil for my head;”*

They would pour oil on each other's heads as a way of refreshing you after being out in the hot sun, working hard, whatever, traveling. If you poured oil on somebody's head today, they'd probably slug you. But it was considered a real way of blessing someone. And he's saying here that if a brother, a righteous man, rebukes me, I'll consider it like him pouring oil over my head. I'll consider it an act of refreshing me, and I won't refuse it. He says, I won't refuse it.

What is David saying here? He wants the Lord to know that he is willing to receive correction, if the Lord deems it necessary. But what David is saying to God is, if You need to correct me, let it come through a righteous man.

And here's why he's saying that: David knew the history of Israel, and the history of Israel was such that whenever they would become hardhearted, whenever they would become stubborn, what would God do? He'd raise up one of their enemies, really, one of their neighboring nations, to come against them, and then they would afflict them, and they would do all kinds of nasty things to them, and sometimes even enslave them.

So, David is praying here that God is not going to have to resort to the kind of discipline that requires an enemy to be used to open up his heart and mind. He says— we're in the middle of verse 5— he says:

*“Yet my prayer is continually against their evil deeds.
6 When their judges (or your Bible may say rulers) are thrown over the cliff,
then they shall hear my words, for they are pleasant.”*

And then verse 7, I have to tell you, is a very challenging verse to interpret. In the original Hebrew, we know what it says word for word, but we're not exactly sure what it means. The ESV renders it this way:

*“As when one plows and breaks up the earth,
so shall our bones be scattered at the mouth of Sheol.”* (or the mouth of the grave).

What we're not sure about is what is meant by that, or how—we're not sure if it was a saying that they— in fact, if you have an NIV Bible, it actually puts this verse in quotations as if the enemy is saying it. But most of the other modern English translations don't do that. They interpret it differently as if David is the one saying it.

But frankly, none of them really know exactly what he's saying. So, it's one of those challenging, probably Hebrew-isms, or sayings that has lost its meaning over the years.

But he goes on in verse 8, and says:

“But my eyes are toward you, O God, my Lord;”

In other words, I'm keeping my eyes on you fixed on you in You, Lord. He says:

“in you I seek refuge; leave me not defenseless!”

Then David ends the prayer that his enemies would fall into their own traps, in verse 9, saying:

*“Keep me from the trap that they have laid for me
and from the snares of evildoers!
10 Let the wicked fall into their own nets,
while I pass by safely.”*