

PSALM LIV.

TITLE.—To the Chief Musician on Neginoth. *The music was to be that of stringed instruments. Variety is to be studied in our tunes, and in all other matters relating to sacred song. Monotony is often the death of congregational praise. Providence is varied, and so should our recording songs be. Maschil. We are to learn and to teach by what we sing. Edification must not be divorced from Psalmody. A Psalm of David. David's productions were as plentiful as they are profitable. His varied life was for our benefit, for from it we derive these hymns, which at this hour are as fresh and as precious as when he wrote them. When the Ziphims came and said to Saul, Doth not David hide himself with us? To curry favour with Saul they were guilty of gross inhospitality. What cared they what innocent blood was shed so that they earned the graceless monarch's smile! David came quietly among them, hoping for a little rest in his many flights, but they desecrated him in his solitary abode, and betrayed him. He turns to God in prayer, and so strong was his faith that he soon sang himself into delightful serenity.*

DIVISIONS.—From verse 1 to 3, where the *Selah* makes a pause for us, the Psalmist pleads with God, and then in the rest of the song, laying aside all doubt, he chants a hymn of joyful triumph. The vigour of faith is the death of anxiety, and the birth of security.

EXPOSITION.

SAVE me, O God, by thy name, and judge me by thy strength.

2 Hear my prayer, O God; give ear to the words of my mouth.

3 For strangers are risen up against me, and oppressors seek after my soul: they have not set God before them. *Selah*.

1. "*Save me, O God.*" Thou art my Saviour; all around me are my foes and their eager helpers. No shelter is permitted me. Every land rejects me and denies me rest. But thou, O God, wilt give me refuge, and deliver me from all my enemies. "*By thy name,*" by thy great and glorious nature. Employ all thine attributes for me. Let every one of the perfections which are blended in thy divine name work for me. Is not thine honour pledged for my defence? "*And judge me by thy strength.*" Render justice to me, for none else will or can. Thou canst give me efficient justice, and right my wrongs by thine omnipotence. We dare not appeal to God in a bad cause, but when we know that we can fearlessly carry our cause before his justice we may well commit it to his power.

2. "*Hear my prayer, O God.*" This has ever been the defence of saints. As long as God hath an open ear we cannot be shut up in trouble. All other weapons may be useless, but all-prayer is evermore available. No enemy can spike this gun. "*Give ear to the words of my mouth.*" Vocal prayer helps the supplicant, and we keep our minds more fully awake when we can use our tongues as well as our hearts. But what is prayer if God hear not? It is all one whether we babble nonsense or plead arguments if our God grant us not a hearing. When his case had become dangerous, David could not afford to pray out of mere custom, he must succeed in his pleadings, or become the prey of his adversary.

3. "*For strangers are risen up against me.*" Those who had no cause for ill-will had gone against him; persons to whom he could have given no offence, for they were strangers to him. They were aliens to his God also, and should these be allowed to worry and destroy him. A child may well complain to his father when strangers come in to molest him? What right have they to interfere? Let them leave off meddling and mind their own concerns. "*And oppressors seek after my soul.*" Saul, that persecuting tyrant, had stamped his own image on many more. Kings generally coin their own likeness. He led the way, and others followed seeking David's soul, his blood, his life, his very existence. Cruel and intense were they in their malice, they would utterly crush the good man; no half measures

would content them. "*They have not set God before them.*" They had no more regard for right and justice than if they knew no God, or cared for none. Had they regarded God they would not have betrayed the innocent to be hunted down like a poor harmless stag. David felt that atheism lay at the bottom of the enmity which pursued him. Good men are hated for God's sake, and this is a good plea for them to urge in prayer. "*Selah.*" As if he said, "Enough of this, let us pause." He is out of breath with indignation. A sense of wrong bids him suspend the music awhile. It may also be observed, that more pauses would, as a rule, improve our devotions: we are usually too much in a hurry: a little more holy meditation would make our words more suitable and our emotions more fervent.

4 Behold, God *is* mine helper: the Lord *is* with them that uphold my soul.

5 He shall reward evil unto mine enemies: cut them off in thy truth.

6 I will freely sacrifice unto thee: I will praise thy name, O LORD; for *it is good.*

7 For he hath delivered me out of all trouble: and mine eye hath seen *his desire* upon mine enemies.

4. "*Behold, God is mine helper.*" He saw enemies everywhere, and now to his joy as he looks upon the band of his defenders he sees one whose aid is better than all the help of men; he is overwhelmed with joy at recognising his divine champion, and cries, "*Behold.*" And is not this a theme for pious exultation in all time, that the great God protects us, his own people: what matters the number or violence of our foes when HE uplifts the shield of his omnipotence to guard us, and the sword of his power to aid us? Little care we for the defiance of the foe while we have the defence of God. "*The Lord is with them that uphold my soul.*" The reigning Lord, the great Adonai is in the camp of my defenders. Here was a greater champion than any of the three mighties, or than all the valiant men who chose David for their captain. The Psalmist was very confident, he felt so thoroughly that his heart was on the Lord's side that he was sure God was on *his* side. He asked in the first verse for deliverance, and here he returns thanks for upholding: while we are seeking one mercy which we have not, we must not be unmindful of another which we have. It is a great mercy to have some friends left us, but a greater mercy still to see the Lord among them, for like so many cyphers our friends stand for nothing till the Lord sets himself as a great unit in the front of them.

5. "*He shall reward evil unto mine enemies.*" They worked for evil, and they shall have their wages. It cannot be that malice should go unavenged. It were cruelty to the good to be lenient to their persecutors. It is appointed, and so it must ever be, that those who shoot upward the arrows of malice shall find them fall upon themselves. The recoil of their own gun has often killed oppressors. "*Cut them off in thy truth.*" Not in ferocious revenge is this spoken, but as an Amen to the sure sentence of the just Judge. Let the veracity of thy threatenings be placed beyond dispute, the decree is right and just, let it be fulfilled. It is not a private desire, but the solemn utterance of a military man, a grossly injured man, a public leader destined to be a monarch, and a man well trained in the school of Moses, whose law ordains eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.

6. "*I will freely sacrifice unto thee.*" Spontaneously will I bring my free-will offerings. So certain is he of deliverance that he offers a vow by anticipation. His overflowing gratitude would load the altars of God with victims cheerfully presented. The more we receive, the more we ought to render. The spontaneousness of our gift is a great element in their acceptance; the Lord loveth a cheerful giver. "*I will praise thy name, O Lord.*" As if no amount of sacrifice could express his joyful feelings, he resolves to be much in vocal thanksgiving. The name which he invoked in prayer (verse 1), he will now magnify in praise. Note how roundly he brings it out: "*O Jehovah.*" This is ever the grand name of the revealed God of Israel, a name which awakens the sublimest sentiments, and so nourishes the most acceptable praise. None can praise the Lord so well as those who have tried and proved the preciousness of his name in seasons of adversity. The Psalmist adds, "*for it is good,*" and surely we may read this with a double nominative, God's name is good, and so is his praise. It is of great use to our souls to be much in praise;

we are never so holy or so happy as when our adoration of God abounds. Praise is good in itself, good to us, and good to all around us. If David's enemies are described in the third verse as not setting God before them, he here declares that he is of a different mind from them, for he resolves to have the Lord in perpetual remembrance in his sacrifices and praises.

7. "*For he hath delivered me out of all trouble.*" Up to that time deliverance had come, and for that danger also he felt that rescue was near. David lived a life of dangers and hair-breadth 'scapes, yet was he always safe. In the retrospect of his very many deliverances he feels that he must praise God, and looking upon the mercy which he had sought as though it were already received, he sang this song over it—

"And a new song is in my mouth,
To long loved music set,
Glory to thee for all the grace
I have not tasted yet."

Out of all trouble our covenant God is pledged to bring us, and therefore even now let us uplift the note of triumph unto Jehovah, the faithful preserver of them that put their trust in him. Thus far we have proved his promise good; he changes not, and therefore in all the unknown future he will be equally our guardian and defence, "showing himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward him." "*And mine eyes hath seen his desire upon mine enemies.*" He knew that yet he should look on his haughty foes, gazing down on them in triumph as now they looked on him in contempt. He desired this as a matter of justice, and not of personal pique. His righteous soul exulted because he knew that unprovoked and gratuitous malice would meet with a righteous punishment. Could we keep out of our hearts all personal enmity as fully as the Psalmist did in this Psalm, we might yet equally feel with him a sacred acquiescence and delight in that divine justice which will save the righteous and overthrow the malicious.

In closing, let us trust that if we are friendless as this man of God, we may resort to prayer as he did, exercise the like faith, and find ourselves ere long singing the same joyous hymn of praise.

EXPLANATORY NOTES AND QUAIN T SAYINGS.

Title.—From the inscription, learn, 1. Particular straits and particular deliveries should be particularly remarked: as David here remembereth the danger he was in by the treachery of the *Ziphims*. 2. Mighty men will find readily more friends in an evil cause, than the godly do find in a good cause: as Saul has the *Ziphims* to offer their service to his cruelty, when David was in straits. 3. The wicked are very hearty to do an ill turn, and glad to find occasion of it. "*Doth not David,*" say they, "*hide himself with us?*" as if this had been good and blessed news.—*David Dickson* (1583—1662), in "*A Brief Explication upon the Psalms.*"

Whole Psalm.—The church has taken a clear view in appointing this as one of the Psalms in commemoration of the passion of Jesus. It is seen with greatest effect as a simple prophecy of Christ. Read thus, it is very plain and intelligible; requiring little more than the first idea to exhibit a perfect correspondence with the life and feelings of the Messiah.—*William Hill Tucker*, in "*The Psalms . . . with Notes,*" 1840.

Whole Psalm.—In the first three verses, David being sought for by his enemies, prays against them. That was his course, he always began his conflict with God, contending and wrestling with him for a blessing and assistance. He durst not lift up his hand even against the enemies of God (yet what durst not David do?) till he had first lifted them up in humble supplication to the Lord his strength, "Who taught his hands to war, and his fingers to fight." Psalm cxliv. 1. This being done, his courage breaks out like lightning, he doubts not of slaying his thousands and ten thousands. So in the fourth and fifth verses, he becomes his own prophet, promising himself victory. For who can resist him who hath omnipotence for his second? Or how can any enemy maintain a fight against that captain who hath beforehand defeated and broken their forces by his prayers? assured his conquest before he put on his armour? Then in the last verses, David concludes

where he began, thankfully acknowledgeth God's goodness in his deliverance, and the dissipation of his enemies, obliging himself to a return of dutiful, affectionate service, in consideration of so great mercies received.—*J. Dolben, in a Thanksgiving Sermon, 1665.*

Whole Psalm.—Blessed Redeemer! give me grace to eye thee, and to call to my recollection thine exercises amidst the false friends and open foes, which in the days of thy flesh surrounded thee. Lord! help me so to consider thee, who didst endure such a contradiction of sinners against thyself, that I may not be weary and faint in mind. And while the Ziphims of the present hour harass and distress me, and would deliver my soul up into the hand of the enemy: oh! for grace to be looking unto thee, and deriving strength from thee, that I may discover thy gracious hand delivering me out of all my troubles, and making me more than conqueror in thy strength, and in the power of thy might.—*Robert Hawker, D.D., 1753—1827.*

Verse 1.—“*Save me, O God!*” As David was at this time placed beyond the reach of human assistance, he must be understood as praying to be saved by the *name and the power of God*, in an emphatical sense, or by these in contradistinction to the usual means of deliverance. Though all help must ultimately come from God, there are ordinary methods by which he generally extends it. When these fail, and every earthly stay is removed, he must then take the work into his own hands. It was in such a situation that David here fled to the saints' last asylum, and sought to be saved by a miracle of divine power.—*John Calvin.*

Verse 1.—“*Judge me by thy strength,*” or power, *i.e.*, determine, decide my cause by thy mighty power. Saul, in the cause between him and David, was resolved to end it by force only, and to arbitrate in no other way than by a javelin, a sword, or his forces. The Psalmist well knew that Saul, in this respect, would be too hard for him; and therefore applies for protection and justice to one whose power he knew was infinitely superior to his adversaries, and who, he was assured, could and would defend him.—*Samuel Chandler (1693—1766), in “A Critical History of the Life of David.”*

Verse 2 (second clause).—Let “*the words of my mouth*” with which I have defended my cause, be pleasing and acceptable to thee. For in this way can *prayers* and words of *the mouth* be correctly distinguished, unless any one should wish simply to understand by them *prayers uttered by the mouth*; but, as I have said, the phrase is more emphatic.—*Hermann Venema, 1697—1787.*

Verse 3.—“*Strangers:*” aliens to his truth, men who from unbelief have estranged themselves from all lot and portion in his covenant—oppress and persecute.—*William Hill Tucker.*

Verse 3 (first clause).—The Chaldee interpreter reads, *proud men*, instead of “*strangers,*” a reading which also is found in eight of Kennicott's Codices. So also Psalm lxxxvi. 14.—*William Walford, in “The Book of Psalms. A New Translation,” etc., 1837.*

Verse 3 (first clause).—There is a great mistake made by rendering the word זָרִים (*zarim*) “*strangers.*” The Ziphites surely were Israelites, and not strangers. The fact is this, that word is taken from זָרָה (*zarah*) the primary meaning of which is “*to scatter,*” “*to disperse,*” also “*to sift,*” as grain. Hence it signifies, likewise figuratively, to sift a matter, to investigate, to search out, to trace out. So here David complains of the new and dangerous enemies he had got in the Ziphites, who became Saul's spies. When he pleads, therefore, for deliverance, saying, “*Save me, O God,*” etc., he describes the danger he was in: “*For spies have risen against me.*”—*Benjamin Weiss, in “New Translation, Exposition and Chronological Arrangement of the Psalms,” 1858.*

Verse 3.—“*Oppressors seek after my soul;*” *i.e.*, my life at least; my soul also they would destroy, if it lay in their power, as the Papists delivered up John Huss to the devil.—*John Trapp, 1611—1662.*

Verse 3.—“*Selah.*” See “*Treasury of David,*” Vol. I., pp. 23, 26, 27; and Vol. II., pp. 224—227.

Verse 4.—“*Behold,*” says he, I produce a certain fact, well-known, demonstrated by a new proof, and worthy of all attention; for the particle *behold*, contains this breadth of meaning.—*Hermann Venema.*

Verse 4.—Christ sees with the utmost clearness, that God will be his *own*

“*helper*,” and of them—the disciples and believers—“*that uphold his soul*.” In the same moment, does he foresee the destruction of his enemies. He views, in thought, the armies of Titus, the fall of the Jewish nation, and the dispersion of the remnant. He beholds the avenging hand of God, stretched in fury over the destroyers.—*William Hill Tucker*.

Verse 4 (second clause).—Such as take part with the persecuted saints, God will take part with them: “*The Lord is with them that uphold my soul*.”—*David Dickson*.

Verses 4, 5.—He is assured of help to himself and to his friends, and of vengeance to his enemies. Whence learn, 1. Fervent prayer hath readily a swift answer, and sometimes wonderfully swift, even before a man have ended speech, as here David findeth in experience. “*Behold*,” saith he, “*God is my helper*.” 2. The sight of faith is very clear, and piercing through all clouds, when God holds forth the light of his Spirit unto it, it can demonstrate God present in an instant; ready to help in greatest straits: “*Behold, God is my helper*.” 3. There is more joy in God’s felt presence than grief in felt trouble; for, “*Behold, God is mine helper*,” was more comfortable to David than his friends’ unkindness, and strangers’ malice was grievous.—*David Dickson*.

Verse 5.—“*Cut them off*.” He desires that God would destroy them with a *death-dealing blow*, which is the force the word נָפַח contains; its primitive sense is *to be silent, to keep silence*, whence it is transferred to a stroke penetrating deeply and striking fatally, such as is called a *silent blow*, opposed to a *sounding one*, which is wont to rebound and not pierce deeply.—*Hermann Venema*.

Verse 6.—“*I will freely sacrifice unto thee*.” He would *sacrifice freely*: by which he does not allude to the circumstance, that sacrifices of thanksgiving were at the option of worshippers, but to the alacrity and cheerfulness with which he would pay his vow when he had escaped his present dangers.—*John Calvin*.

Verse 7.—“*Mine eye hath seen his desire upon mine enemies*.” Or, *mine eye hath looked upon mine enemies*; that is, he was able to meet them without terror.—*Samuel Davidson, D.D., 1852*.

Verse 7.—The reader will note that the words *his desire* are supplied by our translators, and are not in the original text.—*C. H. S.*

HINTS TO PREACHERS.

Verse 1.—In the deliverance of the saints the honour and power of God are concerned. I. Their failure would dishonour both. II. Their salvation glorifies both. III. Both are immutable, therefore we have a sure plea at all times.

Verse 2.—Our main concern in prayer. I. What is meant by God’s hearing prayer. II. How we may know that he has done so. III. What is to be done when this is doubtful. IV. What is due to him when the hearing is given.

Verse 3.—Strange trials. I. They are not altogether strange. 1. Not so to God. 2. Not so in the history of the church. 3. Not so to the provisions of grace wherein they are anticipated. II. Wherein they are strange. 1. They reveal God anew. 2. Endear forgotten promises. 3. Train unused graces. 4. Bring new praises, etc.

Verse 3 (last clause).—The root of sin: if they remembered his authority they dared not, if they tasted his love they would not, if they were conformed to his nature they could not.

Verse 4.—A theme for wonder. 1. At his unmerited grace, that he should side with *me*. 2. At his gracious power, for who can resist him? 3. At his practical help, for he has upheld my soul.

Verse 6.—We should sacrifice voluntarily, liberally, joyfully, continuously, with pure motive.

Verse 6.—The goodness of praising the good name.

Verse 7 (first clause).—The exclamation of the newly-pardoned penitent, the cry of the delivered saint, the song of the ripe Christian, the shout of the glorified believer.