

RESPONDING TO

GOD

WEEK 5: PSALM 56

Throughout the Old Testament, the concept of *Shalom* is intended to touch the different layers of ‘order’ in our world. When this word is translated into English, we get a very poor substitute with the word ‘peace’. The word ‘shalom’ embodies the ideas of soundness, completeness, security, welfare, peace, harmony and safety. Shalom is meant to permeate our relationship with God, our internal (mental, emotional and cognitive) state of being, our relationships with each other, our relationships with those around us and our relationship with the physical environment. When we looked at Psalm 15, we focused particularly on ways in which we can seek to live at peace and harmony with each other in the context of both our faith community and with our neighbours.

When sin entered the world, this *shalom* was broken. Sin not only impacted upon our relationship with God, but on every part of our lives: the IN, the UP and the OUT. This week we are looking at the second of the **Psalms of the Disordered World**. Negative relationships – both with those inside and outside the community of faith – can very much impact us. On one level, conflict can be physical and impersonal. But, more often, conflict occurs in the context of relationships with people that we know, so words spoken can be very painful and cut deep.

ICEBREAKER: What sort of conflict upsets and stresses you most?

PRAY: Praise God that he “is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear ...”. (Ps 46:1-2)

READ: Psalm 56 (below is the text in New Living Translation. Please also keep whatever Bible translation that you use, open. There are some parts of this Psalm that have variations in translation.)

O God, have mercy on me, for people are hounding me. My foes attack me all day long. I am constantly hounded by those who slander me, and many are boldly attacking me.

But when I am afraid, I will put my trust in you. I praise God for what he has promised. I trust in God, so why should I be afraid? What can mere mortals do to me?

They are always twisting what I say; they spend their days plotting to harm me. They come together to spy on me— watching my every step, eager to kill me.

Don't let them get away with their wickedness; in your anger, O God, bring them down. You keep track of all my sorrows. You have collected all my tears in your bottle. You have recorded each one in your book.

My enemies will retreat when I call to you for help. This I know: God is on my side!

I praise God for what he has promised; Yes, I praise the LORD for what he has promised.

I trust in God, so why should I be afraid? What can mere mortals do to me?

I will fulfill my vows to you, O God, and will offer a sacrifice of thanks for your help.

For you have rescued me from death; you have kept my feet from slipping. So now I can walk in your presence, O God, in your life-giving light. [NLT]

The attacks on the Psalmist seem to come from two angles: on one hand there are military words and images, so the threat could be physical. At the same time, there is a prolonged and persistent personal attack on his credibility, character and reputation. As in Ps 51, there is abuse of power. In 2016, we often see prolonged personal attacks against public figures in the media. Similarly, internet bullying and slugging has massive impacts.

- What words and phrases tell us about the nature of the attack on him? What are the very real physical and emotional impacts on him?

The title of the Psalm indicates the context of “when the Philistines seized him in Gath” (see 1 Sam 21:10–22:1). Tanner comments that “The exact trouble, however, is not specified and thus (the Psalm) could apply to any circumstance where the person praying feels surrounded and pursued by those wishing harm.”

This Psalm has two halves and there are lots of ideas that keep repeating. Some of the frequent words are: “all day”, “afraid”, “trust”, “God/ LORD”, “flesh/ mortal man”, “praise”, “word”. Here’s one suggestion re structure:

Cry to God for rescue from enemies (v1-2)

Declaration of trust (v3-4)

Description of the acts of the enemies (v5-6)

Petition for God to act against the enemies (v7-9)

Declaration of trust (v10-11)

Offering of thanksgiving for deliverance (v12-13)¹

- Read v3-4 and v9-11 again. Tate comments that “Fear and faith struggle together in this Psalm. But faith seems dominant and the Psalm’s message is one of confidence in God.”² In this Psalm - what is the role of God’s word and his promises, in sustaining our faith? And what is the role of praise?

Another contrast in these verses is between man (flesh/ mortals) as against God. We read two rhetorical questions: “what can man do to me?” The Psalmist seems to be reminding himself that he is aided in this battle by his VERY BIG GOD – and, by comparison – his enemies, who are merely human, are very small and weak.

- What happens when we forget that God is bigger than our personal circumstances? How can we consciously remind ourselves (and each other) to keep bringing our circumstances before God?

A very real human tendency is for us to try to fight our own battles. Also, we can sometimes use ungodly means to try to solve our own problems. God not only wants to fight our battles for us, but to help, sustain and strengthen us. Through Scripture, we see a contrast between God’s Spirit vs human strength (flesh).

- Ask different people in your group to READ the following verses. After each passage is read, ask: in this situation, what did it look like for people to exercise faith/ trust? What warning is given? What could they expect God to do for them?

2 Chron 32:7-8; Is 31:1-3; Ps 118:5-9; Jer 17:5-8; Rom 8:25-27, 31-33.

In Ps 56: 7-8, the Psalmist asks God to collect evidence (like a victim impact statement), to justify retribution against the enemies. Firstly, his tears are recorded/ written down on a scroll. Secondly, his tears are collected in a bottle (or more literally, the kind of skin that would be used to carefully preserve wine, milk or water).

- In v1, the Psalmist pleads to God for mercy for himself. Later, he pleads with God, to not show mercy to his enemies or let them get away with their acts. Given that we all do things that make God angry, is the Psalmist right to be asking for God’s justice and vengeance on his enemies? What are your thoughts?

It is only in verses 12-13, that we read that the Psalmist has been spared from death and stumbling. He responds with acts of gratitude.

- How do you respond to God’s mercy and salvation? Do you take it for granted? Or realise the enormity of God’s grace and mercy towards you? How does that impact how you live each day?

REFLECT on the following verses: *Your love, O LORD, reaches to the heavens, your faithfulness to the skies. Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains, your justice like the great deep.* (Ps 36:5-6)

PRAY: Ask God to bring his righteousness, justice, life and light to hard situations in your life.

¹ deClaisse-Walford, N., & Tanner, B. (2014). Book Two of the Psalter: Psalms 42–72. In E. J. Young, R. K. Harrison, & R. L. Hubbard Jr. (Eds.), *The Book of Psalms* (p. 485). Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

² Tate, M.E. (1990). Psalms 51-100. Word Biblical Commentary. Vol 20. Dallas, TX: Word Books.