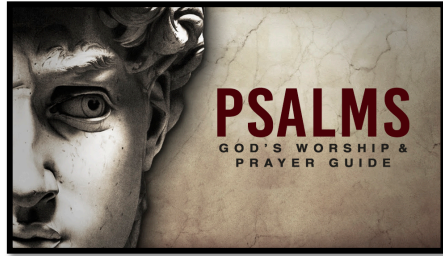


Psalms: God's Worship & Prayer Guide

Maturity & Hostility: A Believer's Balance

Psalm 141
 Written By
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Talk about a saint who experienced his share of hostility. That was David. Even though God had dethroned the inept, egotistical, power-hungry Saul, and replaced him with the young, unproven, but humble shepherd from Bethlehem, Saul didn't go quietly into the political night. No, he looked for every opportunity to either eliminate his political opposition, or to make his life miserable. Whether it was an attempt on the young man's life by means of some of his military men (1 Sam. 19:1ff), or hunting him down like a dog in the Dead Sea region (1 Sam. 21), Saul's insane jealousy of David's political and military prowess knew no bounds. Imagine being chosen as the king of God's people, and your path to the throne was one of opposition, anger, subversion, and outright lies. David could have called it quits anytime, but as a man after God's own heart, he chose to live a holy life in hostile times. You, too, are faced with the same choice in the times in which you live. How will you fare?

Once Saul died and David assumed the throne, life didn't get any easier. Wanting the throne above all else, David's son, Absalom, a favorite of the people, rebelled against his father, forcing him to literally run for his life as he arrogantly crowned himself king in Hebron, a small hamlet about twenty miles south of Jerusalem (2 Sam. 15:1). Thousands of dead Israelites later David eventually reclaimed the throne; however, he had also lost a son, too.

David did accomplish much for God, but pernicious people constantly dogged him. If it wasn't the Philistines acting up (2 Sam. 5:17ff), it was Israel's ancient enemy the Ammonites or Syrians (2 Sam. 8; 10). To read about the king's life is to see how trouble typically came his way from all points of the proverbial compass. Yet still David lived a noble godly life in the face of ongoing opposition to his person and position. How did he do this? How did he remain spiritually effective with so many in his life and culture bent on his demise? How did he make sure his life stayed the spiritual course when so many mean-spirited, dysfunctional, and selfish people wanted him to drift off-course so his life impact would be minimized?

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These questions, which just might be your questions as you, too, live at a time where people still love darkness more than light, are answered in Psalm 141. Here David shares not just his heart, but his strengths and weaknesses as a man, coupled with insights into how he pushed forward when most would have been tempted to pull back and live in quiet obscurity. Homiletically, we can best understand David's counsel here by reducing it to a question:

How Do You Achieve Maturity Amidst The Hostility (Psalm 141)?

What hostility? I, along with David, am talking about the hostility you are facing, or will face, for your faith in faithless times. Paul, who faced the fire of his faith many times, wrote these insightful words to Pastor Timothy:

¹⁰ But you followed my teaching, conduct, purpose, faith, patience, love, perseverance, ¹¹ persecutions, *and* sufferings, such as happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium *and* at Lystra; what persecutions I endured, and out of them all the Lord delivered me! ¹² And indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. ¹³ But evil men and impostors will proceed *from bad* to worse, deceiving and being deceived. ¹⁴ You, however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned *them*; ¹⁵ and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶ All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; ¹⁷ that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work (2 Tim. 3).

Sound advice from a seasoned, old pastor to a young, up and coming pastor. Paul, like David of old, knew that godly living stirs up opposition for wicked people do not want spiritual truth and moral living upsetting their love affair with sin. So, they do what comes natural. They persecute believers in order to sideline and perhaps silence them so they can continue in their sin unabated. They did it to David, Paul, and Timothy, and, as Paul warns here, these folks will only increase as we approach the eschatological end of time. How should we function? We should do what Paul says. Let me paraphrase: *Stay in the Scriptures and let them teach and transform you.* With this in mind, I invite you to join me as we see what the Scriptures from Psalm 141 can teach us about moving onto maturity even when our carnal culture turns up the heat.

Looking over David's wise words here, I believe he gives us seven proven methods for living for God amongst those who oppose the faith. Believe me, each point could be a study in and of itself, so suffice it to say we will limit our analysis and thoughts to the salient facets of each one. Perhaps you can go back at a later day and do a little more digging on your own.

First up, David cuts to the quick of issue.

Get Into Prayer (Psalm 141:1-2)

After identifying himself as the author of this worship psalm, David jumps right into what you should be doing as you face opposition for your faith. You should be in prayer like never before.

A Psalm of David. O Lord, I call upon Thee; hasten to me! Give ear to my voice when I call to Thee! ² May my prayer be counted as incense before Thee; The lifting up of my hands as the evening offering.

You can sense the utter desperation and emotion of his request, can't you? With the wicked doing a number on his life, David went right to God and let Him know he needed help, not tomorrow, but today, right now. Here David likens his prayer to the incense altar located just outside the thick, massive curtain separating the Holy of Holies from the Holy Place (Ex. 30). From what we know of the purpose of this particular altar, it was constant reminder to God of the prayers of His saints which ascended before Him as He promised to dwell over the Ark. Rightly, then, does David liken his prayers in his predicament to this altar. Ostensibly, he informed God that just as the incense smoke rose from this altar, his prayers for divine help were perpetual.

Point well-taken. If you are in the fire of a furnace for your faith, the last thing you want to do is fail to pray for prayer is where you obtain your power, and prayer is where God hears and is moved to act. Further, if you are truly being tried for your faith, you will, by definition, be knocking on heaven's door quite a bit because you know you need divine help with a highly spiritual situation. Also, you know, from what our Lord says, that prayer is, more often than not, a spiritual discipline of asking, seeking, and knocking (Matt. 7:6-7). If God responded immediately all the time our faith would be shallow and brittle. Working through prayer, really wrestling with prayer deepens us as we wait upon God's will to be made known to us. And whatever that will is, it will be the best for us, as Jesus promised:

⁹ Or what man is there among you, when his son shall ask him for a loaf, will he give him a stone? ¹⁰ Or if he shall ask for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he?

¹¹ If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him! (Matt. 7).

So what about it? Are you prayin' or playin'? I don't know what you are up against right now as a saint, I don't know who is making your life hard because you are a Christian, but God does, and He is waiting to hear from you before He makes a move. Want victory? Want insight? Want strength when you are weak? Good, then, let your prayers about the particular situation or person you are dealing with be readily known to God because you frequently showcase the sordid situation or pernicious person in your daily prayers.

Moving to verse 3, David puts some meat on the bones of his prayers. What he says here is intriguing because instead of asking God to work over-time in the lives of his opponents, David humbly asks God to work first in his life. Wow. What a humble, sensitive saint. What did he ask for? Read on and you'll see:

Get Control Of Your Mouth (Psalm 141:3)

³ Set a guard, O LORD, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips.

What an amazing prayer. Even though David was a powerful, influential man, he also knew himself. He knew that in any given highly charged situation his main problem was his mouth.

Just let someone falsely accuse him, and he would dress that person down. Just let someone say something cutting to him, and he'd be tempted to say something equally cutting back. Just let someone lace their tumultuous tirade against him with "f" bombs, and he, being a seasoned, salty soldier, knew how to respond in kind. I'm sure he had embarrassed himself before by not controlling his mouth when dealing with unsavory, mean-spirited, and prickly people. This is exactly why he asked God to step in and help him. You have to love his prayer: "Lord, could you position a guard at the opening of my mouth, you know, a guard which will stop me from saying things I might regret?"

Chances are you can relate. That's why you are probably looking down at your shoes right now. We've all been here, haven't we? Put some of us in a pressurized situation with a pushy, problematic person (like a hostile ex-wife or husband, an incorrigible senior leader, a combative ideologically driven teacher, etc.) and it is amazing how quickly the godless garbage flows out of our mouths. You know what I'm talking about. Jesus warned us about this, didn't He?

"Listen to Me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵ there is nothing outside the man which going into him can defile him; but the things which proceed out of the man are what defile the man. ¹⁶ *If any man has ears to hear, let him hear.*"²⁰ And He was saying, "That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. ²¹ "For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, ²² deeds of coveting *and* wickedness, *as well as* deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride *and* foolishness. ²³ All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man (Mk. 7).

What comes out of your mouth merely shows what's in your heart, and it is all of this which really defiles you. So, to control the mouth one must, by definition, control the heart and the mind, to make sure they are submitted to and transformed by God (Rom. 12:1-2). This, of course, is a daily, moment by moment spiritual discipline wherein you ask for the Lord to help you with how you communicate with others.

Do you need a big, burly guard to stand watch over your mouth, someone who will say, "Hey, you have better not say that"? I'd dare say that guard is the Holy Spirit and you've most likely heard Him as He has tried to stop you over the years. If you didn't do too well in 2021, then a new year is before you, and I think you know exactly what you need to pray in this regard. If you don't here's some advice, "God, give me victory over my mouth this year so my Christian witness will be maximized, not minimized."

Interestingly enough, David was not finished looking at himself. What a humble, thoughtful, and sensitive man of God. In verse 4 he peers even deeper into his soul:

Get Control Of Your Desires (Psalm 141:4)

If anything, David studied and knew himself well. He knew his spiritual strengths, and was equally aware of his innate carnal weaknesses. This is why, then, he makes this bold request of God in verse 4:

⁴ Do not incline my heart to any evil thing, to practice deeds of wickedness with men who do iniquity; and do not let me eat of their delicacies.

Translated, David was saying, “Lord, I know when I am with those types of people, I tend to be drawn to what they say, think, and do, which I know is contrary to You and your Word. So, Lord, will you help me keep my heart in love with the straight and narrow path of truth and holiness?”

Again, can you relate? There are just some non-Christians you encounter who captivate and entice you to live contrary to your faith. Ideally, you feel you are pretty spiritually strong when you are not with them, but then you get with them and the next thing you know you are “eating their delicacies,” be what they may. You know, smoking what they smoke, drinking what they drink, and so forth. And when you finally walk away from them, the Spirit convicts you and you sense the guilt of your sinful departure, so you vow to stand strong and true again next time, but deep inside you wonder how you will fare since you’ve folded like the proverbial lawn chair one too many times.

Change course then by asking God to simply remove the evil desire which lurks in your heart, which comes out so readily and so easily when you are around these particular people. My father, Al, smoked for 53 years. It wasn’t until he had his first heart attack, he broke the habit. The heart doctor told him the heart meds he was one would help him stop smoking, and the doctor was right. That medication removed the desire for smokes altogether. Later, my father couldn’t be near anyone who had either smoked or was smoking for he found the smell utterly detestable. What this med did for my father’s desire for a smoke is what you should be asking for God to do for your desire to embrace sin for a moment. If the desire is gone, the temptation will not be a problem and victorious living will be the order of the day. So, go ahead. Pray that prayer.

David’s third level of counsel for striving for maturity when the immature are arrayed against you is even more jaw-dropping than the last one:

Get Use To Sound Criticism (Psalm 141:5)

You read that right. Instead of complaining about all the criticism he **endured** as a godly leader, David, headed in another direction altogether:

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⁵ Let the righteous smite me in kindness and reprove me; It is oil upon the head; Do not let my head refuse it, for still my prayer is against their wicked deeds.

Behind this request is the admission that David knows there will be times when he will, in fact, sin. He won’t always control his mouth, he won’t always lovingly turn the other cheek when struck, and so forth. Yes, he knew himself, and he knew there would be times when he would act and speak sinfully, when he would go toe to toe with the naysayers in his life. When, not if, this occurred, David asked for God to send righteous people to “smite him” by reproofing him. Have you ever prayed this way? I haven’t I must admit. David was just made of different spiritual material. He so wanted to follow hard after God, he asked for God to send saints into his life to confront him so he could quickly get back on the straight and narrow path with his cross. Wow. What a man of God.

You know, sound and truth-based admonishing and rebuking is a biblical model for pursuing holiness. Speaking to the Thessalonian church about how to live the Christian life fully and effectively, Paul gives them detailed instructions:

¹⁴ And we urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all men (1 Thess. 5).

“Admonish the unruly” clearly suggest there is an absolute moral line of what constitutes viable, God-honoring Christian behavior. When a saint, therefore, steps away from that line, other saints have the divine obligation to lovingly call the saint back to the higher level of life desired by the Lord. To read through the New Testament is to see this admonishment in action. James, for instance, castigated the believers he wrote to because they typically showed favoritism to the wealthy in their church body:

My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with *an attitude of personal favoritism*.² For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes,³ and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes, and say, “You sit here in a good place,” and you say to the poor man, “You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool,”⁴ have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives? (Jas. 2).

James represented the type of saint David looked for in his life. James knew it was/is risky to confront and admonish another saint, because they can retaliate against you, deride you, and oppose you vehemently (and viciously). Been there. Done that. But it’s worth the risk because intimacy and maturity with Christ are at stake. David knew this, I’m sure, and that’s why he asked God to bring people like James into his life at times.

No, I’m not saying you should pray, “Oh, Lord, help me to be a great critic of others.” I’m challenging you to pray like David for God to send good, godly critics your way and for you to be ready and willing to listen to them so you can grow up in the faith and be an even more formidable witness for Christ. Who has the courage to pray this prayer right now?

Isn’t David a breath of fresh air? He so counter-culture, so other-worldly, and so challenging in how he approached his walk with the living God. He was not finished sharing his insights, as we seen in verses 6 through 7.

Get Pleasant With The Unpleasant (Psalm 141:6-7)

First, let’s read these verses and then circle back and make some observations:

⁶ Their judges are thrown down by the sides of the rock, and they hear my words, for they are pleasant.⁷ As when one plows and breaks open the earth, our bones have been scattered at the mouth of Sheol.

Concerning verse 6, which is naturally wedded to verse 7, J. J. Stewart Perowne, a renowned Old Testament scholar, remarks, “6. This verse, difficult in itself, is still more difficult, because it has no very obvious connection either with what precedes or with what follows. The allusions are so

obscure that it is impossible to do more than guess at the meaning.¹ His analysis is, well, spot on. These verses are difficult, but not impossible, to interpret.

Based on the contextual fact David speaks here about wicked opponents he faces; these verses should be interpreted in light of this. What is the meaning, then? I think David is, again, focusing on himself and his faith above all else. He is pointing to the day when those who opposed him will be deposed, as they always are for a man does reap what he sows. David is merely stating he hopes when this day comes for these wicked people they will remember he spoke pleasant words to them, not cutting ones. You might need to read this one more time in order to get the seed into your soil. David so wanted to represent God well before caustic, combative people like this, he wanted them to only ever hear good, kind things come out of his mouth. When God dealt with them in the future, he didn't want them focused on how he, David, went toe to toe, charge to charge, and cuss word to cuss word with them. No, when God arrested their attention and showed them the error of their ways, David wanted their memories full of how he did not return insult for insult, but returned insult with a word of, say, blessing. Sounds like Peter's advice to Christians in his first letter:

⁸ To sum up, let all be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit; ⁹ not returning evil for evil, or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing. ¹⁰ For, let him who means to love life and see good days refrain his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking guile (1 Pet. 3).

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No here is something to put into your life if you are a Christian politician, or if you are a military officer seeking to function in the pressure cooker called the Pentagon, or if you are a teacher trying to keep your head down while the school district goes off the moral cliff with their vacuous ideologies. Strive to speak in such a loving, compassionate, truth-filled way that when all is said and done your opponents will have nothing but good thoughts about how you spoke to and about them. Talk about a powerful way to bring the wonderful, transformative power of the gospel to a lost life. This is the real deal, so go out and live it and watch God work in you and in others.

Turning from his fifth insight about how to live for Christ in hostile times, David gives us a sixth flash of rare insight:

Get Focused On God (Psalm 141:8)

I love what he says here because it is so true:

⁸ For my eyes are toward Thee, O God, the Lord; In Thee I take refuge; do not leave me defenseless.

In the heat of conflict, when the wicked of the world are doing a proverbial number on your faith, it is easy to get your eyes off of Christ and on to your problem(s). Here David counsel against that

¹ J. J. Stewart Perowne, *The Book of Psalms; A New Translation, with Introductions and Notes, Explanatory and Critical*, Fifth Edition, Revised., vol. 2 (London; Cambridge: Deighton Bell and Co.; George Bell and Sons, 1882), 453.

by saying he is going to double-down on making sure his eyes maintain a laser-lock on God. This is so important for by looking to God we find hope for living, strength for the road ahead, insight into life and living, and a proper perspective on trails. Keeping our eyes fixed on Him reminds us that He is, in fact, sovereignly in charge. Isaiah, who had seen the Lord high and lifted up (Isa. 6), wrote these words in behalf of God:

⁵ I am the LORD, and there is no other; Besides Me there is no God. I will gird you, though you have not known Me; ⁶ That men may know from the rising to the setting of the sun That there is no one besides Me. I am the LORD, and there is no other, ⁷ The One forming light and creating darkness, causing well-being and creating calamity; I am the LORD who does all these. (Isa. 45).

Knowing that God is sovereign in all life events, even persecution and opposition, we can rest assured He will, in fact, be with us to defend us. As He promised in Isaiah chapter 43:

¹ But now, thus says the LORD, your Creator, O Jacob, and He who formed you, O Israel, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are Mine!" ² "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they will not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be scorched, nor will the flame burn you (Isa. 43).

Note well God didn't promise to keep you from trying times, but to be with you in and through them. How comforting. Since He is with you, everything will be all right in the end for He wants only the best for you.

So, will you keep your eyes fixed on the Lord? If you've had your eyes fixed too firmly on the problem people at hand, then it's time to look up not around. Paul's counsel to New Testament saints would have made David swell with pride:

¹ If then you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth (Col. 3).

Today, Lord, as we face a New Year, we bow before you, promising to keep our eyes on you more than we ever have. And we thank you for being there to defend us when baseless accusations fly.

Lastly, a maturing believer is one who is spiritually wise concerning the ways of the wicked. They know they are only ambassadors behind enemy lines, so they don't walk through life naively, thinking everyone is their friend. No, they know there are foes arrayed against them. That is why David says what he says here:

Get Your Eyes Peeled (Psalm 141:9-10)

The imagery here is of dangerous traps being set all over life's path by wicked people. He doesn't identify the traps, but anyone who has lived the Christian life knows what David is talking about. Listen and learn from him:

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⁹ Keep me from the jaws of the trap which they have set for me, and from the snares of those who do iniquity. ¹⁰ Let the wicked fall into their own nets, while I pass by safely.

With the arrival of the cold, mice have sought refuge in my garage. To solve the problem, I installed three different types of traps to catch them. Let me say, I know exactly where these traps are located, and I am very careful when I get near them because I don't want to trip them. I speak from past experience.

It's the same way with some non-believers. You so bother them all they can think about are ways to trap you so they can control and silence you. They did this to Christ all of the time. Mark chapter 12 contains multiple traps set by the false religious leaders of Christ's day. Their trap regarding taxes was most clever:

¹³ And they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Him, in order to trap Him in a statement. ¹⁴ And they came and said to Him, "Teacher, we know that You are truthful, and defer to no one; for You are not partial to any, but teach the way of God in truth. Is it lawful to pay a poll-tax to Caesar, or not?" ¹⁵ "Shall we pay, or shall we not pay?" But He, knowing their hypocrisy, said to them, "Why are you testing Me? Bring Me a denarius to look at." ¹⁶ And they brought *one*. And He said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" And they said to Him, "Caesar's." ¹⁷ And Jesus said to them, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." And they were amazed at Him (Mk. 12).

These wicked men didn't want to learn from Christ. Far from it. They wanted to tie Him up in a trick question so they could get Him. Jesus, of course, had His eyes peeled for their wicked hunting expeditions, so He knew exactly how to disarm their trap. Here Jesus taught that God-fearing people have two citizenships: one to the earthly ruler, and one to the heavenly ruler, God. Nobody could argue with His pristine logic and understanding of the Torah, so at that point the trap was completely disarmed. Yet that didn't keep these men from continuing to get to Him so they could silence and sideline Him.

I don't know what traps you face in our Christian walk, but I do pray God would give you eyes to see them and the wisdom to know how to disarm them to His glory. Our day has plenty of traps set around race, sex and gender, climate change, defunding or funding the police, keeping or removing historical monuments, getting ~~vaccinated~~ or staying ~~unvaccinated~~, and so forth. Seeing the traps on a given day is one thing. Knowing how to respond to them is another thing. May this be the year you learn how to disarm those traps to God's eternal glory.

And, may this be the year where the Lord will allow you to see the wicked caught in their own traps, resulting in poetic justice and a return to righteousness.

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