

END OF PSALM 140

You are Psalms

Some people think you never get discouraged, but the fact is, when you do, you know where to run. Your prayers are open and honest because you realize that God already knows your heart, He's just waiting to hear you spill it. And when you do, what starts out as heavy ends up becoming a song of praise. You may struggle... and often you do... but each time, you grow in your understanding of God's faithfulness. You're just a song waiting to happen.

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PSALMS (SONGS OF PRAISE)

TRUST
IN THE
LORD *and do good;
dwell in the land and
enjoy safe pasture.*
PSALM 36: 3

PSALM NUMBER: 140

A prayer against sinful words and deceitful flatterers.

1. I have cried to thee O Lord, hear me: hearken to my voice, when I cry to thee.
2. Let my prayer be directed as incense in thy sight; the lifting up of my hands, as evening sacrifice.
3. Set a watch, O Lord, before my mouth; and a door round about my lips.
4. Incline not my heart to evil words; to make excuses in sins, with men that work iniquity: and I will not communicate with the choicest of them.
5. The just man shall correct me in mercy, and shall reprove me: but let not the oil of the sinner fatten my head. For my prayer also shall still be against the things with which they are well pleased:
6. Their judges falling upon the rock have been swallowed up. They shall hear my words, for they have prevailed;
7. As when the thickness of the earth is broken up upon the ground: our bones are scattered by the side of hell.
8. But to thee, O Lord, Lord, are my eyes: in thee have I put my trust, take not away my soul.
9. Keep me from the snare, which they have laid for me, and from the stumbling blocks of them that work iniquity.
10. The wicked shall fall in his net: I am alone until I pass.

The Psalms are songs of praise and cover a period of about 1000 years, from the time of Moses (ca. 1400 B.C.) to the Israelites' return from exile (ca. 450 B.C.). They deal with selected events of that period and provide us with the thoughts and feelings of those who went through the experiences recorded. After being made a Cardinal by Pope Clement VIII, Saint Robert Bellarmine, prepared for posterity his very own commentary on each of the Psalms. Enclosed are his interpretations on each of the Psalms.

PSALM NUMBER: 140

EXPLANATION OF THE PSALM

1. "I have cried to thee, O Lord, hear me: hearken to my voice, when I try to thee." Such is the language of Christ's body, or the body of the faithful, from the midst of the enemy. "I have cried to thee, O Lord," to help me, surrounded as I am by so many dangers; and as "I have cried" with all the powers of my interior, and with great affection, "hear me." In the Hebrew it is, hasten to help me, and thus prove that you hear me. And hear me not only on this occasion, but "hearken to my voice, when I try to thee;" as much as to say, be sure to attend to my prayers, whenever I put them up to thee.

2. "Let my prayer be directed as incense in thy sight: the lifting up of my hands, as evening sacrifice." He now tells what he wants, and in what respect he wishes God should hear him. He first, and most properly, begs of God to assist him in praying well; for, as the apostle has it, "for we know not what we should pray for;" and we are equally ignorant of the manner in which we should pray for anything, unless the Spirit help our infirmity. He, therefore, begs of God to afford him the assistance of his grace to enable him to pray well. He then declared the conditions of prayer by comparing it to the incense that was daily: morning and evening, by God's command, offered up in the Temple. "Let my prayer be directed as incense in thy sight." My first request is, that my prayer, through your grace, may ascend like incense. Now, incense suggests the following remarks: first, it was composed of four gums that were highly fragrant and aromatic, frankincense, gum, alkanet, and myrrh, which emitted a most exquisite fragrance. Secondly, it was offered up in the inmost recess, in the most noble part of the Temple, called the Holy of Holies, where the tables of the law and the altar of gold was kept. Thirdly, it was offered by the high priest. Fourthly, it was put on the fire, from which it ascended in the form of smoke, mounting up in a direct straight line. The four aromatic substances represent the four virtues, Faith, Hope, Charity, Humility, and the most grateful prayer that can be put up to God is composed of them. Man is the temple of God, for the apostle says, "your members are the temple of the Holy Ghost," the inmost part of which is the soul, in which is the law, written there by the finger of God; there, also, is the will, representing the altar of gold, namely, a pure heart, adorned by the grace of God. Christ is the high priest, for it is through him, as being our advocate, that we must always pray; and it is for that reason that we conclude every prayer with "through our Lord Jesus Christ." Finally, the fire that produced the fragrant smoke, that rose up and ascended so directly, is fervor of desire, but in order that it should ascend in a straight and direct

line, there must be a pure intention and constant attention; for they who pray with a view to attract notice have their incense aside by the draught of the world, and it will not ascend in a direct line; while they who allow the cares of this world, and its distractions, to interfere with them when they pray, they do not give proper direction to their prayer, and such distractions like so many currents, blow away, and dissipate the incense of their prayer, and will not suffer it to soar aloft, as it ought; and it was a consciousness of this that makes the Prophet pray, “let my prayer be directed as incense in thy sight.” “The lifting up of my hands as evening sacrifice.” A repetition of the preceding “lifting up the hands” signifies prayer, for the Jews, as well as ourselves, were wont to raise up their hands in prayer; thus, in Psalm 133, “in the nights lift up your hands to the holy places” and the apostle, “lifting up pure hands, without anger and strife.” The “evening sacrifice” means the sacrifice of incense, that was offered up every evening. The meaning, then, is “the lifting up of my hands,” – the prayer I offer with uplifted hands, may it be like the sacrifice of incense offered up every evening. The Prophet wishes that his prayer should be like the evening, rather than the morning sacrifice; perhaps, because it was in the evening he composed the Psalm, as it is in the evening the Church sings it too; or, perhaps, because the evening sacrifice was of more value as being a figure of the sacrifice on the cross, that occurred in the evening.

3. “Set a watch, O Lord, before my mouth; and a door round about my lips.” The second petition he lays before God, is to give him the grace of knowing when he ought to speak, and when to be silent; for as St. James says, “if any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man;” and according to Ecclesiastes, there is “a time to speak and a time to be silent;” and in order to explain it, the Prophet uses a figure, taken from the guard put on the gates of a house or a city. Two things are necessary to ensure freedom of exit to those entitled to it, and detention to those not entitled to it; and the two things are, gates, and a porter to stand by the gates; for a gate without a porter will not suffice, for it must, of necessity, in such case, be always shut or always open; nor will a porter without a gate do the business, unless he keep guard at all hours and be strong enough to prevent any forcible ingress or egress; but with a gate and a porter all is right and safe; and he, therefore, says, “set a watch, O Lord, before my mouth;” my mouth being the gates through which pass the language that causes so much mischief and harm, I pray you to set a porter or a watchman on it, to guard it with the greatest diligence “and a door roundabout my lips.” As a porter would hardly suffice to restrain my words, or to keep sufficient guard, I further beg of you to put “a door round my lips;” that is to say, a strong, secure one, that cannot easily be stormed. The porter and a gate signify two gifts of the Holy Ghost, one pertaining to the understanding, that man may know when, how, and what they say, or to do; and the other having reference to the will; that is to say, that one should have the courage to speak when they ought to speak, and fear to speak when they should be silent; these are the gifts which Isaias calls “the spirit of counsel and fortitude,” which are nearly identical with prudence and charity. Now, we are not to ask these gifts of God without doing all in us lies to cooperate with his grace, at the same time that we are also to bear in mind that such

cooperation is also a gift from God; and, therefore, that we should glory in nothing, when, in point of fact, we have nothing.

4. "Incline not my heart to evil words; to make excuses in sins, with men that work iniquity: and I will not communicate with the choicest of them." His third petition is, that as, in spite of all his diligence, yet, such is human frailty, that even the "just man falls seven times," and "we all offend in many things;" that God may give us the grace to make a free confession of our sins, for fear, by representing ourselves in a state of perfect health, we may prevent our heavenly physician from curing us. "Incline not my heart to evil words." Do not allow us, when we shall have fallen into sin, to let out heart incline to lies and excuses. "To make excuses in sins;" instead of acknowledging our guilt, to excuse ourselves in all possible forms. "With men that work iniquity; and I will not communicate with the choicest of them." Here is the fourth petition, for God to guard us, and keep us from the company, and from making too free with the wicked. Many and many a one would have preserved their innocence only for the company they fell into! To understand this latter part of the verse we must connect it with the first part, and then the meaning will be: do not incline my heart to evil words, to make excuses for sinners, as their fellows do, for fear, by doing so, I may become one too; and thus, "I will not communicate with the choicest of them;" your grace will enable me to avoid and shun the very choicest of them.

5. "The just man shall correct me in mercy, and shall reprove me: but let not the oil of the sinner fatten my head. For my prayer also shall still be against the things with which they are well pleased." The fifth petition is, that, through God's grace, we may fall in with friends, who will correct us in charity, instead of fawning flatterers, who deceive by their false praise. And one of the greatest blessings from God is to meet faithful friends, to tell us the truth in regard of ourselves, and also to give us the grace to heal them willingly, and to be thankful to them. For with those who belong to the world, and have not got such grace from God, "flattery creates friends, and truth hatred." "The just man shall correct me in mercy;" he will reprove me with a view to my correction, in order to heal me, and not as the sinner would, to destroy me; because he will do with "in mercy," that is to say, in charity, from a feeling for my wretched state; and not in anger or bitterness, from a desire of revenge. Such a man "shall reprove me" with pleasure; but "let not the oil of the sinner fatten my heart;" that sweet unction the sinner will seek to lay on the soul of another poor sinner, in extenuation of, or frequently in defense of, nay, more, in praise of, their sins. "For my prayer also shall still be against the things with which they are well pleased." All allow this to be a most obscure passage. St. John Chrysostom explains it thus: I will not only shut off all communication with the wicked, but, furthermore, "my prayer shall be against the things with which they are well pleased;" against the crimes and the vices in which they revel, which will be very transitory; because

6. "Their judges falling upon the rock have been swallowed up. They shall hear my words, for they have prevailed:" The career of the wicked will be short; because "their judges," the great ones amongst them, will fall upon the rock, as if they were battling with a seething sea, that dashes them unmercifully on a rock, and shivers

them to pieces. "They shall hear my words, for they have prevailed." An allusion to "my prayer also shall, still be against the things with which they are well pleased;" by which he gives us to understand that many unfortunate souls, who prided themselves on their sins, would hear his words, and be converted to God through them; for as the hardest soil is entered by the plough, so the heart of man, however hardened it may be, will be entered and stirred up by the power and the efficacy of the word of God.

7. "As when the thickness of the earth is broken up upon the ground: our bones are scattered by the side of hell." Those poor souls, already alluded to, will hear my words; for these words were most effectual in moving them; as effectual as a spade or a plough, to enter into and turn up the thick, sluggish clay. "Our bones are scattered by the side of hell." Such and so numerous are the temptations that surrounds us, that "our bones," which represent our strength and courage, are so scattered, weakened, and debilitated as to be brought almost nigh to the gates of hell, to the last extremities.

8. "But to thee, O Lord, Lord, are my eyes: in thee have I put my trust, take not away my soul." This is the last petition, similar to the first, in which he asked to deliver us from all the dangers of temptation; and he now repeats it, on consideration of the miserable state alluded to in the preceding verse. "To thee, O Lord, are my eyes" looking out for help from you; "in thee have I put my trust;" and I, therefore, pray that you "take not away my soul." Do not suffer my life to be taken, myself to be lost.

9. "Keep me from the snare, which they have laid for me, and from the stumbling blocks of them that work iniquity." He tells from what quarter he apprehends death, and says it is from the snares and stumbling blocks, that is, from the temptation of the devil and from bad example. "Keep me from the snare which they have laid before me" – be it the concupiscence of the flesh, that concupiscence of the eyes, or the pride of life, "and from the stumbling blocks of them that work iniquity," from the examples set by the carnal, the covetous, and the proud.

10. "The wicked shall fall in his net: I am alone until I pass." He finally tells us, that all those attached to sin will fall into the net of the evil spirit; while he, and all who, like him, have a hatred of sin, will escape it; an admonition that proves man to be endowed with free will, and one that must prove a great consolation to those who fear God. "The wicked," all those who take pleasure in sin, that is, who are at present, and wish to remain, sinners, "shall fall in his net," in the net of the arch hunter, the devil; "I am alone until I pass," I will keep aloof from the whole world, until I should have passed all snares and stumbling blocks. Though I may be kept an exile for a time in this world, I will not belong to it. "I am alone," until I shall have passed to my country, where I shall have no shares or stumbling blocks to encounter.