

David is in a time of his life when he is encountering enemies on every hand that want him dead and he is not ashamed to confess his fear to the LORD. However, he also expresses his confidence that he can call upon the LORD for help. David understands that the LORD is aware of his fears and tears and will step in to protect him from his enemies.

To the chief Musician upon Jonath-elem-rechokim, Michtam of David, when the Philistines took him in Gath.
1 Be merciful unto me, O God: for man would swallow me up; he fighting daily oppresseth me.

“To the chief Musician” – The title of this psalm indicates that it was given to “the chief musician” (the worship leader) for use in the worship of the LORD.

“upon Jonath-elem-rechokim” – The words “Jonath-elem-rechokim” are rendered in the original Hebrew without translation due to the uncertainty of their meaning. Some commentators believe them to be the name of a musical instrument while others believe it to be a name of a song. The literal meaning of the words is “the silent dove in distant lands,” which may express how David felt when he wrote this psalm. He may have felt like an innocent dove being forced to flee from Saul into a distant land, silent because he did not have the opportunity to speak in defense of his innocence.

“Michtam of David” – David is listed as the author of the psalm but the meaning of the word “michtam” is unknown. However, some Hebrew experts believe the word to be derived from another Hebrew word that means “gold,” yielding a translation of “a golden psalm of David.” Others believe the word means “an engraving” (such as an inscription or a writing), meaning that this psalm is something that David wrote.

“when the Philistines took [seized; captured] him in Gath” – The occasion for David writing this psalm appears to be when he went to Gath in order to be beyond the reach of Saul (1 Sam. 21:11-15). This psalm seems to be a companion to Psalm 34, which was written on the same occasion. This psalm was written while David was still in danger, while Psalm 34 was written after the incident and David is grateful to the LORD for enabling him to escape to safety. I had previously interpreted the passage in 1 Sam. 21 to mean that David had gone directly to king Achish for protection but the title of this psalm seems to shed new light on the narrative. After David begins pretending to be insane, Achish asks his servants why they have brought this mad man to him (1 Sam. 21:14). Apparently David had intended to hide in Gath without drawing attention to himself but servants of the king recognized him (1 Sam. 21:11), seized him and then brought him to king. This would explain why he became extremely afraid of Achish (1 Sam. 21:12). David was likely afraid that Achish would not look favorably on the one who killed their champion, Goliath, since this was how the servants introduced him to their king (1 Sam. 21:11).

“Be merciful unto me, O God” – The immediate problem is that David has been captured by the Philistines and is at the mercy of Achish the king. He begs for God’s mercy because He knows that only God can rescue him from this situation. However, this psalm seems to be written more generally to address any situation when David was in trouble.

“for man would swallow me up [to trample; to crush]” – David does not seem to be referring to a specific man, but to mankind in general. He feels like everywhere he goes, he is running into someone who is wanting to hurt him. He had gone to Gath to escape Saul, the king of Israel, who wanted to kill him, and now he finds himself in danger from the king of Gath, who may also decide to kill him.

“he fighting daily oppresseth [to press; to squeeze] me” – David believes that every day he is encountering someone who wants to do him harm. He cannot get a single day of peace.

2 Mine enemies would daily swallow me up: for they be many that fight against me, O thou most High.

David combines the thoughts of v. 1: 1) that everywhere he goes there are enemies wanting to harm him, and 2) every day someone is attempting to harm him. He says that every day one or more enemies are seeking to “swallow me up” (trample or crush him). He tells the LORD that he has many enemies seeking his demise.

3 What time I am afraid, I will trust in thee.

David spent the first two verses describing his predicament to the LORD. Now this psalm, like many others, changes tone from describing the psalmist’s fears to describing the confidence he has in the LORD to help him. David has admitted that he has plenty of reason to be afraid (vs. 1-2) but then he declares that he will put his trust in the LORD whenever he becomes afraid. Rather than focusing on the things that make him afraid, he instead focuses on God, the One Who can protect him from the things that he fears.

4 In God I will praise his word, in God I have put my trust; I will not fear what flesh can do unto me.

“In God I will praise [to praise; to boast] his word, in God I have put my trust” – David is praising the words that God has promised (to protect him) and because of these words he has put his trust in God. We should always take God at His word, believing Him and trusting that He will do what He promised, just as David did.

“I will not fear what flesh can do unto me” – David is so confident that God will keep His promises of protection that he no longer fears what man, who is mere flesh, can do to him. Men cannot harm someone that God is protecting.

5 Every day they wrest my words: all their thoughts *are* against me for evil.

“Every day they wrest [shape; to twist] my words” – David’s enemies twist his words to mean something he did not say and try to use it against him. The chief priests and scribes attempted to twist Jesus’ words seeking an excuse to execute Him (**Matt. 26:59-61** “Now the chief priests, and elders, and all the council, sought false witness against Jesus, to put him to death; But found none: yea, though many false witnesses came, yet found they none. At the last came two false witnesses, And said, This fellow said, I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to build it in three days”). The ungodly always have to resort to twisting the truth into a lie in order to condemn the righteous.

“all their thoughts are against me for evil [harmful intent]” – David’s enemies focus themselves on devising a way to harm him.

6 They gather themselves together, they hide themselves, they mark my steps, when they wait for my soul.

David wants the LORD to understand the type of people his enemies are as he describes them as teaming up against him. They take note of where he habitually goes, then wait in a hidden position where they can ambush him when he comes by.

7 Shall they escape by iniquity? in *thine* anger cast down the people, O God.

“Shall they escape by iniquity [wickedness; idolatry]?” – So many times the wicked believe that they can escape punishment for their deeds through dishonest and wicked means. The Hebrew word for “iniquity” can also refer to idolatry, implying that the wicked may even appeal to their false gods to protect them from judgment. David asks the rhetorical question of whether or not his enemies can escape the judgment of God by doing more evil deeds.

“in *thine* anger cast down the people, O God” – The wicked may think they are profiting by their evil acts and escaping the consequences, but David calls on the LORD to execute His wrath on these wicked people and cast them down.

8 Thou tellest my wanderings: put thou my tears into thy bottle: *are they* not in thy book?

“Thou tellest [to count; to take account] my wanderings” – The Hebrew word translated “wanderings” refers to the wandering of a fugitive, who has no place where he can stop for long. At this time David is fleeing from Saul and can find no place where he can rest, safe from those who seek his life. David understands that the LORD was fully aware of all the places his wandering has taken him.

“put thou my tears into thy bottle: are they not in thy book?” – David knows that the LORD also is aware of all the tears he has shed during his wanderings. He pictures the LORD preserving his tears in a bottle and recording them in a book, an illustration of the fact that the LORD does not forget the suffering that His people endure.

9 When I cry *unto thee*, then shall mine enemies turn back: this I know; for God *is* for me.

“When I cry *unto thee*, then shall mine enemies turn back” – David realizes that the way to cause his enemies to retreat and no longer pursue him is to cry out to the LORD for help. When the LORD intervenes, David’s enemies will have no choice but to cease and desist in their efforts to harm him.

“this I know; for God *is* for me” – David knows from past experience that God is on his side. He is confident that if he calls on the LORD then He will respond and help him.

10 In God will I praise *his* word: in the LORD will I praise *his* word. 11 In God have I put my trust: I will not be afraid what man can do unto me.

These two verses (vs. 10-11) are very similar to v. 4 and expresses the same thoughts. David trusts the LORD and praises Him for the word He has spoken. The LORD has promised to take care of David and this promise gives him the confidence to not be afraid of the power of men. Men cannot do anything against David that the LORD does not allow and so he rests in the will of God.

12 Thy vows *are* upon me, O God: I will render praises unto thee.

“Thy vows *are* upon me, O God” – Apparently David made vows that he would make thank-offerings once the LORD delivered him out of his current danger. David is remembering his obligation to fulfill these vows now that the LORD has rescued him.

“I will render praises [praise; thanksgiving; thank-offerings] *unto thee*” – David promises to make the thank-offerings when he is able to do it properly. It’s possible that he planned to wait until a time when he was near enough to the tabernacle that he could bring a proper thank-offering before the LORD.

13 For thou hast delivered my soul from death: *wilt* not *thou deliver* my feet from falling, that I may walk before God in the light of the living?

“For thou hast delivered my soul from death: *wilt* not *thou deliver* my feet from falling” – David acknowledges that the LORD has saved him from death, referring to all the times the LORD has protected his life or specifically this instance in Gath. Notice that the next line (“*wilt* not *thou deliver* my feet from falling”) has some italicized words, indicating that they are not in the original Hebrew, leaving us with “not my feet from falling.” This line may be better translated “thou hast delivered my soul from death and kept my feet from falling.” David is crediting the LORD with the fact that he is still alive and has not fallen.

“that I may walk before God in the light of the living” – “Walking before God” implies living in obedience to God. David understands that the LORD did not preserve his life so that he could do as he pleased. Instead, the LORD preserved David’s life so that he could live before God in obedience to Him. We ought to recognize that fact in our own life and be grateful enough to live each day in obedience to the LORD, grateful that He has preserved our life.