

Psalm 57:1

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Be merciful unto me, O God, be merciful unto me: for my soul trusteth in thee: yea, in the shadow of thy wings will I make my refuge, until these calamities be overpast.

Analysis

Be merciful unto me, O God, be merciful unto me: for my soul trusteth in thee: yea, in the shadow of thy wings will I make my refuge, until these calamities be overpast. This urgent opening cry reveals David's desperate circumstances while simultaneously expressing profound trust. The doubled plea "be merciful unto me" (chonneni, חֹנֵן) intensifies the appeal for divine grace and compassion. This is the Hebrew chanan, meaning to be gracious, show favor, have compassion—not a demand for what's deserved but a plea for unmerited favor.

The superscription indicates David fled from Saul into a cave—either at Adullam (1 Samuel 22:1) or En-gedi (1 Samuel 24:1-3). Caves provided temporary physical refuge, but David recognizes his ultimate security lies not in stone walls but in God's protective presence. His soul "trusteth" (chasah, חָסַח) meaning to take refuge, seek shelter, flee for protection. This isn't passive hoping but active fleeing to God as one's safe haven.

"The shadow of thy wings" evokes maternal bird imagery—a mother bird sheltering chicks under protective wings (cf. Matthew 23:37). This tender metaphor appears throughout Scripture (Psalm 17:8, 36:7, 61:4, 63:7, 91:4; Ruth 2:12). God's wings represent His hovering protective presence, intimate care, and encompassing shelter. The imagery suggests both vulnerability (needing protection) and security (finding it in God).

"Until these calamities be overpast" demonstrates realistic faith. David doesn't deny danger's reality—"calamities" (havvot, חַבּוֹת) means destruction, ruin, disaster. But he trusts these troubles are temporary: they will "be overpast" (ya'avot, יָעַבּוּת), will pass over, cross over, move beyond. Faith sees beyond present crisis to future deliverance. The storm is fierce, but it will pass; meanwhile, God's wings provide shelter.

Historical Context

The superscription connects this psalm to David's flight from Saul, when he hid in caves—either Adullam, where he gathered a band of distressed followers (1 Samuel 22:1-2), or En-gedi, where he spared Saul's life by merely cutting his robe (1 Samuel 24). Archaeological excavations confirm numerous caves in the Judean wilderness capable of sheltering fugitives. These limestone caves provided physical protection from pursuers but were also death traps if discovered.

David's desperate years as fugitive profoundly shaped his theology. Hunted like an animal by Israel's king, betrayed by informers, constantly endangered, David learned that human refuge fails but divine refuge never does. The psalms born from this period (Psalms 54, 56, 57, 59, 63, 142) overflow with trust forged in the crucible of mortal danger.

The wing imagery has ancient Near Eastern parallels. Egyptian art depicted protective deities with outstretched wings. However, Israel's God uniquely combines transcendent power with intimate, tender care—strong enough to defeat all enemies yet gentle enough to shelter like a mother bird. This combination of might and mercy distinguishes Yahweh from pagan deities.

For Israel through centuries of exile, persecution, and suffering, Psalm 57 became a song of confident endurance. When Jerusalem fell to Babylon (586 BCE), when Antiochus Epiphanes persecuted faithful Jews (167-164 BCE), when Rome destroyed the temple (70 CE), God's people sang of refuge under divine wings until calamities passed. The psalm teaches that faith doesn't deny trouble's reality but trusts in God's ultimate deliverance.

Related Passages

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Hebrews 11:1 – Definition of faith

Study Questions

1. What does it mean to take refuge 'in the shadow of God's wings,' and how does this image of maternal care address our need for both security and intimacy with God?
2. How does David's example of crying out urgently to God while simultaneously expressing trust in Him provide a model for prayer during desperate circumstances?
3. In what ways might we seek refuge in 'caves' (temporary human solutions) instead of finding ultimate security under God's wings?
4. What does the phrase 'until these calamities be overpast' teach about the temporary nature of trials and the importance of maintaining hope during prolonged difficulties?
5. How can we cultivate the kind of trust that enables us to rest in God's protection even when physical circumstances remain threatening?

Interlinear Text

אָחָס הַבְּנִי	אֱלֹהִים	בְּנִי	בְּנִי	בְּנִי	בְּנִי
Be merciful	unto me O God	Be merciful	H3588	H0	trusteth
H2603	H430	H2603			H2620
unto me	for my soul	in thee yea	in the shadow	of thy wings	trusteth
H5315	H6738	H3671	H2620		H5704
רַעַב	הַזֹּאת	כְּנָפָת יְהִי	אָחָס הַבְּנִי	ע	ד
be overpast	until these calamities				
H5674	H1942				

Additional Cross-References

Psalms 91:4 (Faith): He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust: his truth shall be thy shield and buckler.

Psalms 36:7 (Faith): How excellent is thy lovingkindness, O God! therefore the children of men put their trust under the shadow of thy wings.

Psalms 63:7 (Parallel theme): Because thou hast been my help, therefore in the shadow of thy wings will I rejoice.

Psalms 9:10 (Faith): And they that know thy name will put their trust in thee: for thou, LORD, hast not forsaken them that seek thee.

Psalms 61:4 (Faith): I will abide in thy tabernacle for ever: I will trust in the covert of thy wings. Selah.

Psalms 91:1 (Parallel theme): He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.

Revelation 21:4 (References God): And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.

Psalms 56:1 (Grace): Be merciful unto me, O God: for man would swallow me up; he fighting daily oppresseth me.

Ruth 2:12 (Faith): The LORD recompense thy work, and a full reward be given thee of the LORD God of Israel, under whose wings thou art come to trust.

Isaiah 50:10 (Faith): Who is among you that feareth the LORD, that obeyeth the voice of his servant, that walketh in darkness, and hath no light? let him trust in the name of the LORD, and stay upon his God.