

PSALMS

Chapter 143

My Soul Thirsts for You

A Psalm of David.

Hear my prayer, O LORD; give ear to my pleas for mercy! In your faithfulness answer me, in your righteousness! 2 Enter not into judgment with your servant, for no one living is righteous before you. 3 For the enemy has pursued my soul; he has crushed my life to the ground; he has made me sit in darkness like those long dead. 4 Therefore my spirit faints within me; my heart within me is appalled. 5 I remember the days of old; I meditate on all that you have done; I ponder the work of your hands. 6 I stretch out my hands to you; my soul thirsts for you like a parched land. *Selah* 7 Answer me quickly, O LORD! My spirit fails! Hide not your face from me, lest I be like those who go down to the pit. 8 Let me hear in the morning of your steadfast love, for in you I trust. Make me know the way I should go, for to you I lift up my soul. 9 Deliver me from my enemies, O LORD! I have fled to you for refuge. 10 Teach me to do your will, for you are my God! Let your good Spirit lead me on level ground! 11 For your name's sake, O LORD, preserve my life! In your righteousness bring my soul out of trouble! 12 And in your steadfast love you will cut off my enemies, and you will destroy all the adversaries of my soul, for I am your servant.

Ps 143 A prayer for deliverance from enemies and for divine leading. This is the seventh and final penitential psalm. In the first half (vv. 1–6) the psalmist makes his appeal and describes his situation; in the second half (vv. 7–12) he presents his prayer. Appeal to God's righteousness (vv. 1, 11) and the author's self-identification as "your servant" (vv. 2, 12) enclose the prayer. See also his appeal to God's faithfulness (v. 1) and unfailing love (v. 12), which together form a frequent pair. (CSB)

Original context of this penitential psalm (cf Ps 6; 32; 38; 51; 102; 130) is thought to be David's desolation after being driven from his throne by his son Absalom. The last of the seven penitential psalms, it has historically been used in the Church during Lent. See Ps 130 intro. Luther: "Every psalm, all Scripture, calls to grace, extols grace, searches for Christ, and praises only God's work, while rejecting all the works of man.... The life of a saint is more a taking from God than a giving; more a desiring than a having; more a becoming pious than a being pious.... Not on account of the work I do, but on account of the faith Thou givest me" (AE 14:196). (TLSB)

Format: Vv 1–2, call for the Lord's righteous answer; vv 3–4, crushed by the enemy; vv 5–6, meditation on God's works; vv 7–8, call for the Lord to answer quickly; vv 9–10, asking for the Lord to lead; vv 11–12, the Lord's servant. (TLSB)

The 143rd psalm is a psalm of prayer. The psalmist prays for grace and forgiveness of sins, in the terror of his conscience. He is nearly pressed to despair by the enemies of faith, that is, the promoters of the Law. These especially plague the distressed and timid conscience and drive it into darkness, that is, into despair and death with heavy burdens and unbearable doctrines of works, which they do not so much as touch with one of their fingers, as Christ says (Matthew 23:1).

But here the psalm shows that grace provides deliverance, not the judgment before which no one alive can stand. Of this all the ancient histories and works of the Lord also give witness. For all of the holy patriarchs of old placed their hope on God's love and grace, not on the judgment. As St. Peter also says (Acts 15:10), "Now then. Why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."

I consider their works and examples of old (he says here), and I am comforted, for they were comforted and delivered from sin purely from grace, just as I am. Even Abraham himself was called from out of idolatry (Joshua 24:2). No praise of human righteousness or holiness has any value here at all, not matter how much the false prophets worry us. (Reading the Psalms with Luther)

The penitential portion of the psalm forms only a small part of the whole. Most of the psalm is an appeal for relief from the oppression of enemies. (PBC)

143:1–2 Initial appeal. (CSB)

143:1 *O' Lord* – The pain was terrible, yet just removing the problem would not satisfy the psalmist. Problems will come and go throughout life. David knew the real answer lay in having continuing fellowship with God. He needed a constant source of help with this problem. (LL)

righteousness – Very often the "righteousness" of God in the Psalms (and frequently elsewhere in the OT) refers to the faithfulness with which he acts. This faithfulness is in full accordance with his commitments (both expressed and implied) to his people and with his status as the divine King—to whom the powerless may look for protection, the oppressed for redress and the needy for help. (CSB)

Not our faithfulness and righteousness, observes Luther, but God's, which He bestows on us (AE 14:196). (TLSB)

David is not terrorized by God's perfection. Rather, he is comforted by his knowledge that God will act in line with his character; he is faithful and righteous. He will do what he has promised. And he has promised to forgive. God's character can comfort us too. (LL)

When men begin to cry out as this man does they have a feeling that they have not been heard, that God has closed His ears to their petitions. They quite naturally seek some reason for being heard. In this case the psalmist appeals to God's "faithfulness" and to His "righteousness. His saints have long known that He can be absolutely depended upon. (Leupold)

143:2 As he begins his prayer, he pleads that God not sit in judgment over his servant (he knows his own failings) but that he focus his judicial attention on the enemy's harsh and unwarranted attacks.

The accused usually protest their innocence and ask for justice, but here the psalmist admits that he cannot stand before God's judgment. "This passage denies absolutely—even to all saints and servants of God—the glory of righteousness, if God does not forgive, but judges and convicts their hearts" (Ap V 205). (TLSB)

David is the "innocent party" in the conflicts with Saul and Absalom, he recognizes that his own sins make him unworthy of claiming any blessing from the Lord. He asks to be judged, not on the

basis of his record, but on the basis of his relationship with God. Because David is a child of God through faith, he can call upon the Lord for help (PBC)

143:3–4 The distress he suffers. (CSB)

143:3 The last half of this verse appears almost verbatim in La 3:6. (CSB)

the enemy – We might read this, “the enemy Satan.” He attacks and causes David to live in dark thoughts and fears that rob him of joy. (LL)

Psalmist’s persecutor, and so, by extension, the enemy of the “soul,” namely, Satan. (TLSB)

in darkness. As one cut off from the enjoyments of life {The vivid imagery that associates distress with “the depths”—so expressive of universal human experience—is common in OT poetry (see 69:2, 15; 71:20; 88:6; 130:1; La 3:55; Jnh 2:2). The depths are often linked, as here, with Sheol (“the grave,” v. 3) and “the pit” (v. 3), together with a cluster of related associations: silence (see 31:17; 94:17; 115:17; 1Sa 2:9), darkness (see 88:6, 12; 143:3; Job 10:21–22; 17:13; Ecc 6:4; La 3:6), destruction (see v. 9; 18:4; 55:23, “corruption”; 88:11; Isa 38:17; Hos 13:14), dust (see v. 9; 7:5; 22:15, 29; Job 17:16; 40:13; Isa 26:19; 29:4), mire (see 40:2; 69:2, 14), slime (see 40:2) and mud (see 40:2; Job 30:19).}. (CSB)

143:4 *my spirit faints within me.* Because he is overwhelmed by his situation. (CSB)

Psalmist is at such a low point, his inmost life is fading. (TLSB)

In the Hebrew all the verbs are past tenses. There was first an utter fainting away in weakness so that no courage was left. His spirit did not stand up manfully in bearing the shock. The stroke was too much for him. At the same time his heart within him was appalled. (Leupold)

heart. In Biblical language the center of the human spirit, from which spring emotions, thought, motivations, courage and action—“the wellspring of life” (Pr 4:23). (CSB)

143:5–6 Remembrance of God’s past acts of deliverance encourages him in his appeal. (CSB)

He overcomes this weakness by thinking about the Lord’s great deeds in the past. (PBC)

He longs for fellowship with God once again. David knows that if God is near, nothing will destroy him. The more we meditate on the power and love of our God, the less we will fear the forces of evil. (LL)

143:5 *remember the days of old*– He overcomes this weakness by thinking about the Lord’s great deeds in the past. (PBC)

Psalmist remembers the past, when it was evident that God was with him, including God’s great redemptive acts in the history of His people. (TLSB)

meditate – The more we meditate on the power and love of our God, the less we will fear the forces of evil – whether of Satan or of human agents. (LL)

143:6 *spread out my hands*. In prayer (see 44:20; 88:9; Ex 9:29). (CSB)

Gesture of prayer turns into a reaching, a sign of thirst and longing. (TLSB)

soul. In this verse refers to the psalmist’s entire being, equivalent to the personal pronoun “I.” (CSB)

Selah – Hebrew; untranslatable. Mainly in the first two books of Psalms. Probably refers to the accompaniment of the harps during the psalm. (TLSB p. 993)

This often occurs in the middle of a psalm and which apparently signals an interlude. “The Sela indicates that one must be still and quickly think through the words of the psalm; for they demand a quiet and restful soul, which can grasp and hold to that which the Holy Spirit there presents and offers” (Luther). (Psalms – The Prayer Book of the Bible – Dietrich Bonhoeffer p. 23)

Selah may be a musical notation. It could also be a point where a pause is desirable for the singer or reader of the psalm in order that the statement last made or the thought as a whole just developed may be reflected upon before the next turn of the thought appears. (Leupold)

143:7–10 The prayer. (CSB)

143:7 *my spirit fails*. Or perhaps: “my spirit fails.” The translation parallels that in 119:81, but in view of the next line the thought appears closer to that of 104:29 (where “breath” translates the same Hebrew word as that for “spirit” here). Ultimately, the failing of “my spirit” will be healed by the leading of “your good Spirit” (v. 10)—the two references enclose the prayer. (CSB)

Luther: “The disconsolate soul which finds nothing in itself is God’s most cherished sacrifice, especially when it cries for His grace” (AE 14:200). (TLSB)

hide your face. In moments of need the psalmists frequently ask God why he hides his face (see 30:7; 44:24; 88:14), or they plead with him not to do so (see 27:9; 69:17; 102:2; 143:7). When he does hide his face, those who depend on him can only despair (see 30:7; 104:29). When his face shines on a person, blessing and deliverance come. (CSB)

Someone who is hiding is present but not seen. The psalmist pleads with God not to hide His face in anger against his sin. (TLSB)

To have God’s face means to have His acceptance and favor like in the blessing at the end of our worship service. If God were to turn His face away from His servant in displeasure, that alone would be more than he could bear. (Leupold)

the pit. Metaphor for the grave. (CSB)

Pointing to condemnation in Sheol. (TLSB)

The Meaning of *Sheol*

This word, occurring 65 times in the Hebrew OT, is still obscure. Since the derivation of the word is uncertain, the context must determine the meaning in each case.

1. *Sheol* can mean the resting place of mankind's mortal remains (Jb 17:16; Is 38:10).

2. *Sheol* can also mean "realm of the dead," into which all enter who depart this life, righteous as well as wicked (e.g., Gn 37:35; Jb 7:9; Ps 16:10; 31:17; 89:48). In this sense, it is a general term used very much like the English phrase "the hereafter" or "the beyond." The phrase "to go down into Sheol" means "to die, to depart from the land of the living." But it should be noted that when the righteous are said to descend into Sheol, their fate beyond is rarely taken into account. The hope of the pious in the OT is expressed differently (e.g., Ps 73:24).

3. *Sheol* can mean the place where God's judgment overtakes evildoers. In this sense, Sheol receives those who are taken away in God's anger. Korah's rebel band went down to Sheol because they had provoked the Lord (Nu 16:30, 33). Harlots go to Sheol (Pr 5:5). The anger of the Lord burns to the depths of Sheol (Dt 32:22). According to Ps 49, all people die physically, the righteous as well as the ungodly (v 10), but there is a difference in their existence in the hereafter. The confidence of the psalmist is expressed in the words "They [i.e., the wicked] are appointed for Sheol; Death shall be their shepherd.... But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for He will receive me" (vv 14–15). Clearly, there is a sharp contrast between the doom of the ungodly and the glorious hope of the believer, who hopes to rest securely in the hands of God (Ps 73). (TLSB)

143:8 *the morning*. Of salvation from the present "darkness." (CSB)

steadfast love. The Hebrew for this phrase denotes befriending. Appeal to God's "(unfailing) love, kindness, mercy" is frequent in the OT since it summarizes all that the Lord covenanted to show to Israel (see Dt 7:9, 12) as well as to David and his dynasty (see 89:24, 28, 33; 2Sa 7:15; Isa 55:3). (CSB)

Luther: "Thus God speaks peace to the hearts of His people, and He does this 'early,' that is, speedily" (AE 14:201). (TLSB)

make me know the way. See v. 10. Deliverance from the enemy is not enough—either for God's "servant" (vv. 2, 12) or for entrance into life. (CSB)

lift up my soul – Luther: "A man can say to his God: 'Behold, take my heart, and lead me according to Thy will. I surrender myself wholly to Thee' " (AE 14:202). (TLSB)

143:9 *enemies* – Luther: "The enemies of the righteous are trying only to mislead them and clutch them to themselves, into their way of life" (AE 14:22). (TLSB)

I have fled to you for refuge –The very fact that a man has cast himself upon God's mercy gives warrant for the hope that he shall not have appealed to God in vain. (Leupold)

143:10 *teach me to do your will* – He desires the faith and wisdom to use his victory wisely in a God-pleasing way. For this reason he asks for divine instruction and guidance. He is not interested in the Lord only to be bailed out in a crisis, but he thirsts for a relationship with God which will regulate his whole life. (PBC)

We have labeled this a prayer for rehabilitation. Whereas trouble has brought the psalmist low, he asks that God may set him on his feet and enable him to go steadfastly on his way. (Leupold)

David wants a relationship with God that will regulate his whole life. God is not a fire extinguisher we can pull out in an emergency. God is our constant companion in life whose presence gives comfort, whose wisdom give guidance, and whose power brings hope. (LL)

let your good Spirit lead me – In what areas do you need God’s guidance right now so that you stand strong against temptation in Him? (LL)

Chemnitz: “[The Spirit] directs and governs our course, so that we do not stumble or go astray ... just as a horseman guides his horse” (*LTh* 1:246). (TLSB)

level ground. Where the going is smooth and free from the danger of falling (see 143:10; Isa 40:4; 42:16). (CSB)

Easy, pleasant way. (TLSB)

143:11–12 Concluding summary of the prayer. (CSB)

143:11 *For your name’s sake.* The prosperity of the Lord’s servant brings honor to the Lord’s name (see 1Ki 8:41–42; Isa 48:9; Jer 14:21; Eze 20:9, 14, 22).}. (CSB)

That God’s name be honored, as opposed to “the self-righteous [who] honor their own names” (Luth, AE 14:203). (TLSB)

This means that God has a reputation for dealing thus with his saints. (Luther)

143:12 *steadfast love* – Hbr *chesed*, “loyalty” to one’s community; most common term for God’s grace in the Psalms (125 times). Luther described *chesed* as “goodness in action” (AE 14:50). God’s unwavering devotion to the salvation of His people finds its fulfillment in the cross of Christ. (TLSB p. 843)

destroy all the adversaries. The presence of so-called “imprecations” (curses) in the Psalms has occasioned endless discussion and has caused many Christians to wince, in view of Jesus’ instructions to turn the other cheek and to pray for one’s enemies (see Mt 5:39, 44), and his own example on the cross (see Lk 23:34). Actually, these “imprecations” are not that at all; rather, they are appeals to God to redress wrongs perpetrated against the psalmists by imposing penalties commensurate with the violence done (see 28:4)—in accordance also with normal judicial procedure in human courts (see Dt 25:1–3). The psalmists knew that he who has been wronged is not to right that wrong by his own hand but is to leave redress to the Lord, who says, “It is mine to avenge; I will repay” (Dt 32:35; see Pr 20:22; Ro 12:19). Therefore they appeal their cases to the divine Judge (see Jer 15:15).}. (CSB)

Ps 143 The psalmist pleads for God’s mercy, admitting that neither he nor anyone else can stand before God’s judgment. He trusts in God’s righteousness and in His name, not his own. This penitential psalm is a profound description of a repentant heart, which receives God’s grace. The psalmist, giving up on himself, trusts in God’s “steadfast love” (v 8). • O Lord, I confess that I am sinful and unclean. By Your steadfast love, take away from me every shred of pride and self-

righteousness. Trusting in Your grace, I come before You not in my own righteousness, but clothed in Jesus' righteousness. Amen. (TLSB)