

Psalm Twenty-Seven

The LORD is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?

The LORD is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?

When evildoers assail me
to devour my flesh—
my adversaries and foes—
they shall stumble and fall.

Though an army encamp against me,
my heart shall not fear;
though war rise up against me,
yet I will be confident.

One thing I asked of the LORD,
that will I seek after:
to live in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of the LORD,
and to inquire in his temple.

For he will hide me in his shelter
in the day of trouble;
he will conceal me
under the cover of his tent;
he will set me high on a rock.

Now my head is lifted up
above my enemies all around me,
and I will offer in his tent
sacrifices with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make melody to the LORD.

Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud,
be gracious to me and answer me!
“Come,” my heart says, “seek his face!”
Your face, LORD, do I seek.
Do not hide your face from me.

Do not turn your servant away in anger,
you who have been my help.

Do not cast me off, do not forsake me,
O God of my salvation!

If my father and mother forsake me,
the LORD will take me up.

Teach me your way, O LORD,
and lead me on a level path
because of my enemies.

Do not give me up
to the will of my adversaries,
for false witnesses have risen against me,
and they are breathing out violence.

I believe that I shall see
the goodness of the LORD
in the land of the living.
Wait for the LORD;
be strong, and let your heart take courage;
wait for the LORD!

“Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

Thus begins The Battle Hymn of the Republic. Written during the American Civil war by Julia Ward Howe, the song was originally intended as a pro-Union, anti-slavery anthem. Despite that, and the fact that Howe was herself a pacifist, the hymn quickly took on a life of its own, often with the patriotic and military associations that we are most familiar with today.¹

At first glance, Psalm Twenty-Seven reads like a song of that sort. Like the popular, 19th century song, its first words ring out with a note of triumph. Though evildoers assail the writer, they will ultimately stumble and fall (v.2). Though a battalion is encamped nearby, he will not fear (v.3a). Though war arise, and he be the target of assaults, he remains confident (v.3b).

It reads like a battle-hymn... except that the only action we observe in the psalm is that of the adversary. Commander David, to whom these words are ascribed, is conspicuously absent from the frontlines. In fact, he is nowhere to be seen, having evidently retreated to a stronghold (v.1b)

It is not a place of safety, by the standards of wartime. Not by any means. The four walls and gates of the temple will do little to protect him, should the foreign troops advance further. No, the sacred space in which he stands only symbolizes, and exists in service of, the God who is his true Shelter in a setting marked by hostility (vv.4-5).

In the same way that The Battle Hymn of the Republic has often been used as a kind of national anthem, some people have re-appropriated Psalm Twenty Seven to function as a salute to the state, or even as a call-to-arms. To do so is to misinterpret these words. Because, while the psalm-writer is concerned with beholding the glory of the coming of the Lord (v.4b), he does not look to the battlefield for glimpses it.

King David led the charge on no few occasions, it is true. But here he seems to be off singing and offering sacrifices in the tabernacle, rather than shouting orders at officers from inside an army tent (v.6). His is the paradox of the life of faith - he is entirely exposed and vulnerable to attack, by human accounts, and yet remains full-protected and perfectly safe, in spiritual terms (v. 5). Were it not for God, his flight, as we imagine it taking place, would be seen as an act of cowardice. Instead it is presented as bold strength in the face of threats.

You may know that the Battle Hymn of the Republic was adapted for use on another famous occasion. Martin Luther King Jr. closed off his most famous speech (“I have a dream”) with the song’s opening line, the day before he was assassinated.

His church, Ebenezer Baptist, would sing the song at his funeral, and again many times after. Not in an attempt to rouse courage, so that people would take to the streets and retaliate the killing of the civil-rights leader, but as a reminder of God’s ever-advancing and final victory in a world of injustice and violence (vv.13-14).

King’s next-to-last words, before those of the hymn? “I’m not worried about anything; I’m not fearing any man.” They are words that echo the very words of Psalm Twenty-Seven, and capture its meaning and mystery – that enemies, and even death itself, need not be feared, for those who fear God. – NS

¹ <https://www.npr.org/2018/07/04/625351953/one-song-glory>