

A Song and a Sword

Let the high praises of God be in their mouth and a two-edged sword in their hand (Ps 149:6)

Perhaps naval Lt. Howell Forgy had been reading Ps 149 before he made his famous comment at Pearl Harbor, “Praise the Lord, and pass the ammunition.” During the early days of the Protestant Reformation, Ps 149 was put to unholy uses in justifying religious wars by bloodthirsty hypocrites. But this psalm serves a useful purpose in Scripture. A careful reading of this psalm makes it clear that worship and warfare are not incompatible.

This psalm is essentially the Song of the Saints, i.e., the beloved or godly. They are mentioned three times, in vv 1, 3, and 9. It is called a *new song*, for new occasions call forth new songs. This new song should be sung both publicly (*in the congregation*, v 1) and privately (*upon their beds*, v 5). The singing is not merely to be in the heart, for the high praises (the only use of this phrase in Scripture) of God are to be *in their mouth*. (The volume of the singing in bed is a matter of discretion, unless we are living alone!)

Ps 149 seems to have its setting in Israel’s restoration period. This was a time of revival for the saints of God. Times of revival have always been times of singing, expressive of joy, and times of song birth. The Lord takes pleasure in his people. Their joyous songs give him satisfaction. He adorns his faithful ones with salvation, i.e., deliverance from oppression (v 4). The fact that they can sing praises on their beds indicates that some measure of victory already had been achieved. The Israelites were at rest. But the remainder of the Psalm anticipates greater victories to come.

The saints of God must be soldiers as well as singers; they must have a sword as well as a song. There must be *a two-edged sword in their hand*. In Nehemiah’s day those who worked on Jerusalem’s walls had to be prepared to use a literal sword to defend themselves from attacks by adversaries (Neh 4:16). Earlier Gideon was forced to take up the sword against Midian (Judg 7:20). Those addressed in Ps 149 are the godly, the sincere and truehearted Israelites. Of them it may be expected that they would understand this call to worship and warfare in a truly spiritual sense. When forced to take up literal arms in self-defense the Israelites saw themselves as executing vengeance on God’s enemies. Nothing indicates

that this vengeance was undeserved. The word *punishment* (v 7) is lit., *corrections* (pl), and this term always has wholesome objectives.

Like the Israelites, Christians are to be warriors. The Christian life is a warfare. *The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds* (2 Cor 10:3). The Christian must *fight the good fight of faith* (1 Tim 6:12). Thus the apostle instructs us to put on *the whole armor of God*, and to take in our hand the sword of the Spirit, the word of God that is *sharper than any two-edged sword* (Eph 6:12-18).

Previous generations of believers saw themselves as warriors. Hymnals (remember them?) are filled with hymns exhorting Christians to march forward into battle. I cannot remember the last time I was in a service where one of these hymns was sung. We seem to see ourselves as singers, not soldiers. High praise is on our lips, but we have laid down our swords.