Psalm 56 — Praise for God’s Word

1.0 Introducing Psalm 56

- David’s flight to the Philistine city of Gath to escape Saul forms the background for Psalm 56.
  - 1 Samuel 21:10-12
  - Psalm 52’s background takes place just prior to this event (1 Samuel 21:1-9).
  - Psalm 34’s background takes place at the end of this event (1 Samuel 21:13–22:1).
- Psalm 56 is the first of a series of psalms given the title, “A Mikhtam of David” (Psalms 56–60).
  - In addition, the musical subscription (taken from the following psalm heading) on Psalms 56–58 is “set to Al-tashheth.”

2.0 Reading Psalm 56 (NAU)

56:1 A Mikhtam of David, when the Philistines seized him in Gath.

Be gracious to me, O God, for man has trampled upon me;
Fighting all day long he oppresses me.

56:2 My foes have trampled upon me all day long,
For they are many who fight proudly against me.

A 56:3 When I am afraid,
B 56:4 In God, whose word I praise,
C A’ I shall not be afraid.
B’ In God I have put my trust;

What can mere man do to me?

56:5 All day long they distort my words; All their thoughts are against me for evil.

56:6 They attack, they lurk, They watch my steps, As they have waited to take my life.

56:7 Because of wickedness, cast them forth, In anger put down the peoples, O God!

56:8 You have taken account of my wanderings; Put my tears in Your bottle. Are they not in Your book?

56:9 Then my enemies will turn back in the day when I call; 

This I know, that God is for me.

56:10 In God, whose word I praise, In the LORD, whose word I praise,

56:11 In God I have put my trust, I shall not be afraid. What can man do to me?

56:12 Your vows are binding upon me, O God; I will render thank offerings to You.

A 56:13 For You have delivered my soul from death, B Indeed my feet from stumbling, B’ So that I may walk before God A’ In the light of the living.

For the choir director; set to Al-tashheth.

3.0 Understanding Psalm 56

3.1 Outline

I. Prayer for Divine Mercy (vv. 1-4)
II. Proclamation of Divine Care (vv. 5-11)
III. Promise of Offerings for Divine Deliverance (vv. 12-13)

3.2 Notes

• v. 1 “Mikhtam”
  ■ See notes on Psalm 16.
  ■ “Inscription” fits well with the idea of indelible preservation.
  ■ Jeremiah 2:22 — a related word (nikhtam) is translated “stain” to express that something is indelible.
  ■ Job 19:23-24 — the description of words written on stone in order to preserve them.
• **v. 1 “Be gracious to me”**
  ■ See Psalm 51:1. David relies on God’s grace.

• **vv. 1, 2 “trampled … Fighting”**
  ■ The repetition of these terms emphasizes the hostility involved in David’s time of trouble.
  ■ “Trampled” could also be translated as “pursued”—the picture of being hounded relentlessly.

• **vv. 1, 2, 5 “all day long”**
  ■ The threefold occurrence of this phraseology demonstrates the continual nature of David’s trouble.
  ■ Such continual stress came at a time when David was alone. He had not yet gathered others around him.

• **vv. 3, 4 “When I am afraid … I shall not be afraid”**
  ■ See 1 Samuel 21:12.
  ■ Refrain—see verses 10-11.
  ■ We need to recognize the nature of our fear and trust God for help.

• **v. 4 “whose word I praise”**
  ■ David relied upon the Torah (the Pentateuch) and the promises which God had revealed to Samuel.
    ✓ David’s faith is based upon the Word of God.
    ✓ David’s security is based upon the Word of God.

• **v. 4 “What can mere man do unto me?”**
  ■ See verse 11.
  ■ David’s question is rhetorical. The answer is obvious: “Nothing!”
  ■ See Matthew 10:28.

• **vv. 5, 6 “my words … my steps … my life”**
  ■ Compare verse 13, “my soul … my feet.”
  ■ This psalm’s references and applications are personal.

• **v. 8 “Put my tears in Your bottle.”**
  ■ Imagery is significant in the Psalms.
  ■ No tear falls without God knowing the reason and the pain. Because He cares, He remembers.

• **v. 8 “Are they not in Your book?”**
  ■ No matter what is involved in the imagery of the bottle of tears or the book, the fact remains that God remembers.

• **v. 9 “This I know, that God is for me.”**
  ■ David’s confidence is clear.
This is what he means by the bottle and the book in the preceding verse.

- **v. 12** “thank offerings”
  - Those who place their trust in God are thankful.
  - David commits himself to a public declaration of God’s gracious care and deliverance.
  - Compare Psalm 34.

- **v. 13** “So that I may walk before God”
  - Because of God’s deliverance, David is enabled to continue his life.
  - He lives that life with the full awareness of God’s presence.

**Subscription:** “set to Al-tashheth”
- The title of the tune to which the psalm is to be sung is “Do not destroy.”
- This was evidently a familiar tune to the Temple singers and to the Israelites.

**New Testament**
- Psalm 56:9, 11 and Romans 8:31—“If God is for us, who is against us?”
- Psalm 56:11 and Hebrew 13:6—“I will not be afraid. What will mad do to me?” (cf. Psalm 118:6).
- Psalm 56:13 and John 8:12—“the light of life.”

### 4.0 Singing Psalm 56

**O Thou Whose Justice Reigns on High**

*(Tune: “I Sing the Mighty Power of God”)*

1. O Thou whose justice reigns on high,  
   And makes th’oppressor cease,  
   Behold how envious sinners try  
   To vex and break my peace.

2. The sons of violence and lies  
   Join to devour me, Lord;  
   But as my hourly dangers rise,  
   My refuge is Thy Word.

3. In God most holy, just, and true,  
   I have reposed my trust;  
   Nor will I fear what flesh can do,  
   The offspring of the dust.

4. They wrest my words to mischief still,  
   Charge me with unknown faults;  
   Mischief doth all their counsels fill,  
   And malice all their thoughts.

5. Shall they escape without Thy frown?  
   Must their devices stand?  
   O cast the haughty sinner down,  
   And let him know Thy hand.

6. God counts the sorrows of His saints,  
   Their groans affect His ears;  
   Thou hast a book for my complaints,  
   A bottle for my tears.
7 When to Thy throne I raise my cry, 
The wicked fear and flee; 
So swift is prayer to reach the sky, 
So near is God to me.

8 In Thee, most holy, just, and true, 
I have reposed my trust; 
Nor will I fear what man can do, 
The offspring of the dust.

9 Thy solemn vows are on me, Lord, 
Thou shalt receive my praise; 
I’ll sing, “How faithful is Thy Word, 
How righteous all Thy ways!”

10 Thou hast secured my soul from death, 
O set Thy pris’ner free! 
That heart and hand, and life and breath, 
May be employ’d for Thee.

— Isaac Watts (1719)

5.0 Praying Psalm 56

- Lord, teach me to trust you when I am afraid. [v. 3]
- I praise You for Your Word, O God. [vv. 4, 10]
- Thank You, Father, for caring about my troubles and tears. [v. 8]
- Lord, give me the privilege of demonstrating my thanks to You. [v. 12]
- Father, let me in Your ways while I have life. [v. 13]

6.0 Applying Psalm 56

- The best antidote to fear is trust in God and His Word.
- God is for us—hostility against His people ultimately will fail.
- We should practice the giving of thank offerings.