

The hand of the wicked (Psalm 71:1-6)

Enemies are quite common in the Psalms, sometimes with deadly intent.

by [Greg Carey](#)

August 22, 2025

To receive these posts by email each Monday, [sign up](#).

For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.

Speaking confessionally, I have rarely resonated personally with the psalms of deliverance, those psalms that seek God's help in crisis. I absolutely seek God's help in crisis, but something about these psalms has never fit me well. Please don't hate me.

Psalm 71:4 may press the pin precisely into the site of my discomfort. "Rescue me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked"? The psalmist knows enemies and calls them wicked. In contrast, my life has been largely enemy free. I've experienced conflict, sure. I know people who don't like me. I don't believe many people bear direct animosity toward me, and perhaps none seeks to do me harm.

But enemies are quite common in the Psalms, sometimes with deadly intent. I perceive a mismatch between these psalms and my relatively low-conflict life. Might you feel the same way?

Here in the United States—particularly in the South, where I grew up—we have often kept our conflicts low key. But other people's situation is more like that of our psalmist. Many people do have enemies, and they know who they are. Folks keep score on slights and other petty offenses. People take sides and make alliances. It is

hard to stay friends with two parties who hate each other. And while the concept of open violence may seem remote to many of us today, things were very different just a few generations ago, when conflicts might result in a fight or even a duel. Psalms like Psalm 71 may feel distant to me and to some of you, but from a broader perspective they are hardly extreme.

I could learn from my many pastor friends, all of whom have enemies who, at a minimum, have wanted them dismissed from their churches. I could imagine them praying along with Psalm 71.

Still, when I have experienced conflict in the past, I have rarely thought of the other side as wicked. School bullies excluded, of course. God has supplied enough humility that I don't regard disagreement, criticism, or conflict as a sign of total depravity on the part of the other side. I know enough wickedness within myself. It requires a special cause to raise up a Dietrich Bonhoeffer or a Fannie Lou Hamer who possesses the moral authority to name wickedness in a categorical way. I am no Fannie Lou Hamer in courage or in conviction.

Recent events, however, have reframed my attitude. Many people I know share the experience. Current events in the United States are revealing genuine wickedness—not debauchery of the carousing-all-night sort but cruelty to other human beings. This wickedness sits on the throne of power, and it has permeated our churches, where preachers proclaim spiritual warfare against wokeness and “transgenderism,” blaming our nation's problems on people who suffer harm rather than those who perpetuate it. What a wicked thing to do. For the first time, I sense there are people who might harm me if given the opportunity and a sense of immunity. Churches have earned accreditation as academies of cruelty.

I do not wish harm upon these enemies. I pray they will experience a gentle and transforming grace. Yet surely I will praise God alongside the psalmist if this wickedness is vanquished.