

When I am afraid * Psalm 56

January 12, 2020 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

I want to tell you about the neat ways that God works.

At some point in the last few months, I was reading psalms devotionally and I came across this psalm, Psalm 56, and I found it really moving – it offers this really powerful and concise counsel on what to do when you're afraid – and I thought 'that's a good thing for us to know' so I wrote in the front of my Bible – preach on Psalm 56. And it sat there for a while because we were doing other stuff, until the last few weeks when I started planning between now and Easter. So I thought, well, before we get any further, I think I'll preach on Psalm 56 so that we know what to do when things go wrong.

And then Julie's dad was gravely ill from complications due to surgery. And you know what was in my head the whole time? Psalm 56. What to do when I'm afraid. God knows what He's doing.

So I want to look at Psalm 56 with you this morning, because, to be honest, I'm still a little afraid about how things will turn out with my father-in-law and I suspect that some of us may just find ourselves in scary situations this year. So let's take this morning and see what God says to do when we're afraid.

Now normally at this point in the message, I'd say turn with me in your Bibles to Psalm 56, but I'm going to do something a little different this morning. The pew Bibles are NIV and that's a fine translation, but this morning, I'm going to work from the ESV instead. The ESV is a little more wooden and a little more literal than the NIV, but I think that in this case, the more literal translation is actually more powerful and more accurate, so we're going to work from the ESV.

So Psalm 56.

Now right away, you're going to notice that this psalm has a heading which actually tells us a lot about this psalm. It says: To the choirmaster: according to The Dove on Far-off Terebinths. A Miktam of David, when the Philistines seized him in Gath. (Psa 56:1 ESV).

So first, we know that this psalm was written by David, during a particularly trying time in his life (and we'll talk more about that in a minute), but it also appears that this psalm was later adopted a worship song – essentially – in temple worship. And we know that because it says 'to the choirmaster.' The later compilers of the psalm – the people who put them into order and gave this the number 56 - added in this note to say – 'choirmaster, when you use this psalm, play it according to 'The Dove on Far-off Terebinths.' Now to be honest, we don't know for sure what that is, but it sure seems likely that it's a tune that was well known to Hebrew people.

We have that in our culture too – Jennifer's going to help me out here – she'll play a couple of tunes – you'll probably recognize them as hymns – but they actually have tune names themselves. So – Old one hundredth, Diadem, Twinkle twinkle – that's a bit of a trick because it's 'The alphabet song' AND 'twinkle twinkle' AND 'baa baa black sheep. ☺ This psalm was sung to 'The Dove on Far-off terebinths.'

And if that's obscure, well, the word 'miktam' is even more so. There's only six of them in the Bible and aside from Psalm 16, they're all right here from 56-60. There are a lot of guesses about what it means, but we don't know for sure, but we do know who wrote this particular miktam – and that's David.

And this actually ties us back to an event in David's life that we didn't talk about in the fall. At one point before he was king, David became so afraid of Saul that he decided to run away from Saul... and for some reason, he decided to hide in the land of his foremost enemies – the Philistines – who were at Gath. Now you can imagine how scary it must have been with SAUL if David felt safer in the hands of the Philistines, but even then, Goliath's brothers were there in Gath and probably out for blood. And so David found himself in real danger. At some point in that ordeal, David sat down to record his thoughts and prayers and that's this psalm.

And this is where it becomes especially powerful - this is not some ivory tower speculation on what it's like to suffer; this is someone who has experienced tremendous suffering and real danger – and so he can teach us a lot about what to do when we are afraid as the people of God. So let's dig right and see what he says.

Verse 1 – David prays – 1 Be gracious to me, O God, for man tramples on me; all day long an attacker oppresses me; 2 my enemies trample on me all day long, for many attack me proudly (Psa 56:1-2 ESV).

Given that he was sitting in Gath, on the run from Saul, you can imagine that this captures David's circumstances, can't you? Trampled on, attacked, all day long – David uses repetition over and over to give the sense that this danger is happening over and over. Twice in two lines he says 'all day long' – twice he says 'they trample me' – twice he says they're attacking me – and what's his very first instinct? To go to God. "Be gracious to me O God." He doesn't give up. He doesn't despair. He doesn't get bitter and complain. He doesn't hit the bottle. David knows that God alone can help him in this situation so he goes to Him in prayer.

Now the neat thing about the psalms is that they seem to have been written purposely vague, so that we can easily put ourselves into them. You can imagine given the context the people that David is thinking about specifically here, but there are no names here, no faces, so that we can take up this psalm for ourselves and pray it as our own.

And we're not limited to human threats when we pray this psalm; these are very appropriate words to pray when we're facing illness and death and other hardships – whenever we're afraid. So whatever you have going on – you can pray this psalm. "Be gracious to me O God, for I am under attack."

Now when you're afraid, it's easy for your mind to go wild, isn't it? To consider all the worst case scenarios. It's easy to let the enemy – whatever it is – take over your perspective.

But look what David *chooses* to do in the face of that enemy - Verse 3 - 3 When I am afraid, I put my trust in you.

That's a fundamental choice for us as believers - When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. We choose to trust that no matter how big this problem is, God is bigger and God can handle it.

Verse 4 tells us WHY he trusts in God -

4 In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can flesh do to me? (Psa 56:3-4 ESV).

He trusts in God because this is GOD we're talking about here. The maker of Heaven and earth. The author of the Exodus. The God who delivered him from lions and bears and giants. David knows that he is safer in God's hand, than he is in danger at the hands of men.

And it's fascinating to see what David has said here – because look at 3 and 4 together - When I am afraid, I shall not be afraid. When I am afraid, I need not fear because my trust is in God.

That's a stunning statement, isn't it? David leans entirely on the God and says "If the LORD is at work here, then I don't need to freak out. I can trust God to bring good things out of bad situations."

And David actually invites us here to join him here - when we are afraid - trusting in God, having this confident assurance in our hearts that God will handle whatever we're facing. When we are afraid, we need not be afraid.

But let's be honest. That's hard isn't it? And as much as we fix that truth in our hearts, our minds can wander back to the danger, can't they? I mean, all last week when I thought about Julie's dad, I was bouncing back and forth between fear and faith and I think that that's natural. In fact, I think we see David do it in this psalm.

Right? Verses 1 and 2 he tells us about the danger; verses 3 and 4 he says 'I will not be afraid'; now here in verse 5, his mind wanders back to the danger again.

Verse 5 – 5 All day long they injure my cause; all their thoughts are against me for evil.

6 They stir up strife, they lurk; they watch my steps, as they have waited for my life.
(Psa 56:5-6 ESV).

David has gone to God in prayer – "God be gracious to me because I am under attack."

He's found strength and courage in trusting in God – "I will not be afraid."

And then his mind wanders back to his circumstances again. "Those guys still keep attacking me!"

Can you identify with that? That movement of "I'm afraid, I'm not afraid, I am afraid..."

That happens, and that's ok – it just means that we need to keep gently reorienting our hearts back to God.

I think John Goldingay is right when he says –

The psalm may speak paradoxically about these dynamics, but it speaks appropriately. Within a couple of lines it says, "On the day I am afraid I trust in you" and "I am not afraid: what can flesh do to me?" Maybe it means "When I am afraid, I start trusting, and I stop being afraid." But maybe it implies that we can be afraid and not afraid at the same time. We are afraid because that is the rational response to the danger that assails us. But we are not afraid in the sense of being overwhelmed or paralyzed by fear [because we trust in God] (Goldingay, *OT for everyone commentary*, Psalm 56).

And that's a very important distinction. We may feel fear and our bodies may register anxiety, but in our hearts and minds we can stand firm in the knowledge that we are safe in God's hands. We can have a confident assurance that God is working for good.

BeCAUSE... verses 8 and 9 - 8 You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your book? 9 Then my enemies will turn back in the day when I call. This I know, that God is for me (Psa 56:8-9 ESV).

David has told us two very important things about God's commitment to us here; two reasons we can trust Him – first – He knows our struggles – that's that 'He has kept count of our tossings; he's collected our tears in His bottle' part.

Those restless night when you can't sleep or wake up anxious and can't get to sleep again; those days when you are exhausted from emotional weight; those moments of confusion when all you can do is collapse and cry? God knows them. God accounts for them.

And He knows us so intimately that it's as though He collects our tears in a bottle. These symbols of our pain - they are not wasted; they are not pointless – God gathers our tears as a precious and fundamental part of our experience.

And this idea is famous enough and meaningful enough to have created a whole industry of 'tear bottles' – apparently you can buy glass blown ones in Israel – to remind yourself of the point of the metaphor – that God cares intimately for us in the face of danger.

I think if I were writing this psalm, I'd probably put it like this – I remember at one point falling off my bike and getting a big gash up my leg. There I was bawling my eyes out – my mom came over and cleaned the wound and kissed it better. It didn't make the pain vanish, but it did give me strength, knowing that I was not alone and that I was deeply cared for by someone bigger than me. And that's God's posture towards us when we suffer.

He knows our suffering, he feels our pain and even more – the second thing that David teaches us – verse 9 – he is for us. I love how David says it – This is know, that God is for me. Do you know that? That God is for you? Because He is. He made you. He gave you gifts and abilities and value. And He loves you. He loves you so much that despite your reluctance to follow Him, He put Himself in danger to restore you to Him, to make you His child. God is for you. Case closed. Let that fill your heart when troubles come.

He cares for us deeply – He is for us – and so - verse 10 - 10 In God, whose word I praise, in the LORD, whose word I praise, 11 in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can man do to me? (Psa 56:10-11 ESV).

Does that sound familiar? It should. It's verses 3 and 4. When I am afraid, I will not be afraid, because God is for me and I trust in Him.

That's the heart of this psalm and the reason I love it so much. David keeps coming back to it. Time and again, he faces danger. And each time the danger's a little different. But he keeps coming back to the same thing – to the God who never changes. When I am afraid, I will not be afraid because I trust in the God who is for me.

The way he's organized this psalm actually illustrates that point! Verses 1-2 illustrate fear; verses 3-4 bring us back to faith. Verses 5-7 show us another fear; verses 8-11 bring us back to faith.

Faith in God does not mean that our lives are perfect and full of sunshine and rainbows; faith in God means that in the midst of difficulties, the Sovereign God of the universe is with us and for us, and we can stand firmly on that truth. When we are afraid, we can have the confident assurance that God is working for good.

And the reality of our human hearts is that we will probably need to bring our hearts back to that again and again.

When I am afraid – I shall not be afraid – because I trust in God. And then I get afraid again. And then I shall not be afraid, because I trust in God.

In a sense, this psalm is like a song. You know how songs work – usually the verses are different but the chorus is the same. Well, verses 1 and 2 and 5-7 of this psalm are like verses in a song, and 3-4 and 8-11 are like the chorus. The struggles are there in the verses, but we keep coming back to the chorus. When I am afraid – I shall not be afraid – because I trust in God.

Our lives are like that too – like a song. The dangers we face are like the verses, different ones every time - but we keep coming back to the chorus - When I am afraid – I shall not be afraid – because I trust in the God who is for me. Second verse, same as the first... Chorus... When I am afraid – I shall not be afraid – because I trust in God.

Now there are two more verses to this psalm and I do want to touch on them – verse 12 –

12 I must perform my vows to you, O God; I will render thank offerings to you.

I really think that this is here to remind us to not take God's constant care for granted. We need both to trust in Him and also to thank Him for the way he works – and then verse 13 -

13 For you have delivered my soul from death, yes, my feet from falling, that I may walk before God in the light of life (Psa 56:12-13 ESV).

Now this verse means more for us than it ever could have for David. When he says 'you have delivered my soul from death, my feet from falling,' he's probably thinking about the times when God delivered him from the lions and from Goliath; and we can point to those examples too – where God has delivered us from dangerous places. But on this side of the Cross, we have an even deeper appreciation for what that means, don't we? When we trust in Jesus' sacrifice, our souls truly are delivered from death. We have the confident assurance of Jesus' presence with us in this life, and eternal life with Him in the next. Case closed. We have the resources to handle whatever comes our way, knowing that we are safe in God's eternal hands.

So that's psalm 56 – not as well known as some other psalms – but I think just as important. And it leads me to this big idea –

Let the chorus of your life be 'when I am afraid, I will not be afraid, because I trust in God and He is for me.'

You are at various points going to run into trouble – when that comes, bring your heart back to the chorus – 'when I am afraid, I will not be afraid, because I trust in the God who is for me.'

Now listen, that doesn't mean that you won't feel fear – fear is a natural human response that prepares us for action – but faith in God does mean that we can see that fear in light of God's loving commitment to us. It's not that the crisis is diminished but that our confidence in the One who will help is increased (paraphrase Allen Ross, *Psalms, vol. 2, 273*).¹

As this year unfolds, we will all experience some really great things and we will all feel excitement at various points. But there are times too when we will be afraid. When that happens, keep coming back to the chorus – When I am afraid, I will not be afraid, for I trust in the God who is for me.

BENEDICTION

12. Phil. 4:7 - (May) the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

¹ (The crisis is not diminished; his confidence is in the one who can bring it to an end (Ross, *Psalms, 273*).