

The Nearness of God In Our Pain

Psalm 56

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Before we get into Psalm 56, let's step back just a bit because we are almost halfway through Book 2, which is Psalms 42-72. You'll notice, if you haven't already, that the overall trajectory of the Psalms moves from *lament to praise*. By Book 5, the Psalter shifts to all-praise. The Psalter does this because it anticipates the Messiah's coming. Book 2 is a mixture of lament and hope for the Messiah's future reign.

Now, let's get into Psalm 56. The superscription tells us that the historical event behind this Psalm is still connected to King Saul's pursuit of David and his desire to kill him. Look at the superscription:

*TO THE CHOIRMASTER: ACCORDING TO THE DOVE ON FAR-OFF TEREBINTHS. A
MIKTAM OF DAVID, WHEN THE PHILISTINES SEIZED HIM IN GATH.*

The event in the superscription is recorded in 1 Samuel 21:10-15. David was fleeing Saul, and he went to King Achish of Gath. Fearing recognition, he feigned madness and was sent away unharmed.

So, let's think about this event. It actually happened just after Doeg killed the priests in Nob. David fled to the place Saul least expected him to go: Gath of the Philistines. He shows up in Gath, Goliath's hometown, carrying Goliath's sword. David was so desperate to escape from Saul that his fear pushed him to seek refuge with the enemy. Bottom line: Fear was consuming him and causing him to make foolish decisions.

Have you ever been there? So, what's causing you to be afraid? Is it the possibility of losing your job and not being able to care for your family? Perhaps it is the cancer diagnosis? Perhaps it is the pain and grief of the miscarriage and the fear it may happen again? Perhaps it is the son/daughter who has walked away from their faith in Jesus? Perhaps it is marriage problems and the fear of going to counseling? Perhaps it is graduating from high school or college and finding a job so you can make a living in this economy? Perhaps you're getting married, and you're afraid of what married life will be like? Perhaps you're expecting a baby and fear has gripped you over how you will make ends meet? Perhaps you want children, but you're not getting pregnant, and you fear never having kids of your own? Perhaps you're single, want to be married, and fear being alone for the rest of your life? Perhaps retirement is in your near future, and you wonder how you'll afford it? Perhaps it's just the fear of the unknown, of not being in control of your circumstances?

Fear can arise in our hearts over a thousand other things, but here's the deal: *Psalm 56 is about fearing the worst-case scenario*. Psalm 56 will answer the question: *How do you deal with and live through this kind of fear?*

This Psalm is not some kind of ancient poetry. It is the inspired Word of God that shapes our theology of suffering, fear, and faith. It is gospel-centered because it points beyond David to the greater David, Jesus Christ, who was surrounded by enemies, whose words were twisted, who trusted the Father even unto death, and who was delivered from the grave that we might walk in the light of His life. Psalm 56 also shows the Bible's redemptive storyline by tracing it from Israel's king in exile, to the cross, to the church's pilgrimage, and finally to the new creation, where Jesus wipes away every tear from our eyes. So, here we go: We will walk verse by verse through Psalm 56, letting the text preach Christ and apply His grace to our fears. Psalm 56 *will teach us how to pray through our fears and apply the gospel to them*. Psalm 56 gives us six steps for praying through our fears.

I. Step 1: Bring Your Fear to God (vv. 1-2)

What do you do when fear consumes you? Most of us don't like to admit we are afraid. Yet, in the first two verses of Psalm 56, we find the future king of Israel, the man who killed Goliath on the battlefield as a teenager, filled with fear. Look at vv. 1-2 again; let's hear from David. Remember, he's on the run from King Saul, who wants him dead, and now he is in Gath at the mercy of the Philistines:

*Be gracious to me, O God, for man tramples on me;
all day long an attacker oppresses me.*

David went from the frying pan into the fire. The Philistines hated David even more than Saul because he killed their hero. It was like he killed their Superman. Although he had killed the giant Goliath, his confidence in God wavered.

When you consider what he says in v. 1, we see he's overwhelmed with fear. He's not imagining his enemies. He's not pretending it's all good. He's not being pessimistic either. The Philistines are actually attacking him. Look at what he says in v. 2:

*My enemies trample on me all day long,
for many attack me proudly.*

Remember, Hebrew poetry uses a literary device called parallelism. So, here's what happens: v. 2 amplifies and intensifies v. 1. David doubles down on his fear in v. 2; he says they *trample him, oppress him, attack him*, and they do so *proudly* (they're enjoying it). David was pushed to the limit, so he finally took his fears to God and confessed them.

This is key because some Christians believe genuine faith in Jesus means they never admit when circumstances overwhelm them with fear. Perhaps this is you. You come to church, and fear hangs over you like a dark cloud. You know it's there, but you don't want to admit it. You don't want to acknowledge it.

The thing is, when you study the Scriptures, you realize that the word of God is filled with God's people crying out in fear and distress. Job cried out to the Lord when suffering overwhelmed him. Jeremiah cried out to the Lord in fear when he saw disaster coming upon Judah because of their disobedience. The prophets lamented in grief and fear because the people had abandoned God. Friends, biblical faith doesn't pretend we aren't fearful or hurting when we suffer.

So, let's bring this together. David describes his fearful circumstances to God, but he begins his prayer with:

Be gracious to me, O God

He cries out for God to be gracious to him before he lays out his fears. So, before he describes his fears, he appeals to God's incredible graciousness that he has experienced so many times in his life.

This is important because David isn't merely navel-gazing. He isn't just standing there looking down at his fears and the painful circumstances of his life. Instead, he looks realistically at his situation and his fears, then lifts his eyes to heaven and begins to pray.

Here's what happens when you pray by pressing into God's goodness amid your pain and fears. You look up to heaven, and heaven responds by coming down to you. This is what God does. He meets us at our point of need with His rich grace.

David knows his enemies are strong, but he trusts the God who is stronger than his enemies. Think about it this way. Consider the storyline of redemption, and let's trace it to Jesus' crucifixion.

Since Genesis 3, the serpent's seed has warred against the woman's seed, the promised One to come, God's anointed. What David experiences in Psalm 56 is the hostility of a fallen world against God's anointed. David prefigures the coming Messiah who will experience the ultimate hostility of God's enemies.

Yet, here's what I need you to understand. It is at this point, the point of the cross, that the light of the Gospel shines brightly in order to help us. Like David and Jesus, we too are trampled—by God's enemies, sin's remaining power, by the world's scorn, by the devil's accusations, and by the weariness of life in a broken creation. Our cry must be the same as David's: "*Be gracious to me.*"

Now picture this: God answered David's cry decisively in Christ. At the cross, the ultimate Trampled One absorbed the trampling of human pride and divine wrath so that grace might flow to us. How does that grace flow to us in our suffering and fear? Romans 8:31-32 says:

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?

³² *He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?*

So when fear tells you the worst case is final, the cross answers back. It's not final. It's never final. Why? Because God didn't spare His own Son but gave Him up for sinners even while they were dead in their sins and rebelling against Him. Because of what Christ has done for us, God will graciously give us what we need when fear seeks to invade and consume our hearts and lives. So, bring your fears to Jesus.

II. Step 2: Put Your Trust in Jesus (vv. 3-4)

Verses 3-4 are the refrain of Psalm 56. We will hear a slightly different version of this refrain in vv. 10-11. Here's the deal: The refrain is the main point of Psalm 56. Look at vv. 3-4:

When I am afraid,

I put my trust in you.

⁴ *In God, whose word I praise,*

in God I trust; I shall not be afraid.

What can flesh do to me?

I love how David begins the refrain. He says, "*When I am afraid.*" He didn't say, "*If I am afraid.*" David's not claiming to be fearless. He knows fear is simply part of living life in a world broken by sin. But here's the deal: Fear doesn't have to become our master. It's not a question of whether we will experience fear, but what we'll do when it invades our hearts.

Think about the refrain: How do we go from being afraid to not being afraid in only one verse? How can we go from fearing what man can do to us to confidently asking the rhetorical question, "*What can flesh do to me?*"

The answer is: David's trust is grounded in God's Word. David praises the Word, which teaches him about God's promises, His character revealed in Scripture, and His covenant faithfulness. Because God has spoken, fear doesn't go unanswered. David is essentially preaching the gospel to himself as he wrestles with his fears. He reminds himself of who God is and what God has promised. Remember Psalm 43:5,

Why are you cast down, O my soul,

and why are you in turmoil within me?

Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,

my salvation and my God.

The psalmist reminds himself of God's faithfulness as he fights the turmoil in his heart. Listen: *in Scripture, the pattern for fighting fear from Abraham onward is this: God speaks His promises; faith receives them, as you're neck-deep in fear, and we cling to them as we go through life.*

When we get to the Psalms, we are repeatedly called to practice this pattern to fight fear. Then, when we get to the New Testament, Jesus tells us the ONLY proper fear to have in Matthew 10:28,

And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

When you fear God (rightly), you will not fear man or anything else. Think about it this way: In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus embodied what it meant to fight fear perfectly. In Gethsemane, He was deeply distressed and troubled (Mark 14:33), yet He trusted the Father's will and promises as He went to the cross. Hebrews 12:2 says:

[Jesus] for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

What can flesh do to those united to Christ? Kill the body, yes—but not the soul; and even death has lost its sting because Christ has destroyed it.

So, when anxiety rises because of a bad health diagnosis, financial pressure, relational conflict in the family, cultural hostility toward Christ's disciples, or any other thing, do not pretend fear is absent. Name the fear, then deliberately trust the God who did not spare His Own Son.

Friends, this is how we move from fear to faith in a single verse. We remember: The worst thing that could ever happen to anyone already happened to Him, and three days later the tomb was empty. Our faith in Jesus' victory over the ultimate enemy, death and Hell, is how fear is killed in our lives. So, put your trust in Jesus because man cannot really do anything to you.

III. Step 3: Cry Out for Justice (vv. 5-7)

We covered this point in great detail last Sunday. Crying out for God's justice is a fundamental component of a lament. Theologians call this component an *imprecatory prayer*. It is when the psalmist asks the Lord to bring judgment and destruction on his enemies. God is a God of justice. He will judge and set everything right. He will vindicate the righteous and punish the wicked. Listen to vv. 5-7:

*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.
 ⁷ For their crime will they escape?
In wrath cast down the peoples, O God!*

The pressure on David intensifies. His enemies twist words, plot to ruin him; they lurk in the shadows; they watch every step he takes, and are intent on taking his life. This is calculated malice. So, David prays imprecatorily:

For their crime will they escape?

David ends his prayer with a rhetorical question: "*Will they escape?*" We can often feel like David. We have injustice done to us, and we see the wicked walk away without a scratch, and we are left lying flat on the ground in our agony. We can naturally wonder: "*God, will they escape justice?*" The answer is: No! No one escapes God's justice.

As I said last Sunday, if we're honest, for Christians, it feels a bit uncomfortable to ask for God to annihilate our enemies because Jesus teaches us to love enemies and pray for those who persecute us. We must remember that just as God acts on behalf of His people, He also acts against those who oppose His people.

Here's the bottom line on imprecatory prayers in the Psalms. The imprecatory prayers find their fulfillment in the cross. The cross is where justice and mercy meet. So, in the final judgment, God will set all things right. For those in Christ, in His mercy, He will act on behalf of His people, pronouncing them innocent because Christ took the judgment they deserve on the cross. For those not in Christ, the justice they deserve will fall on them, and they will spend eternity under the wrath of God, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Ultimately, vv. 5-7 warns unbelievers and calls them to repent of their sins before it is too late and to place their faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. For those in Christ, vv. 5-7 move us to profound worship as we realize Jesus has rescued us from the kingdom of darkness and put us in His Kingdom, the Kingdom of Light. It is good to pray and ask God to give justice to His people.

IV. Step 4: Remember the Tender Nearness of God (v. 8)

Verse 8 is one of those precious verses for those under tremendous pressure from suffering and fear. Look at v. 8:

*You have kept count of my tossings;
put my tears in your bottle.
Are they not in your book?*

The poetic imagery shows God's tender, divine care for His people. In v. 8, we are thrust into God's arms. He tells us that not one tear of His children goes unnoticed or unremembered because He has recorded those tears in His book.

Friends, our God is not distant. He is not aloof or uncaring. We know this because a millennium after David wrote Psalm 56, God incarnate stepped out of Heaven and into the brokenness of our world to save us from sin. We see Jesus's tender care and love when He wept at Lazarus's tomb (John 11:35). We see it when He wept over Jerusalem's lost sheep (Luke 19:41). Ultimately, Jesus Himself endured anguish in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:37-39). On the cross, Jesus shed tears and blood for us. Listen to me: Jesus Christ is the living proof that God cares deeply about our problems, pain, fears, and the tears we cry over them.¹

Finally, Revelation 21:4 gives us the beautiful promise that God Himself will wipe away every tear from our eyes. In the new creation, the bottle of tears will be emptied; the book will declare that none of the saints' suffering was wasted. God saw every one of our tears, valued them, and redeemed them by the blood of Jesus.

Brothers and sisters, cry your tears of pain with confidence, knowing that Jesus cries with you, holds you close to Himself, saves every tear, and has redeemed them on the cross and by His resurrection from the dead.

V. Step 5: Know that God is for You (vv. 9-11)

In vv. 9-11, we hear David's confidence in God. This second refrain is an intensification of the first refrain in vv. 3-4. Look at vv. 9-11:

*Then my enemies will turn back
in the day when I call.
This I know, that God is for me.
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?*

The refrain in vv. 3-4 and vv. 10-11 are worth committing to memory. They will help you fight fear when it tries to invade your heart. However, when we take these three verses together, v. 9 is the operative verse, and the key sentence within v. 9 that helps you apply the refrain is this sentence:

This I know, that God is for me.

The question is: *How do you know God is for you?* How did David know? He knew because He knew God's word. He knew it and believed it. For him, it was more than facts; it was the reality of who God is, met with confident faith.

Now, on this side of the cross: Where does our faith rest? What is that Word in which we trust? Well, I should say: Who is the Word in whom we trust? Answer: Jesus!

How do we know we can trust in Him when fear invades our hearts? I want to return to a passage we looked at earlier, Romans 8. Listen to vv. 32-35,

*He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not
also with him graciously give us all things? ³³ Who shall bring any charge
against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is
the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand
of God, who indeed is interceding for us. ³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love
of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness,
or danger, or sword?*

How do we know we can trust Him? Because God didn't spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all—who can be against us? No one! Paul tells us that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

¹ Dane C. Ortlund, *In The Lord I Take Refuge: 150 Daily Devotions through the Psalms*, 155-156.

Stay with me here because we need to take David's "I know" in Psalm 56 to the other side of the cross. Watch this: David's "I know" becomes the church's unshakable confidence through Christ's finished work.

Friends, you have to know the gospel! You have to understand the gospel, know it like a mind map in your heart, and believe it by faith.

Let me show you what I mean from Ephesians 3:14-19. Listen to what the Apostle Paul says:

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, ¹⁶ that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Paul uses several words to drive home his point that we must know the love of Christ. He says Christ must dwell in our hearts through faith, and we must be rooted and grounded in Christ's love.

However, here's the kicker. In vv. 18 and 19, Paul uses these two words, *comprehend* and *know*, in one sentence. With these two words, he drives home the importance of *knowing*, *understanding*, and *comprehending* the love of Christ in the gospel. He wants the gospel to become a natural reflex of our hearts and minds when fear attacks us.

Think about it this way. When I first moved to Ames in 2009, I didn't know my way around town. I had to ask someone or enter the address into one of those GPS devices we used. (We didn't have a smartphone back then.) Then, hopefully, the GPS or the directions I was given would get us to the right place. Now, fast forward to this past Friday. I had to drive to South Ames. I went to Ames Christian School for Pastor Appreciation Day. As I left my house in North Ames, I was working out the route in my mind. I thought,

"Well, I could go down Grand and then hit 4th Street to University, and it will take me to South 16th, or I can go down Stange and hit University to get to South 16th."

Here's my point. After 17 years of driving around Ames, I don't have to ask for directions or put the address in my phone. I have a mental map of Ames, and I can get where I want to go several ways. I don't really have to think very hard about it. This is what Paul means when he says:

That you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

He wants the natural reflex of our hearts to work out a gospel application to fight fear. This is what David means when he says:

This I know, that God is for me.

We need to strive to get to know the love of God for us in Christ Jesus in such a way that our hearts and minds just naturally travel the gospel road of what Christ has done for us, so we get to the cross of Christ, where we stare at the love of God for hanging on the cross and then rising from the dead. This is how we know God is for us: He didn't spare His own Son to bring us into His presence.

When you know that you know that you know God is for you in Christ because your natural heart reflex is to work out how much God loves through the person and work of Christ, then gospel-assurance, which is the fullness of God, will drive out the fear in your heart.

VI. Step 6: Give Thanks to God for Bringing You into the Light (vv. 12-13)

Let's read the final two verses:

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

David experienced God's grace in his lament. Most likely his circumstances have not changed, but his heart has. Listen: Grace given creates a heart of gratitude.

David also experienced God's grace in delivering him from death. So, the grace given moves him from death to life. Now David has purposed to walk faithfully in the light before the Lord who gave him new life.

In John 8:12, Jesus says,

*"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but
will have the light of life."*

What this means is that David's deliverance points to the greater deliverance of Christ. The Light of the Word was crucified so we may be delivered from darkness, brought into His marvelous light, and begin to walk in the Light of Christ, giving thanks for the grace given to us in Jesus.

I want to close by asking you to think back to all of the scenarios that can create fear in our lives at the beginning of the sermon. I may not have mentioned the situation you dread, you know, the one that creates the worst nightmare in your life. So, think of that fear. Do you have it in your mind?

Now, I want to do a little exercise with you. I've heard Pastor Mike Breau use this exercise, and I've heard Paul Tripp use it too, so I'm not sure who gets the credit, but here goes. What I want to do is prepare you to face the fear that you dread. I gave you the steps to pray through your fears from Psalm 56. Now, I want to drive a gospel-stake into the heart of your fear, or fears, this way.

Write this on your note page or your Worship Guide: *"If _____ then _____."* If blank happens, then – what? For example: *"If my spouse dies, then my life is over."* *"If I lose this job, then I can't take care of my family."* I can take any of the questions we began with and tell you – blank is probably going to happen. For some of you, it has already happened, and you're in the thick of it.

Listen, the fear that you dread may hit your life one day. It will try to invade your heart and life. It is going to come. Remember what David said: *"When I am afraid."* He didn't say, *"If you are afraid."* He said, *"When."*

Friends, blank is a given. So, here's what we need to do. We need to fill in the second blank ahead of time. *"If blank, then Jesus."* Friends, no matter what your worst-case scenario fear is, fill in the second blank ahead of time with *"Jesus."* *"If blank, then Jesus."* Now, you are ready.