

## God with US

Psalm 56:1-13

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If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Psalm 56. In Psalm 56 we find ourselves with David, but not King David, at least not King David in the eyes of Israel—King David in the eyes of God, to be sure, but at this point in his career he is a fugitive. He's a fugitive from Saul, prince of Israel, the anointed king by God through Samuel and yet not acknowledged in the land of Israel. He's not gathered up his great forces yet; his mighty men do not surround him. The 600 are not with him yet, and he is standing in between faith and fear. He's narrowly escaped the murderous plots of Saul, and now he finds himself at the mercy of his people's old enemy, the Philistines. And he escapes his captors, we're told in 1 Samuel 21, he escapes his captors in this situation by pretending to be crazy. He feigns madness and the Philistines let him go, and he lives to account the way that God has supported him from utter despair in the midst of trial.

And so here we have David between faith and fear, like a sheep between two different roving bands of wolves: the forces of Saul and the forces of the Philistines.

And as we come to this Psalm it is well for us to remember that we have our own fears. Fear and hope may seem opposite to us, but I want to suggest to you that hope never comes into its own without the occasion of fear. Adverse circumstances teach us not to find our peace in temporary situations or to ground our faith and assurance in exigencies, in things that are going to change, things that are temporary. Firm faith stands when mountains fall, and hope flows from that firm faith—but not if faith is grounded in the sureness of mountains not falling, because mountains will fall. No, faith has to be grounded in something else. Before we read God's word here in Psalm 56, let's look to God's Holy Spirit to illumine our hearts as we hear His word. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, we ask that You would open our eyes to behold wonderful truth from Your word. We ask that You would by Your Spirit teach our hearts to believe this word and to live in the hope of Your promises and person. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Hear God's word. Psalm 56:

“For the choir director; according to Jonath elem rehokim” which may mean “a dove of distant oaks” or it could mean “a dove among strangers.” We don’t know exactly how to translate it. That’s why the New American Standard has left it untranslated and given you a couple of options in the margins. “A Mikhtam of David –” There’s another term. Does it mean “an epigrammatic poem,” or does it mean “an atonement poem”? Again, we don’t quite know, so the New American Standard has left it untranslated. “A Mikhtam of David, when the Philistines seized him in Gath.

1 Be gracious to me, O God, for man has trampled upon me; Fighting all day long he oppresses me. 2 My foes have trampled upon me all day long, For they are many who fight proudly against me. 3 When I am afraid, I will put my trust in You. 4 In God, whose word I praise, In God I have put my trust; I shall not be afraid. What can mere man do to me? 5 All day long they distort my words; All their thoughts are against me for evil. 6 They attack, they lurk, They watch my steps, As they have waited to take my life. 7 Because of wickedness, cast them forth, In anger put down the peoples, O God! 8 You have taken account of my wanderings; 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. 10 In God, whose word I praise, In the LORD, whose word I praise, 11 In God I have put my trust, I shall not be afraid. What can man do to me? 12 Your vows are binding upon me, O God; I will render thank offerings to You. 13 For You have delivered my soul from death, Indeed my feet from stumbling, So that I may walk before God In the light of the living.”

Amen. And thus ends this reading of God’s holy, inspired and inerrant word. May He write its eternal truth upon our hearts.

The lessons that David learned in this hard situation—it’s a situation that he writes about on several, different occasions. The lessons that David learned, and these lessons which have been recorded under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, are of vital importance for 21st Century Christians facing a confused and a hostile world. How can the study of an ancient Jewish prince who was in mortal danger at the beginning of a civil war inform the daily lives of people here at First Presbyterian Church in Jackson, Mississippi? Well, in a lot of ways. By answering questions like, “What are God’s purposes in our pain and troubles? What does it really mean to have faith in God? Will having faith in God make a difference in my life? Does God really allow or even cause His people to endure trials? How are we to respond to our fears? How should we deal with our doubts? What is real Christian hope based on? Is God indifferent to the pain His people suffer? How can we minister to our families and friends and acquaintances in their troubles?” Well, this Psalm tackles those issues and more. And so we study this word together and we’ll find in it just how important it is to have God for us.

How bad are things for David in Psalm 56? Well, let me just note this. Look at the heading: "A Mikhtam of David, when the Philistines seized him in Gath." Things were so bad for David in Israel, David's reputation was of such little esteem in Israel, David's support was so slim and shallow in Israel, even amongst his own tribe, that he flees to the hometown of Goliath! Now that's the last place in the world that you would expect David to flee, because David had just a little bit to do with the downfall of the greatest champion of the Philistines who hailed from Gath, Goliath. And yet that's where David finds himself: so cut off, so alone, so abandoned, so fearful, so pursued, so harried, so watched that he ends up in the city of Gath. That's how bad things were for David. You think you've got troubles? David had troubles.

Now let's look at how David approaches those troubles. Look at the four parts of this Psalm. The first part is in verses 1-4: Here's David's prayer. It's a plea of David to God to be gracious to him, and it is an assertion of David to God that he is going to trust in God and His word. He's going to put his faith in the person of God and the content of David's faith is going to be based on the word of God. That's what we see in verses 1-4. Then secondly in verses 5-7, David recounts for us even more specifically than he does in the first four verses some of the struggles that he is facing. He's giving us a feel for his circumstances. In verses 8-11 we come to the third section. In this section David expresses his confidence again that God cares about the wounds of his heart. And finally in verses 12 and 13, having come through the storm, David says, 'Lord, you remember that vow that I made to You in the hour that I prayed that You would spare me? I'm going to fulfill that vow with an offering of thanksgiving in sheer delight of heart because of the way that You've delivered me from the hands of my enemy.' Those are the four parts of the Psalm. Let's see what we learn for our own struggles in the midst of trials from this great word of David.

## **I. David finds faith and hope and confidence in God and in His word.**

First, let's look at verses 1-4: "Be gracious to me, O God, for man has trampled upon me; Fighting all day long he oppresses me. My foes have trampled upon me all day long, For they are many who fight proudly against me." In those first two verses notice three things. First of all, David feels overrun, beaten down, oppressed and crushed by wicked men. Notice the refrain, "They trample me." "They trample me." Secondly, notice that David is worn down by the duration of their pursuit. He repeats, "All day long—" verse 1. "All day long—" again in verse 2. And again if you will look down in verse 5 he'll come back to that refrain again: "All day long."

Have you ever noticed that one of the challenges of intense trials is not simply the intensity; it's the duration? Now sometimes you're in a trial and it's hard but it's short, and you find out that the really hard thing is dealing with intensity over a time, a trial that seems to go on and on and on and on, and you can't see the

light at the end of the tunnel. And you begin to be worn down by it. And that's where David is. He's fleeing from place to place, and it's beginning to wear on him. And he expresses it in this phrase, "All day long." There's never a chance for rest. So the endurance as well as the intensity is an issue for David.

And notice again, David feels alone. Look at verse 2: "They are many who fight proudly against me." He's outnumbered; he's losing the fight; and it's wearing him down. And in the midst of that circumstance he calls out to God to be gracious to him. Now look at the specific assertion of his prayer in verses 3 and 4. "When I am afraid, I will put my trust in You. In God, whose word I raise, In God I have put my trust."

Notice that David points to two things in this circumstance as he asks God to be gracious to him. As he asks God to help him in the midst of this trial, he puts his faith in God, His person, and God, His word. In other words, the object of David's faith is God Himself, the person that David is trusting is God Himself; but the content of David's faith is based upon God's word of promise to him. And so in the person of God and in the word of God, David places his faith. His prayer of faith and hope and confidence is rooted, first of all, in God himself. Have you ever heard that little saying of Augustine that goes something like this? "In the midst of trials we see the greatness of the evil not the power of the Physician." "In the midst of trials we see the greatness of the evil not the power of the Physician." And what David is doing is reminding himself here of the power of the One that he is praying to, because his circumstances are grievous. Don't play down the difficulty of his circumstances. So often we will take an approach to navigating trials by saying something like this to ourselves, "It's not so bad," and try and scale the trial down. David does not do that. David scales up his apprehension of God. He can't scale up God, but he knows that in the midst of trial we are tempted to think the trial itself bigger than the God who has pledged to bring us through that trial. And so he reminds himself that the power of the Physician is greater than the greatness of the disease, and he points himself to God. And then he reminds himself of God's word. "When I am afraid, I will put my trust in You. In God, whose word I praise." Faith's object is God Himself; faith's content is God's word of promise. And in these things David takes great comfort, and he finds hope and he finds bedrock on which to rest his faith.

Now it's a glorious thing, isn't it, what David does? He goes to God and to His promise. But what do we find Paul writing in Romans 8:29-38, surely that's the New Testament parallel to Psalm 56, isn't it? Paul says, 'You as believers, you have more than David had. You know things that David never dreamt of.' What does Romans 8 meditate on us with? Paul meditates with us about this victorious Holy Spirit who is at work in us, making us new creations, ever living, interceding for us when we're groaning and can't find the words to pray to God. He tells us about the eternal plan of God for us, tells us about Christ's death for us on our behalf.

Paul, you see, goes even further. The Christian has a greater hope than David for we're indwelt by the Spirit of God, and we're chosen by the Father God, and Christ the Son of God has died for us. And so Paul can say, "If God be for us, who can be against us?" That's what David is saying to himself, but David is saying it to himself without the fullness of the knowledge of God, which we have been afforded by the glory of the appearance of Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God. And if David can look at his situation and say, 'What can man do to me? God is on my side.' how much more, knowing that we are indwelt by the Spirit, knowing that the Son has shed His own blood for us, knowing that the heavenly Father has ordained from the foundation of the world that not a hair of our heads will fall apart from His will—how much more should we trust in the living God!

Do you remember that line? It's in the second to the last stanza of that wonderful hymn that we so often sing, "Jesus, I My Cross Have Taken." And the hymn writer is exhorting us to think of what we have going for us in the midst of our trials, and he says this: "Think what Spirit dwells within thee, what a Father's smile is thine, what a Savior died to win thee. Child of heaven, should'st thou repine?"

Now that's flowery language, isn't it? But listen to the substance of that glorious phrase: Think of this Holy Spirit who dwells in you, the One who hovered upon the surface of the waters in the creation of the world, the One who raised Jesus Christ from the dead with power, the One who came with power at Pentecost and is taking the gospel to the end of the earth. That's the Spirit that dwells within you. "What a Father's smile is thine—" Think of the love of the heavenly Father who has not spared His own Son. And think of the Savior who died to win you. Child of God, do you have need to repine your circumstance? "If God is for us, who can be against us?" That's the cry of David; how much more is that the cry of anyone who understands what Paul has told us in Romans 8? You see, David faced a mortally dangerous situation and his fear found faith and hope and confidence in God and in His word. And that's where we find hope and confidence: in God and in His word. Well, there's the first thing.

## **II. David trusts God in the middle of his trials.**

But there's more. In verses 5-7 David gives us a little bit more about his struggles. "All day long they distort my words; all their thoughts are against me for evil. They attack, they lurk, they watch my steps, as they have waited to take my life." It's a pretty horrible situation. They're twisting David's words. Maybe they're calling him a traitor in Israel. Maybe they're calling him a usurper. Maybe they're questioning all sorts of aspects of his character. And not only that—all of their thinking regarding David is for the purpose of bringing evil against David. They're seeking to attack him. They are lurking to attack him. They are watching his every step. They are waiting to take his life.

Now let me just pull back and say for a moment, David's struggles here are not exactly what we would characterize as "spiritual." You know I think a lot of us believe that God really does help missionaries who are under the assault of cannibals. Surely God is helping missionaries. They're out there trying to spread God's word and these cannibals are trying to attack them—yes, God helps them. And when ministers and people who are out doing the business of the Lord, we do believe that God will help them. But I wonder sometimes whether we separate explicitly churchly, ministry, spiritual activities and the affordance of God's providence over those who are engaged in them, from God's providence over us in every aspect of life. And notice that David's struggle here is not a particularly spiritual one. I understand he's the anointed of God. I understand that all of this is a great aspect of the redemptive story that God is working in the history of David. But understand that David's basic problem here is to stay alive. This is a military pursuit. There's nothing particularly spiritual going on here: there are some guys who want to kill him! And yet that circumstance becomes an occasion for David to know God better. And so it may be at your office when someone has stabbed you in the back, or it may be in your neighborhood when there is a real and serious conflict with a neighbor, or it may be in a family situation in which there has been some seemingly irreparable breach and it doesn't feel particularly spiritual to you—but even in those circumstances God is coming to teach you about Himself. And I want you to notice that David learns about His God in the middle of His trouble, not after the trouble is over. And I want to confess to you that sometimes my attitude in the trials of life is this: "Lord, if you'd just get me through this, then I'll learn a lot of stuff about You." And that's not how it works. It's in the middle of the trial; it's in the depths of the pit that we come to know the living God. And David, right smack dab in the middle of his struggles, trusts in God. And we come to know God in the depths, in the midst of trouble.

### **III. David reminds himself of the tender compassion and concern of his God.**

Now there's a third thing. Look at verses 8-11. David reminds himself of the tender compassion and concern of his God. "You have taken account of my wanderings; put my tears in Your bottle. Are they not in Your book?" David knows that God knows from where and to whence he has had to flee. And he prays that the Lord would treasure up his tears in a bottle. It's a picture of how God is concerned about everything that happens to His children.

Jesus, of course, uses a different picture in Matthew 10:29. He says something like this, "Do you not know that your heavenly Father will not let a sparrow fall to the ground apart from His will? And do you not think that He will care for you?" David's saying, 'Lord, every tear that falls from my eye, would you remember it?' and he's confident that God will. He's expressing his confidence in God's concern for his fears and sorrow, and in the process he's reminding us that God is mindful

of our every grief. God knows our griefs. He can be touched by the feeling of our infirmities because His Son has been down in grief with us and for us.

#### **IV. Having come through the trial, David fulfills his vow.**

One last thing in verses 12-13. David having come through this trial fulfills his vow, this vow that he had taken to reinforce his embrace of God's promises, this offering of sacrifice of thanks. "Your vows are binding upon me, O God; I will render thank offerings to You. For You have delivered my soul from death, indeed my feet from stumbling, so that I may walk before God in the light of the living." David has escaped the Philistines and his heart is thankful, and he's saying, 'Lord, I'm going to delight in fulfilling that vow. I'm going to delight in giving a sacrifice of thanksgiving to You.'

Because, my friends, a thankful heart is a grace-filled heart. Or to put it the other way around: A grace-filled heart is always thankful. And when God's deliverances come to us, and when He helps us through the midst of our troubles, the heart which has apprehended His grace will not neglect to thank Him. That's why our prayers of intercession on Wednesday nights should also be accompanied with many, many prayers of thanksgiving. Or as the Psalmist says elsewhere, "I will forget not one of His benefits." And so David here having been saved through his trouble gives thanks to God. And in the very giving of those thanks is reminded again that our God is worth trusting because He is for us. Even in the midst of a life-threatening trial, He is for us. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, we have no idea how much You are for us, and if we had but an inkling, we would not fear anything. Give us faith to see You as You are and to trust You because You are good for it. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

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