When I am afraid

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Preacher: Lincoln Rus

[0:00] Well, as Nicole said, we will be in Psalm 56 this morning. It's a beautiful prayer of lament and confidence all at the same time. We're taking a break from the book of Samuel and we'll be in Psalms for the next four weeks.

Before Pastor Zach left, I told him we should come up with like a snappy, fun title for this four-week series. I wanted to say something like a road trip playlist, because these are all songs that David wrote while he was on the run.
But that felt far too upbeat for the level of lament that David has. But I thought it was clever, so I wanted to share it with you nonetheless. But we'll just be in Psalms and we'll say that's what the series is.
We're just in Psalms. But that is a good book to be in. So Psalm 56. Please turn with me and your Bibles to it.
Now, your pew Bible will be 563. And I'd encourage you to keep your Bibles open as we'll be returning to it often throughout the sermon. Psalm 56. To the choir master, according to the dove of a far-off terebinth, a mictam of David when the Philistines seized him in Gath.
[1:12] Be gracious to me, O God, for man tramples on me. All day long an attacker oppresses me. An enemy tramples on me all day long, for many attack me proudly.

When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust. I shall not be afraid. What can flesh do to me?
All day long they injure my cause. All their thoughts are against me for evil. They stir up strife, they lurk, they watch my steps as they have waited for my life.
For their crime will they escape? In wrath, cast down the peoples, O God. You have kept count of my tossings. Put my tears in your bottle.
Are they not in your book? The enemies will turn back in the day when I call. This I know that God is for me. In God, whose word I praise.
[2:14] In the Lord, whose word I praise. In God I trust. I shall not be afraid. What can man do to me? I must perform my vows to you, O God.

I will render thank offerings to you. For you have delivered my soul from death. Yes, my feet from falling, that I may walk before God in the light of life.
This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Please pray with me. Gracious Heavenly Father, we do come before you grateful for your word.
And Lord, in this Psalm of David, we see that we can at the same time call you our God and yet be afraid. So Lord, I would ask that your Holy Spirit would enable each of us to hear your word.
Open our eyes, our ears, and our hearts to it. For we know that without your help, we can glean nothing. We ask all this in the name of your Son, our Lord. Amen. So I know I'm relatively new here.
[3:19] So many of you probably do not know this yet. But I'm sure you'll find out shortly. Children, kids are probably my favorite thing in the entire world.

I am the happiest when I am holding a newborn baby, whether that baby is screaming bloody murder or asleep and gentle as a lamb.
And I know this might be a bit of a hot take, especially for those of you with young children. But my best friend in college and his wife, I think, have the two cutest children in the world.
Jesse and Austin. And I've gotten to see them grow up from the time they were born and holding them in their first couple weeks of life to now a very spunky four-and-a-half-year-old or almost five-year-old and a two-and-a-half-year-old.
And I've loved being able to watch their personalities develop. I had a little sister, but I was four-and-a-half when she was born. So my personality was developing while hers was as well.

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[4:21] So getting to see them grow up and to take on some of this new confidence, where once they were completely reliant on mom and dad or attached to them at the hip, now they're much more desirous of being independent.

And I think perhaps the best example of that is little Austin or Bubba. It's the two-and-a-half-year-old son. Now that he can walk and he can communicate fairly well, it shocks me every time I hear his voice on the phone.
It hurts me that he doesn't stop growing up. He's much less eager to hold his mom or his dad's hand when they're walking across the street, when they're going in a parking lot, or when they're at the grocery store.
But Jake told me this story the last time we were at the park together. And I put my hand out and Bubba grabbed my hand, but I think it's because I'm not there very often. And he said that Austin doesn't like holding his hand, but as soon as he gets scared, his hand shoots up, and he is confident that his dad's hand will be right there, the person who is able to make everything all right, who is able to comfort his trembling heart.
And I think we see much of the same circumstance in our text this morning. As we saw a few weeks ago, part of the reason David is in trouble was a result of his own actions.
[5:47] And though the trouble he was facing was real, he was trying to dig himself out of the hole by his own cleverness and strength. But when he inevitably gets to a place of sorrow and distress, when he has nowhere else to turn, just like little Austin, David's hand shoots out to grab onto the hand of his heavenly father to find comfort.

In other words, David strengthened himself in the Lord. But even finding strength and comfort from his God does not make all of his troubles and circumstances disappear.
But it does allow him to walk confidently in those circumstances, believing that God will safely deliver him to the other side. So being surrounded by enemies, both inside and outside of Israel, David offers up this beautiful lament to God.
And it's in this psalm that I think we see the challenging reality that goes on in so many of the hearts of Christians. It is possible at the same time to be struggling, to have a real lament, and yet have true, genuine faith in God.
And as we walk through this passage, I want us to ask the question of, why is it when we are afraid, do we put our trust in God? And I know I'm breaking some Presbyterian rules this morning, but I'm not going to be looking at this sermon in three fancy points.
[7:19] I have no alliteration for you. We're just going to walk through the text in two to three verse chunks and see how it unfolds. So as our psalm opens, you can almost hear the fear and the worry in David's voice as he offers the first few verses.

And that's not without reason. We know that David fled to Philistia while he was on the run from Saul. And we see in both 1 Samuel 22 and in 27 that his flight led him to Gath, the capital city of the Philistines.
And not only are the Philistines one of Israel's greatest enemies, but Gath is the hometown of local hero Goliath. You may have heard of him.
And David had killed and beheaded him just a few short chapters before. And the Philistines are well aware of who this David is and the reputation that he has for killing Philistines.
So his fear and his worry is not an overreaction. He's been seized by these enemies of the people.
But it's in these worried words that I think we also find our first reason for why we trust in God when we are afraid.
[8:31] We trust in God when we're afraid because he listens and because he sees. Now that may seem like a pretty basic theological truth, and that's because it is.

But I think we would do well to dwell on it for a while this morning. Look with me at the opening verses of the psalm. Be gracious to me, O God, for man tramples on me.
All day long an attacker oppresses me. My enemies trample on me all day long, for many attack me proudly. While David does not go outright and say it, the simple fact that he is offering prayers to God implies that he believed his God was listening.
It would have been madness for David to pray to a God that he did not believe could hear him. And not only does he offer up this prayer of lament, but in it he shows the relationship that he has to the God that he is praying to.

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And who is that God? It is my God. It is his God. It is the God who promised to have a people of his own and who promised that he would be their God.
[9:43] The way that many pastors and theologians describe this relationship is to say that Christianity is a religion of personal pronouns.

God is my God. He is our God. David was praying to a God that he knew, the one who had promised to be his.
And after his cry for mercy, he immediately goes into the reasons for why he needs God's help. His enemies are pursuing him with everything they have.
Some translations put it that the enemies are panting behind him, putting everything they have into taking him down. Twice in these verses and once again in verse 5, David uses the phrase, all day long.
The assault of the enemies is not letting up, and that is exhausting. And how true is that for so many of our struggles and problems as well?
[10:44] Now I hope and pray that none of you have enemies like David who are pursuing you to take your life all day long. But our enemies can come in many different forms.

Our bodies are falling apart slowly but surely, some of us faster than others. So perhaps that enemy for you is chronic pain that you can never find relief from.
No matter how many doctor's visits you go to, no matter what medication you're taking, or what amount of therapy you've done, you can't seem to escape that pain. Maybe you have a relationship in your life, someone who is tormenting you and struggling, and they frustrate you just by their existing, or their actions within your own life, and you can't separate yourselves from that.
Maybe it's a battle with a particular sin. And no matter how much prayer you've offered, or how much time has passed, or how many different ways you've worked to combat it, day after day, or season after season, you fall victim to that temptation once again.
Whatever that enemy is, brothers and sisters, continue taking your prayers to God. Do not stop asking for deliverance in the midst of battle.
[12:04] And as I mentioned a moment ago, this psalm is a wonderful picture of the reality and the heart of real-life Christians. The Bible teaches us that we never need to doubt God.

God never breaks His Word. God never goes back on His promises. There is nothing in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or the waters beneath the earth that can separate you from His love.
And yet, as we read, even David, a man after God's own heart, faced doubts and difficulties because of the circumstances of his life.
And the reality that our faiths too are so often weak. And it's because of that weakness, and it's in that weakness, that God meets us.
And we are reminded of who He is. When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. In God whose Word I praise, in God I trust, I shall not be afraid.
[13:10] What can flesh do to me? Now the first thing we see is a reminder and a recognition of fear. When I am afraid.

Real Christianity, real faith, is not the denial of fear, but it's understanding what to do with it. This life is full of troubles.
That is a reality that unfortunately will not change on this side of glory. There will be things in this life that cause us to doubt, that cause us to stumble, that cause us to be afraid, and that is okay.
We see in these two verses that instead of running to the fleeting things in this world to find a moment of solace or comfort from pain, we run to God.
And again, why is it that we run to God? It's because He has the whole world in His hands. All of creation is under His power.
[14:14] The Westminster Larger Catechism has a question, what is God? And the answer to that question is this, God is in and of Himself infinite in being, glory, blessedness, and perfection.

All sufficient, eternal, unchangeable, incomprehensible, everywhere present, almighty, knowing all things, most wise, most holy, most just, most merciful, and glorious, long-suffering, and abounding in goodness and truth.
Now that's quite a mouthful, but that doesn't even scratch the surface into who our God is. We could spend the rest of our days, every breath, 24-7, 365, giving praise to God, trying to describe His character, and it would still fall woefully short.

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Our God is beyond everything that we could hope or imagine. The wildest picture of God that you could create in your head, again, does not scratch the surface.
And He is infinite and eternal in every one of His attributes. His love never runs dry. His mercy never runs dry. His holiness, His justice, all of these things never run dry.
[15:38] And not only that, but our God knows the number of hairs on your head. He knows the number of days, the hours, the minutes, the seconds that make up your life.

We're told that He knit you together in your mother's womb. Our God knows you intimately. Every single detail.
He calls all creation out from nothing but the power of His Word. When you are loved and cared for by a God like that, we do have to ask ourselves, what can mere mortals do to us?
But this isn't always an easy thing to remember on our own. And it is an abundant mercy that God gave us the body of believers.
We carry one another when a member is weak. It's one of the many reasons that we come to church on Sunday. You are sitting in your pews not only for your own benefit, but for the benefit of the brothers and sisters who are sitting next to you.
[16:46] You are individually giving praise to God. You are corporately giving praise to God. But you are also stirring up and giving strength to each other as well.

And I'm sure that each one of you has had a Sunday or a season of Sundays when it's been particularly hard to come to worship for whatever reason. Where the breath in your lungs did not want to give praise.
When we bowed our heads to pray and you struggled to talk to this God that you know is good, but who in that moment did not feel good. I know for myself there was one particular service at chapel when I was in seminary when I was going through a difficult season.
And we sang a song called The Eternal Weight of Glory. It's a wonderful song. I'd encourage you all to listen to it. And as we were singing it we got to the second half of the chorus and each time my throat caught itself and I was choked up in tears desperately wanting the words to be true but not being able to sing them for myself.
The second part of the chorus goes like this. For behold I tell a mystery and the trumpet sound will wake. Death is swallowed up in victory when we meet our King of Grace.
[18:08] Every year we thought was wasted and every night we cried how long? All will be a passing moment in our Savior's victory song.

So badly I wanted those words to be true but I could not bring myself to sing them because I did not feel like I could ask God for that. But hearing my brothers and sisters around me singing those promises over me singing those promises on my behalf was a bulwark and it was a strengthening reminder.
So remember you are not just in church for you you are here for each other as well. And it's after this reminder of God's faithfulness and power that we see David return to the reason for his lament.
All day long they injure my cause. All their thoughts are against me for evil. They stir up strife they lurk they watch my steps as they have waited for my life.
For their crime will they escape. In wrath cast down the people O God. Again in these verses we see the gravity of David's situation.
[19:23] He repeats the sentiment that his enemies are assaulting him all day long. They are seeking not only his downfall but ultimately his death. He's already made God aware of his needs but this situation seems so desperate that he continues his plea for deliverance.

And here I think we see the same thing that Jesus encouraged the disciples to do when they prayed. In Luke 18 we read the story of the persistent widow who night after night knocks on the door of the judge asking for the justice that she rightfully deserved.
And though the judge neither feared God or men he eventually granted her her deserved justice.
And in that same parable Jesus goes on to say and will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones who cry out to him day and night?
Will he keep putting them off? I tell you he will see that they get justice and quickly. It is good for us to continue returning to God in prayer.
He wants to hear from you whether it is praise or lament. your God loves to have his children run into his arms and speak to him.

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[20:44] Is it true that God already knows everything about you and all that you need? Yes. Would he know those things even if you didn't take them to him in prayer?

Yes. But he hasn't given us the gift of prayer for his benefit. It is for our benefit. God knows everything that his children need or will ever need from him.
And he's given us the gift of faith in a way that accounts for that. Faith so often reflects the old adage it is easy to say and it is much harder to do.
We know that the truths about God are true and the promises that he made to us are in our minds but we still so often find ourselves in times of doubt and worry.
And this psalm offers for us a model to follow in how we pray. God does not get annoyed when you return to him over and over again with the same request.
[21:50] He is not a vindictive judge that you need to wear down in order to be heard. He is a father who loves his children. Who wants to be here for them in all circumstances and who knows what is best for them.

I want to briefly look at verse 7 once again. For their crime will they escape. In wrath cast down the peoples O God.
This verse contains to use a five dollar seminary word an imprecation. It's a prayer of curses. And while there are a lot of things in the book of Psalms that challenge us when we find imprecations that's near the top of the list.
Now I think it's fair to assume that not all of you are regularly praying curses down on your enemies and it's because it's an irregularity I think in scripture. It is not something that happens often and it seems like a challenging thing to do.
And you may ask yourselves can Christians still pray prayers like this? And I think the answer is yes. one of the reasons that I think we're less familiar with this type of prayer is because we have the blessing of not being afraid to be open about being Christians.
[23:11] We have brothers and sisters all throughout the world who risk their very lives to claim Christ as their Savior. Who risk death and persecution of every kind.

And for them this can be a needed cry for deliverance. people but in their situation and in ours there needs to be a certain posture of heart. David's plea is for God to bring the nations down.
Bring the people down. And there's two ways for this to happen. One is for God to rain down destruction and judgment from heaven either in this life or in the next.
But the other is for God to bring our enemies to their knees in repentance and having that wrath and destruction poured out on the cross.
And I think that can be a tough pill to swallow in our sin. If we're honest with ourselves we're not always praying for justice sometimes we pray for vengeance.
[24:15] We don't want to see people forgiven we want to see people burn. We want to see people suffer in the same way that they have wronged us and caused us to suffer. But as we're told elsewhere in God's word vengeance belongs to the Lord.

So even when praying imprecatory prayers we must remember that. So flowing out of both his continued lament and his confidence in God David continues his prayer.
You have kept count of my tossings. Put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your book? When my enemies will turn back in the day when I call this I know God is for me.
When David asked the Lord to record his miseries, to keep track of his tossings, he's asking him to list them down and this is twofold.
First as we've already seen David is making a plea to God. Showing that he is truly in distress and needs help. this is a different way of praying the same prayer that we see throughout the Psalter.
[25:26] Hear my prayer, O Lord. Remember me. Do not ignore me any longer, O God. Even if our troubles are not going to disappear or be dealt with immediately, we want to know God is watching.

That God has not yet forgotten us. That God sees the troubles that are afflicting our lives. And the answer to the question that David asks, have you not kept count of my tossings, is yes, they are.
Every wrong that has happened to us, every sin that has been committed against us has been recorded by God, and he will not forget what has been done to his chosen people.
The devil knows that he has lost the war, but he is going to continue fighting. He is going to continue assaulting the children of God until his dying breath.
Every wrong that we suffer is going to be accounted for, either on the cross or in the fire of hell.
There are prayers for deliverance that God answers on this side of glory.

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[26:40] And when we have such joyous occasions for answered prayers, we can be filled with the assurance that our God is with us and our God is for us.

But even when God does not answer prayers for deliverance in this lifetime, we can still be confident that our God has a plan for us.
And this is a hard truth to wrestle with. To trust that God's timing is right. To trust that God's plan is the best thing for us. And the truth of that doesn't always help in the moment.
But whether we believe it or not, God is always for us. And he is always on our side. So having finished his plea, David returns to the reminder that God is for him.
And to reinforce this, he makes a declaration. In God whose word I praise, in the Lord whose word I praise, in God I trust, I shall not be afraid, what can man do to me?
[27:51] This reminder of confidence is similar to the one we saw in verses 3 and 4. But there's a few key differences. We no longer see David admitting fear.

His trust is in the name of the Lord. And there are a few ways we can take this change. One is that David has been delivered from his troubles and he no longer has a reason to be afraid.
Another is that though he has not yet been delivered in going to God for prayer and with honest lamentation and a reminder that God is for him, his fear has been washed away.
Or finally, though he is still in the midst of his trouble, and though anxiety still plagues his heart and may not yet be gone, when compared to the trust and faith that he has in God, it is though they are not there at all.
Whatever the reason may be, his confidence in the Lord can no longer be shaken. And why is that? It's because in the Lord's word that he praises.
[29:05] He glorifies in the promise that God has made to his people. And the ultimate promise that God made to a people who were plagued by a world of sin and could not bring about redemption on their own.

And we see that redemption in the person of Jesus Christ. He came into the world to conquer sin and death so that we would not have to face or fear the wrath of God that we rightly deserved. Through adoption, he has brought us into the family of God so that we might be full heirs of his eternal inheritance. And though this is a reward and a gift that is beyond comprehension, it still does not stop there.
When Jesus ascended into heaven, he did not tell his disciples, good luck, you guys got this until I get back. No, instead he assures them that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.
And surely I am with you always to the very end of the age. That is the God who is on your side. That's the God who goes, that's the God that we can go to when life is overwhelming, when we are confronted with troubles on every side.
[30:25] Men can seemingly do quite a lot. We can be physically or emotionally hurt. Our bodies can be afflicted with sickness, but there is still nothing that can separate us from the love of the Lord Jesus Christ.

He is the same God who is beyond comprehension, who holds all creation in the palm of his hand, and as we're told in 2 Timothy 4, that the Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom.
To him be glory forever and ever. Amen. whatever may happen in this life, we have been saved from the greatest evil attack.
The devil cannot separate you from the love of God and your heavenly father will safely bring you to your eternal home. And in closing his prayer for deliverance, David offers up these promises to God.
I must perform my vows to you, O God. I will render thank offerings to you, for you have delivered my soul from death, yes, my feet from falling, that I may walk before God in the light of life.
[31:49] These vows of praise were likely made as a response to the Lord's deliverance. And now whether God answers all our prayers or not, we can still run to him with praise.

Because as we have just seen, we have been delivered from the greatest threat. Instead of being separated from God for all eternity, because of our sin, we get to enjoy his presence forever.
And I don't know if that's an image that you often think of, but I encourage you to revisit that again and again throughout your day and throughout your week.

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That there will come a day when you get to see your Savior face to face with your own two eyes. And that every tear you have cried will be wiped away.
And you can't wipe away a tear from a distance. It's something that happens intimately. Your Savior reaching out and making everything alright.
[32:56] All that wrong that has ever been committed against you. All those times when you stumbled or fell. All those nights when you cried how long.

All of that is going to be but a moment. Our Savior says to us, well done, good and faithful servant. Come and enjoy my kingdom forever.
forever. All that is going to remain is the God whose love is light. We'll have no need for faith. We'll have no need for hope.
Just the God who is ever present before us. And we get to bask in his love for all eternity. Brothers and sisters, this is a hard journey to walk, but what an incredible finish line we get to cross someday.
Please bow our heads and pray with me. Gracious Heavenly Father, we do come before you weak kneed and wobbly.
[34:01] Lord, this is a long, long journey and God, we are eager for the day when you call us home. But until then, provide us with the strength to keep going.

Lord, give us the endurance the same way you've given us the gift of faith. Give us an extra helping of the Holy Spirit to power through those times when laments are on every side of us.
When, Lord, it feels like the waves of sorrow are crashing down on us, when it feels like we are drowning. Let us be like Peter who tried to walk on the water, whose hand shoots out and Jesus grabs hold of him, saves him, and he knows that in his hands everything is going to be alright.
Lord, give us the endurance to make it through to the finish line, and give us an excitement and a hope for what it will be to see you face to face.
Might the hunger for that sight grow inside of us each and every day. Lord, we ask all this in the name of your Son, our Lord. Amen. Amen.

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