

09-07-06 AM - Song of Personal Strife - Psalm 56:1-13

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[0 : 00] Fear. It can sneak up on us slowly and overwhelm us.

Or it can come on us in just an instant. It's like opening the doors of a lift and going to step in, only to realise that as your foot enters the lift well, that the lift isn't there.

Charles Jenkins had been a good soldier for nine years. In fact, he'd been awarded a Good Conduct Award and been promoted to sergeant. But on January 5, 1965, after ten days of planning and also ten beers, he tied a white T-shirt to his rifle and defected to the North Koreans.

He disappeared in that dark country for nearly 40 years, until 2004, when he was able to leave North Korea and go to Japan for medical treatment.

And in the September of that year, he turned himself into the US military authorities. And at his court-martial, this frail, tearful 64-year-old pleaded guilty to desertion.

[1 : 19] And he told the judge, ma'am, I am, in fact, guilty. So why did he walk away from his unit? Why did he walk away from his country?

He said he fled because he was afraid that he'd be transferred to the dangerous daytime patrols in the demilitarised zone between the two Koreas, or worse, be sent to Vietnam.

And Jenkins wept as he described his depression, his fear of death, and his heavy drinking that led up to his desertion.

He thought he'd be returned home, but instead he suffered under harsh conditions all his life. He says, I knew 100% what I was doing, but I didn't know the consequences.

And it was 20 years, in fact, before anyone in the US even knew that he was alive. Fear. It is real.

[2 : 25] The Western world is increasingly in the grip of anxiety and fear in the face of indiscriminate terror. This weekend, in fact, marks the anniversary of the London bombings.

And last year, following those bombings, the Melbourne Age had this headline, simply entitled, The Sum of Our Fears. And the headline was above a picture of anxious travellers waiting to board a train.

And the journalist commented, the public mood is receptive to almost anything that could make people safer. So whether our fears arise from the activities of Al-Qaeda or a potential missile attack from North Korea or biological threats such as SARS, the world lives in a seemingly perpetual state of fear and anxiety.

And anxiety comes naturally to us as fallen human beings. We each, of course, have different tolerances, but everyone's mental and emotional constitution has its limitations.

And that's true as well for believers, for those who follow the Lord Jesus Christ. See, Jesus didn't ask the disciples in Matthew 6, can any of you, by worrying, add a single hour to your span of life?

[3 : 58] He didn't ask him that question. If we are not prone to worry. Our anxieties, our fears, reveal that our trust in the Lord is less than it could be.

And that was the experience of the psalmist. If you turn with me in your Bibles to Psalm 56. Psalm 56 is a song of personal strife.

And the structure of this psalm is straightforward, but it's also revealing in helping us appreciate the thrust of the psalm. So the first four verses are just simply an opening plea to God for mercy.

And then the large and middle part of the psalm, verses 5 to 11, it's as if it's, God, bring your justice to bear. And then the psalmist concludes in the last two verses, 12 and 13, with an expression of thanksgiving.

But I want you to note, even at this stage in looking at the psalm, that verse 4 and then verses 10 and 11 act like a refrain. They act like a chorus. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust, I am not afraid.

[5 : 13] What can flesh do to me? Psalm 56, a song of personal strife. The psalmist is in danger.

In fact, he's in extreme danger. And he does experience fear. And the superscription, just those opening words under the title, Psalm 56, points us to the original circumstances of David.

See, early in his life, as you well know, David had been forced to escape King Saul because Saul was trying to kill him. David went to a town called Nob, N-O-B, and it was one of the towns for the priests where Amililek, the head priest, helped him.

In fact, he gave him food and he gave him a weapon. He gave him, actually, the sword of Goliath, the huge sword of Goliath. But there was a rotten egg in Nob.

Doeg, it's an interesting name, it's known, Doeg, the Edomite. He was present when David arrived there and he reported back to Saul and Saul demanded that Amililek be killed.

[6 : 28] Well, Doeg not only killed Amililek, but he killed all of the 85 priests in that town, plus their families. And between the time of David's visit to that town of Nob and the report back to Saul, in that intervening time, we read of those events in 1 Samuel 21.

David, in his extreme fear, he flees to the fortified Philistine city of Gath, alone. An army, you see, didn't gather around David until after his time in Gath.

And Gath was the hometown of the slain local hero, Goliath. I mean, imagine how either arrogant or how desperate David must have been to enter such a city.

Psalm 56, in fact, reveals that David was desperate. His strategy, though, was poor because not only was he being pursued by Saul, but he found no safety in Gath.

Indeed, the locals realised very quickly who David was. And we read in 1 Samuel 21, the servants of Achish, the king, said to him, is this not David, the king of the land?

[7 : 57] Did they not sing to one another of him in dances? Saul has killed his thousands and David his ten thousands? Well, David took these words to heart and was very much afraid of King Achish, of Gath.

So as we come to this psalm, David's enemies are in pursuit. Be gracious to me, O God, for people trample on me all day long, foes oppress me.

My enemies trample on me all day long, for many fight against me. Oh, most high. You see, the intensity is conveyed by the repetition in those opening verses.

He's being trampled on and it's happening all day long. And the sense of the original word, just translated as enemies in verse 2, is slanderous.

He's being attacked and the sense is that he's being attacked from people in a position of advantage. The psalmist knew the reality of fear.

[9 : 09] Verse 3 begins, When I am afraid. There's a website entitled www.phobialist.com and this is a collection of the names and descriptions of more than 500 fears.

The guy who's put together maintains that all of these phobias can be found in either reference books or medical journals. Paul Collier can check that for us. So here are some of the phobias.

There's paladophobia. This is the fear of bald people. It's a significant fear. There's the fear which is very current in the US Senate, especially if you've served in it for 20 or 30 years.

This is geniophobia. This is the fear of chins. There's orlo or allophobia. Joy McGrath was with it at 8 o'clock but she wouldn't come back, I think, to 10 o'clock because this is the fear of flutes.

There's one that clearly arises somewhere in Eastern Europe or Russia called Paris Cavadecatria phobia. This is well known to men.

[10 : 22] This is the fear of mother-in-law. And then there's Pit-Ur-Ono phobia which is the fear of being tickled by feathers.

Just some of the 500. The reality though is that phobias can be terrifying for those who experience them. But even if you consider that you're free of phobias, how would you respond if you were David Page?

You see, for four hours he held the cylinder waiting for rescue or an immediate death. After digging up what appeared to be an unexploded World War I bomb, David Page held onto it, afraid that letting go would actually detonate the device.

And while holding the bomb, the terrified 40-year-old from Norfolk, England, called an emergency operator on his mobile phone, he probably didn't think that that might trigger the bomb, he even used the call to issue his last words to his family.

The woman police operator kept saying it would be okay, said Page, but I kept saying to her, you're not the one holding the bomb. Well, the first responders rushed to the work yard in eastern England and army bomb disposal experts finally arrived.

[11 : 42] But the drama came to an abrupt end when the bomb was identified. It was in fact part of the hydraulic suspension system from a Citroen.

That's a Citroen motor car. The psalmist proclaims, when I am afraid, I put my trust in you.

But how often do we in our daily lives put our trust in the wrong things, in material things, in the things of this world, in fleeting things, and not in the eternal God, the one who is indeed the beginning and the end.

We put our trust in all sorts of things, and often we have quite foolish hopes. The scene is a four-engine airliner, and the pilot's voice comes over the intercom.

Those on the left-hand side of the plane, you will have probably already noticed that one of our engines has failed. Don't be alarmed. We can still fly on three engines, but it'll take us maybe an extra 15 minutes.

[12 : 57] A few minutes later, the pilot's calm voice came back over the intercom. Those on the right-hand side of the airplane, you're probably aware that a second engine has failed. Don't be alarmed.

We can make it on two engines, though it'll probably take us about an extra 30 minutes. A few minutes after that, the pilot again spoke to the passenger.

It's just come to my attention that a third engine has failed. Don't be alarmed. We can make it to the airport on one engine. However, we're going to likely arrive about 45 minutes late.

One passenger, probably Irish, turned to another and said, boy, I hope that fourth engine doesn't fail or we could be up here all night. foolish hopes, false hopes, but at a serious vein, what is it that each of us are trusting in?

You see, if we're followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, if we're Christians, then we have trusted in Jesus Christ for our salvation. But, the question is, but do we trust him in all of the things in life?

[14 : 17] Do we trust him in the littlest things? Do we trust him in those situations where feelings of anxiety and fear just build up and seem to overwhelm us?

The psalmist declares, in God whose word I praise, in God I trust, I am not afraid. What? Can flesh do to me?

What indeed can flesh do to me? Well, at one level, flesh can actually, other people can do a lot. They can oppress us, they can slander us, they can hurt us, hate us, maim us, indeed, murder us.

But the critical issue is where we stand before Almighty God. Jesus says in Matthew 10, don't fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.

Rather, fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Friends, mortal men, other people, had made life and were making life very miserable for David.

[15 : 31] And our lives, at least on one level, can be made extremely miserable by others. God's praiseworthy word, the psalmist is able to trust God.

You see, there's nothing that humans can do to undermine the psalmist's trust in the Lord. And as you read through the psalm, the sense is that the pressure on the psalmist is unrelenting.

I don't know if there have been periods in your life where you can relate to that. I certainly can. I turn the clock back somewhere around about eight years ago when there was not any pressure from a variety of sources, and this variety of pressures, if you like, were unrelenting, but the pressures just kept building.

You can remember it as if it was yesterday. And I remember that feeling at the time. It's like the very breath in your lungs is being sucked out. so I wonder if you can relate to the psalmist, even though your context is likely to be radically different to his portrayed in 1 Samuel 21.

All day long they seek to injure my cause. All their thoughts are against me for evil. They stir up strife. They lurk. They watch my steps as they hoped to have my life.

[17 : 01] All day long, unrelenting pressure. Back in those first two verses, this was the first thing that the psalmist emphasised, all day long.

And then the sense of that expression, to injure my cause, is to twist around his words. You see, David's enemies were twisting his words so that he was portrayed as an enemy of Saul.

They're plotting, they're conspiring, they're waiting for the opportunity in fact to snuff out his very life as we read at the end of verse 6. And so David appeals to God for justice in verse 7.

If you like, the sense is, Lord, just don't let them get away with this. And the psalmist wants a permanent record of his complaint.

You've kept count of my tossings, put my tears in your bottle. are they not in your record? And the image that's used here was a familiar one in ancient Israel.

[18 : 06] You see, precious liquids, whether that was water or wine or milk, were preserved in leak-proofed leather bags. And these bags, they had small openings which made them very efficient for pouring out but also excellent for minimizing evaporation.

salvation. And so the thought is that the psalmist tears are so precious to God that he collects them and he preserves them.

Friends, God will never forget nor ever be indifferent to the cares of any one of his much loved children.

He'll never forget nor be indifferent to our cares. And I trust that is of great comfort to you as you go through your lives.

David's perilous situation would naturally cause him great anxiety, cause him extraordinary fear. But it's interesting that the psalm majors on its assertions of trust.

[19 : 19] Look at verse 4 again. In God whose word I praise, in God I trust, I'm not afraid, what can flesh do to me? And verse 11, in God I trust, I'm not afraid, what can a mere mortal do to me?

You see, repetition and contrast by the psalmist, they drive home this theme of trust. You've got afraid versus trust, you've got God versus flesh, God versus mere mortals.

trust. And not only does the psalmist repeat in verse 3, 4, 11, implicitly at the end of 9, implicitly at the end of 13, that he trusts only in God, not only that, but he repeats the phrase, in God whose word I praise, he repeats it in verse 4, states it in verse 4 and then repeats it in verse 10.

trust is not some independent act of the human world, it's our response to salvation or the promise of salvation. Well, what is this word that the psalmist praises?

He would have had the Old Testament scriptures at that time, would have been the first five books, the Pentateuch and likely Joshua and Judges. Psalms and the psalmist sums up, if you like, the Old Testament gospel at the end of verse 9.

[20 : 46] He says, this I know, this I know that God is for me. And the apostle Paul picks up those words from verse 9 in one of the most wonderful and assuring texts found anywhere in scripture.

And if you'd like to just keep your finger in that psalm, Psalm 56 and flick across to Romans 8. Romans 8, I think it's page 919. Let's see how Paul takes this thought from Psalm 56.

Because Paul writes in verse 31, if God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?

who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies, who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us, who will separate us from the love of God, will hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, or peril, or sword, and you can see just as he rattles off this list, the reality that Christians are not immune from difficulties, severe difficulties in life.

As it is written, for your sake we are being killed all day long, we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered. No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

[22 : 20] For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all of creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

You see, friends, without Jesus Christ as the Lord of our life, there is actually much that we should fear. There's much that we should fear in this life and much that we should fear in the life to come.

And when the Bible speaks of our trust in the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, it's speaking of us relying on him for our security. It's speaking of, if you like, putting our life in his hand.

It's speaking of depending on him because he's the one who both controls and sustains life. God's So in verses 10 to 11, the psalmist returns to that refrain of verse 4 and he does it in an expanded form.

In God, whose word I praise, in the Lord, whose word I praise, in God I trust, I'm not afraid, what can a mere mortal do to me?

[23 : 46] You see, in the midst of suffering, in the midst of great difficulties, what's the psalmist's proclamation? What's his solid anchor? What's his sure refuge?

In God, I trust. In God, I trust. I'm not afraid. A movie that was put out a year and a half, two years ago, King Arthur, retells the legend of the great warrior king who ruled England in the Dark Ages.

Arthur is a Christian of Roman origin, but his knights are all pagans and they were forced into service at a young age. And Arthur had won over the allegiance of this group by his selfless leadership.

But the group has retained the religion of their youth. And in one of the movie scenes, Arthur is preparing his supplies in a dimly lit stable. And he's about to lead his knights on their last perilous quest before they'll each be granted their freedom.

But Arthur, he's not yet the king, is frustrated that his superiors would send his knights on such a dangerous mission just before they're going to be released from duty.

[25 : 01] So he takes his discouragement before God. He sits down the saddle he was carrying and he bows in prayer. And Lancelot emerges from the darkness and he overhears him.

He asks, why do you always talk to God and not to me? But pray to whomever you pray that we don't cross the Saxons. My faith is what protects me, Lancelot.

Why do you challenge this? Well, I don't like anything that puts a man on his knees, is Lancelot's response. No man fears to kneel before the God he trusts, replied Arthur.

without faith, what are we? Indeed, without faith in the Lord God, what are we?

God, what are we? God, what are we? As the psalmist just reflects on the greatness of God and the joy of trusting him, he can just sort of feel his heart overflowing with praise as he expresses it in his words.

[26 : 10] my vows to you I must perform, O God, I'll render thank offerings to you, for you have delivered my soul from death and my feet from falling so that I may walk before God in the light of life.

In April 1988, a US evening news reported on a photographer who was a skydiver. He jumped from a plane along with a group of other skydivers and he'd filmed the group as they fell and then they opened their parachutes.

And on the film that was shown on that telecast, as the final skydiver opened his chute, the picture just all of a sudden went berserk and the announcer reported in fact that the cameraman had fallen to his death.

He had actually jumped out of the plane without his parachute. And it wasn't until he'd sort of reached for his absent ripcord that he realised that he was actually free falling without a parachute.

And until that point the jump would have seemed very exciting and a great deal of fun. But tragically he'd acted in thoughtlessness, he'd acted in haste, and he'd acted in deadly foolishness.

[27 : 27] Nothing could save him because his faith was in a parachute that was never buckled on. And faith in anything, in anything but an all-sufficient God, can be just as tragic spiritually.

Because it's only with faith in Jesus Christ that we dare face the trials and the difficulties of just everyday life. It's only with faith in Jesus Christ that we dare face the certainty of our own mortality and life beyond the grave.

The psalmist lifts up his heart in praise to God. God has delivered his soul from death in the light of life.

And as we think of those words, the light of life, maybe you might go back to Jesus' words in John 8. I am the light of the world, Jesus says. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have, the light of life.

So how do we interpret verse 13 of Psalm 56 in the light of the New Testament? Simply that through trust in the Lord Jesus Christ we're delivered from darkness, from the kingdom of the devil, from being slaves to sin.

[28 : 55] We're delivered, we're rescued, and we're given life. The regenerating work of the Holy Spirit for each one, for anyone who turns from their sin and trusts in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Regeneration, and as we yield to the Holy Spirit in our daily lives, continued transformation as we become more like Christ.

Fear and faith. fear of fear of terrorism, of environmental and biological catastrophes, fears of losing our jobs, such a real fear in our modern world.

Relationship fears, fears of we're going to bring up our kids well, health fears, financial fears, and we could just keep naming them ad nauseam, and we can easily become submerged under this sort of viscous, deadly mud of fear.

Indeed, fears that just keep layering on layer. Fear and faith. faith. They're both prominent in the psalm, but faith in God is what is dominant.

[30 : 29] You see, the psalmist message is one of confidence in God. The writer to the Hebrews actually picks up verse four of the psalm, and he applies it to a community of Hebrew Christians, and they were experiencing great difficulties.

In fact, their difficulties were so great that they were just just teetering, teetering on the edge of going down a path of apostasy. Were they going to continue to trust in Christ and in him alone?

So whoever that writer was, in the letter to the Hebrews in chapter 13, he pens these words under the inspiration of the Spirit. So we can say with confidence, the Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid.

what can anyone do to me? And the Holy Spirit brings this word to each of us gathered here this morning, each gathered here who are followers of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me? So how does trusting God remove our fear?

[31 : 46] Well, the Holy Spirit gives us clear instruction through Psalm 56. You see, it's God's word that's the source of confidence for all of God's people, for all of God's people beset by just myriads of difficulties.

Our God is on the throne, he's the sovereign one. He's just, he does love his children, and he will one day right every wrong.

In God, whose word I praise. And if God is for us, then who indeed can be against us?

You see, no matter what storm that you're facing in life, and life brings lots of storms, we can find refuge.

refuge. The refuge is safe, and the refuge is secure. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust.

[32 : 53] I'm not afraid. What can flesh do to me? May the psalmist's confident trust in the Lord be the reality in each of our lives as we walk forward in faith.

Father, we thank you that you are indeed a safe refuge, a secure refuge. Well, we thank you that we come before you as the almighty God, the sovereign Lord, the ruler of the whole cosmos.

And Lord God, that we can come before you, as our redeemer, who's come and died for our sins and delivered us from darkness, and through simple, repentant faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, we can experience regeneration and transformation, and indeed live in the light of life.

Lord, we're acutely aware that in our fallenness, we can have many anxieties and fears in our life, real fears, and they can build up and sometimes just seem to totally overwhelm us.

Lord, help us at such times by the ministry of the Holy Spirit in our lives to remember these great words penned by the psalmist, in God whose word I praise, in God I trust.

[34 : 49] Father, may that be the experience of each one gathered here this morning, and we ask this for Christ's sake. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.