

Fear, Danger and Consequence

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[0 : 00] Father, we thank you for your great kindness to us in Jesus. We thank you for all that you have done. We pray that as we read this great psalm that you'd help us understand it and understanding it, that you'd help us to live rightly in response to you.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. I want you to imagine a woman called Eugenie, a fictional woman. Nevertheless, she captures a number of things that I think are characteristic of the life of ordinary people in churches.

Eugenie had grown up in a wonderful home. Her parents loved God. They loved his son Jesus. And she had learned on her lap to call out to God and to call him Father as they called him Father. She grew up to have a very deep affection for Jesus herself. And that affection grew and developed in her adolescence. She left home. She travelled to university. She threw herself into Christian ministry.

She made very good, firm Christian friends. And people came to know Christ through her for the first time. Finally, Eugenie graduated.

[1 : 09] And the years ticked by. Her friends found her or were found by good Christian men. But no Christian man came for her.

She resisted the advances of one non-Christian man. But that only heightened the loneliness and the deep sense of despair. And deep inside, a new emotion began to ferment.

And at first she suppressed it. She suppressed her rising bitterness toward God. But slowly the bubbles of fermenting bitterness began to surface.

And she did the right thing. She told God about it. She told him about her bitterness. And she raised her voice to him in anger. And still no man came.

And still her bitterness grew. Attending church is now a painful experience for Eugenie. There is the pain of seeing her friends with marriages and with young children.

[2 : 10] There is the pain of being reminded week after week after week about a God who loves her. But she is slowly coming to no longer believe those words. She is on the brink of a very great angst.

For deep underneath she fears being without the God who has been her constant companion. But she also fears the cost that might have to be paid if she is to be faithful to him.

Eugenie you see is a woman in very great danger. She is in danger of being overwhelmed by her pain. And she is in danger of deserting her God. She is fearful, afraid and desperately lonely.

Now let me say that Eugenie is not alone in her fear and her precarious position. She is in the company of many of the people of God. Like the SAS soldier from Perth who will spend a six month stint in Afghanistan who is fearing life itself.

Or perhaps his wife who calls upon God to preserve him. With the now ageing minister as he watches his youthful faith and love for God slowly dissipating in the struggles of a diminishing parish.

[3 : 25] With the Christian court in deep clinical depression wondering if the clouds of that fog will ever lift. With the couple who carry the body of their dead child down a long corridor of a hospital a week after it had been born.

27 weeks into the pregnancy. Each of these people are people at the edge. Fearful of physical danger. In danger of deserting their God.

Or simply wondering whether God really is good. Psalm 16 is a psalm for such people. However I want to warn you before it starts.

Before we start looking at it. That it does not look like it at first glance. At first glance it looks like a psalm that will offer very little help for people like Eugenie.

I want you to stick with me as we look at it. For I think you'll find that it does point us toward a small glimmer of light. That might shine into the darkness of our fear and our danger.

[4 : 30] So please open your Bibles with me there. Almost in the middle of your Bible. It's Psalm 16. And let's have a look at it together. The first thing I want to do is just take a quick run through it.

The context of the psalm is not all that clear. It's called a miktam of David. And who knows what a miktam is. I'm not sure that I know. It might be some sort of inscription on a stone.

But no one really knows. It was, we are told, a psalm that was originally used as a prayer of David. Or perhaps a Davidic king. And third, the psalm is about some situation where the king is facing some sort of danger.

Verses 2 and 4 seem to imply that it may be a temptation to call upon gods other than the real God. Verses 9 to 11 seem to imply that there's some sort of physical danger that is concerning him.

However, having set the context, let's have a look at the content of the psalm. Let's look at what it actually says. Verse 1 records the king's plea to God. He has taken refuge in God.

[5 : 27] He therefore calls upon God to do what God promises to do for his people. He calls upon God, please God, protect me. Verses 2 and 3 describe what it means to take refuge in God.

It means turning away from the pleasures of sin and the vanities of life and facing good in God and finding good in God. It means delighting in God and delighting in the godly.

The ungodly, you see, don't live like this. The ungodly have exchanged the true and living God for the vanities of the world and they've deserted finding good in God.

The true believer can't do that. The true believer must face life differently. The true believer knows that the ungodly will have very deep sorrow and trouble. And so the king resolves that he'll not be, he'll not offer idolatrous drink offerings or blood, nor will he even let their names pass over his lips. Nor will he even... And verse 5 is an interesting verse. You see, verse 5 has the echoes of other passages in the Bible. Have a look at it in verse 5. It says this, The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup.

[6 : 39] You hold my lot. Verse 5 talks about when the people of God entered the promised land and they parceled out the land between all the tribes. And however, there's one group of people who believed no...

who received no land. Do you remember who they were? They were the Levites. And Deuteronomy 10, 8 and 9 and Numbers 18, 20 tell their story. Listen to it while I just read for you.

Deuteronomy 10. At that time, that is when they entered the land, the Lord set apart the tribe of Levi to carry the ark of the covenant of the Lord and to stand before the Lord to minister to him and to bless in his name.

And therefore, Levi has no portion or inheritance with his brothers. The Lord is his inheritance. The Lord is... as the Lord your God said to him. And then listen to Numbers 18.

And the Lord said to Aaron, You shall have no inheritance in the land. Neither shall you have any portion among them. I am your portion and your inheritance among the people of Israel.

[7 : 39] Can you see what's being said here in this verse? The king is saying... Can you see what he's saying? He's saying, The Lord himself can meet all his needs. It is not land or food or drink that this man needs, but God.

God has satisfied his hunger. He has given him his portion. He has met his needs. He has quenched his thirst. And what's more, He has found God's inheritance to be a rich and delightful one.

Just as Levitical priests who were given no inheritance in Canaan because their inheritance was with the Lord. On top of this, God has richly given him his counsel.

And even in his ponderings in the night, God has given him counsel. Verses 8 to 11 break into this burst of confidence. The king has kept the Lord always before him.

And with God as his right hand, he's confident that he'll not be moved. He's confident that his body will rest secure, that he'll not be abandoned to Sheol, that his faithfulness will be rewarded with life and not death.

[8 : 46] And verse 11 lets us into the mind of the psalmist at this point. You see, the psalmist knows that his God is the living God. Life and God belong together.

Therefore, to be in the presence of God, to be in relation with God, is to be in the presence of life and to be related to life itself. Being bound to God is about fullness of life and joy and enduring pleasure.

It's not about death and decay. And it's that that gives the king confidence in his present situation. That it not be one that terminates in death. That is what causes his heart to overflow with gladness and his soul with rejoicing.

He is God's and God is his and nothing can separate them, not even death itself. Now there's the psalm. And as you can see from what I've said, I think this psalm is about some momentary situation.

Something that happens in the psalmist's life where David feels as though he's tempted to abandon his faith. He resists that temptation and in the midst of the temptation he calls out confidently to God and he makes God his refuge.

[10:00] God is going to be good toward him. Now my own experience is that this psalm is still a very long way away from meeting Eugenie in her knee and the others that I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon.

You see, it's right isn't it? Eugenie wants a bit more than David's confidence, doesn't she? She wants some word. Eugenie wants some counsel.

She wants some direct assurance from God himself that there is to be fullness of joy in his presence. That at his right hand there are to be pleasures forevermore.

And it's here I think that the New Testament just offers us a little more help. I wonder if in your Bibles you might open at Acts chapter 2. Have a look at Acts chapter 2 verses 22 to 23.

Now at one point you don't think this is going to offer us any help at all. But let me just explain it. Acts 2, 22 to 33.

[11:10] I'll read it for you. You remember what's happening? It's after Jesus has died and been raised from the dead. And Peter says, You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say.

Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders and signs that God did through him among you as you yourselves know. This man handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God.

You crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up having freed him from death because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.

For God says concerning him, and listen to the words, I saw the Lord always before me for he's at my right hand so that I will not be shaken.

Therefore my heart was glad and my tongue rejoiced. Moreover, my flesh will live in hope for you will not abandon my soul to Hades or let your Holy One experience corruption.

[12:09] You have made known to me the ways of life. You will make me full of gladness in your presence. Fellow Israelites, I may say to you confidently that our ancestor David has both died and was buried and that his tomb is with us to this day.

Since he was a prophet, we knew that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would put one of his descendants on the throne. Foreseeing this, David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, saying, he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh experience corruption.

This Jesus Christ, God raised up and of that all of us are witnesses, being therefore exalted to the right hand of God and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out that which you see and hear.

Can you see what Peter's saying? It's quite a profound point, really. He's quoting the Psalm, the Psalm 16 that we've looked at and he makes the point, Look, David both died and was buried.

The implication is that David in that Psalm can't have been primarily referring to himself when he said those words. He goes on to point out that David knew that God had promised to set one of his descendants on the throne and in some way, therefore, this Psalmist, David, looked into the future and spoke prophetically about the resurrection of King Jesus from the dead.

[13:33] Now, I think at this point we need to be very careful. You see, many years later, Peter, in 1 Peter 10, made the point that the Old Testament prophecies did not, the prophets did not always understand what the Spirit of Christ within them was doing as he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glory.

I think this means that we don't have to say that David was making a deliberate and conscious prophecy concerning Jesus. Rather, I think that we can say that David was caught up by God's Spirit and led to write words about the conquest of death that would finally be fulfilled, not in his own experience, but in his descendant Jesus.

So, this technicality aside, Jesus is saying, Peter is saying that Jesus, that David is right, isn't he? David, you see, was fundamentally confident that God was the author of life.

He was sure that if you bound yourself to God, then God would bind himself to you. If you bound yourself to God, you bound yourself to life and joy and pleasure.

And he was confident that anyone who took refuge in God would be protected by him, even from the greatest danger in life, death itself. For death has not conquered his Holy One Jesus and therefore death will not conquer those who put their faith and their trust in him.

[15:05] Now, friends, how are you going now? Do you think Peter's words about the resurrection of Jesus would be enough for Eugenie to be able to join David in saying the psalm?

Would that be enough to help her? Now, let me be very honest with you. As I put myself in Eugenie's shoes, I'm not sure that it does.

It may help the SAS soldier contemplating the risks of warfare in Afghanistan or Iraq, but I think Eugenie needs more, you see. I think she's still struggling.

Eugenie's need is not so much for comfort that she'll live in God's presence. No, Eugenie's need is to know that there is a God who loves her despite what she's facing.

And to give this sort of help, I think we've got to go elsewhere than this psalm. I don't think this psalm gives all the answers. We need to go back past where Peter was speaking, past the day of Pentecost, past that, back further, back to a hill outside Jerusalem, to a man hanging exposed on a cross and crying out to his father in the darkness, to a man experiencing the suffering and alienation of an unprecedented sort, to Jesus, the only God, dying nailed to wood in her place and for her, to the one who loved her as no one will ever love her, to the only God who ever became human to die at human hands.

[17:04] This is the counsel I think I can give Eugenie. This is the word that can instruct her in the isolation of her loneliness. You see, God loved her in his son on the cross.

And because of this, she can be sure that he will continue to love her and have her best in mind.

She may not understand God's purposes for her now, but what she can know is that God loves her with an everlasting love.

And this is he who rose from the dead as testimony that his presence and love and care will never deserve her. Ever. You see, in the light of the cross, in the light of the resurrection, in the light of him who loved her, in the light of him who loves us, Eugenie can rightly flee running after other gods that will only bring her sorrow.

She can join with David, albeit in great trembling and great angst. And she can say and join in with David as we can and say, Protect me, O God, for I take refuge in you.

I say to you, O Lord, you are my Lord. I have no good apart from you. The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup. I keep the Lord always before me.

[18:40] Because he's at it my right hand, I shall not be moved. Therefore, my heart is glad and my soul rejoices and my body also rests secure for you will not give me up to shield.

Or let your faithful one see the pit. You show me the path of life and in your presence there is fullness of joy. In your right hand are pleasures forever.

Let's pray. Father God, in the great difficulties of life it is so hard so often to trust you.

But Lord, we know that there is no other good apart from you. For you have sent your Son. In your Son you have claimed your great love upon the cross.

And we know, Father, that because of him you are our chosen portion and cup. You are at God's right hand and because you are, we are.

[19:52] Please, Father, in the midst of great angst may our hearts be glad and our souls rejoice and our bodies rest secure. For you show us the path of life and in your presence there is fullness of joy and in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.