

## When the Faithful are Fearful

### Psalm 56

Psalm 56<sup>i</sup> is one of two psalms inspired by David's flight to the Philistines for refuge (cf. Ps 34). To understate his situation, the psalmist is under pressure. God had given David the kingdom (1 Sam 16), everybody knows it, and Saul knows it and wants to kill David because of it.

At length, David fled to the Philistines for refuge. He fled to the Philistines not once but twice (1 Samuel 21:10-15; 27:1). David is not doing his best thinking either time. It is hard to know which flight to the Philistines stands behind Psalm 56. To flee to Gath of all places is the measure of David's distress.

Distress and fear rob us of our ability to think well. On his first flight to Gath, he stopped by the shrine at Nob and collected Goliath's sword (1Sam 21:9), not the weapon of choice when you're headed to Goliath's hometown.

If his first flight to Gath shows his fear, his second flight reveals a bit more of his thinking. He reasoned, *what is the one place on earth I can go where Saul will not follow* (1Sam.27:1). Answer: Gath. What he didn't think about was what he would do when he got there.

Enter Psalm 56. The psalm shows tension between faith and fear in the believer's life. The Psalm basically has 3 sections: 1-4, 5-11, and 12-13. The first two sections are similar in content. Each have pleas (1a, 7), protests (1b-2, 5-6), statements of confidence (3,9-8), and end with a refrain expressing trust (4,10-11). The second stanza is a bit more detailed and descriptive than the first stanza, purposely intensifying the mood of the psalm. The final stanza is a statement of thanksgiving (12-13).

So let's walk through the psalm and then make some applications.

#### David's enemy

In the opening stanza, David pleads for mercy because *man tramples on [him]*. *Man* is used in the universal singular, *mankind*. This general view of man comes out in the psalm in the refrains, *What can flesh do to me* (4d)? and *What can man do to me* (11c)?

He moves from the universal singular to an *attacker who oppresses* him (1b). In verse 2, he moves to the plural, *enemies trample him* and *many attack him* (2). The attack is constant. In verses 1 and 2, and again in verse 5, he says the attack is *all day long*.

The picture in verses 1-2 is of the psalmist on the run with his enemies breathlessly pursuing him.<sup>ii</sup> Fear was the natural response to verses 1-2 (3). When David fled to Gath and was taken before Achish, king of Gath, the text says, *David was much afraid of Achish the king of Gath* (1Sam 21:12).

### **David's fear**

How did David handle the fear? *When<sup>iii</sup> I am afraid, I put my trust in you* (Ps 56:3). Derek Kidner says, *Faith is ... a deliberate act of defiance of one's emotional state.*<sup>iv</sup> In David's situation that is exactly how faith was operating in him.

The defiance of faith leads to the psalm's refrain (4): *In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can flesh do to me?* The foundation of David's faith is the *Word* of God. His faith is not wishful thinking. It is not something he has mustered up. He chose rather to believe the word of God than give one inch to fear. *What time I am afraid...I will not be afraid* (3a, 4c). There is a bit of a chiasmic structure in verses 3 and 4: *fear, trust, word, trust, fear*. The word is the center. Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God.

The rhetorical questions that ends each refrain, *What can flesh do to me?* (4d) and *What can man do to me?* (11b), are big questions. What can humans do to you? The answer is quite a lot. After seeking refuge with the Philistines the first time, David fled to the cave of Adullam. He became a cave dweller, and God brought a community of outcasts to him (1Sam 22:1-2). After seeking refuge with the Philistines the second time and being rejected—even the Philistines didn't want him—David returned to Ziklag with his men, only to find their town burned, looted and all the women and children kidnapped by the Amalekites (1Sam 30:1-6). Hear the distress in that moment: *Then David and the people with him raised their voices and wept until they had no more strength to weep* (1Sam 30:4).

Hear David's question again, *What can flesh do to me?* and marvel! David's faith sprouts and steels his spine, and he says, *This I know, that God is for me* (9c). You

can hear Paul pick this up in Romans 8, *If God is for us, who can be against us* (31)?

The basis of David's fear is precisely what humans can do to him, and the basis for not fearing is what humans cannot do to me.<sup>v</sup> David sets the human capacity for evil over against the God's word of promise in light of which humans can do nothing.<sup>vi</sup>

### **David's faith**

Through faith in the Word of God, David took courage in what God said of him rather than what his enemies said of him. In light of who God is and what God says, David is able to view his enemies from the proper perspective. They are simply flesh. The writer of Hebrews picked this up saying, *He has said, I will never leave you nor forsake you, so that we may confidently say the Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?*

### **David's enemies**

Starting in verse 5, the psalmist goes back to the beginning and works through his situation once again but in greater detail. Rather than moving on, the psalmist rehearses his complaint. The repetition amplifies the distress the Psalmist feels. Verses 5-6 expresses the content of verses 1-2.

Again, the psalmist says, *all day long* (5a, cf. 1b,2a). You can hear the exasperation. Then he has that curious clause, *they injure my cause*. To me that sounds like an eighteenth century phrase. Other translations have, *they twist my words*. The rest of the verse helps with the meaning.<sup>vii</sup> *All their thoughts are against* the psalmist for evil. The point is that they twist everything about the psalmist's life—what he says, what he does, who he is. They fabricate, fashion, and twist his words or actions to support the narrative they want to put forward about him. They invent ways to slander him. They are passive aggressive, so their accusations seem plausible.

Notice the four verbs the psalmist uses to describe what their evil thoughts about him have conjured up: *stir up*, *lurk*, *watch*, and *wait* (6). They study his every move, looking for a way to ambush him.

### **David's plea**

This brings the psalmist to his second plea. The first was in verse 1, *be gracious to me, O God*. The second is in verse 7, *In wrath cast down the peoples, O God!* He reasons the reason of faith. Will they escape the consequences of their ways (7a)? The answer to this rhetorical question is, *NO!* The psalmist is simply praying for God to be God. Again, not simply his present enemies are in view, but the world of evil men, *In wrath cast down peoples, O God*. The most necessary thing in the world is that evil peoples are cast down. Otherwise, the good purpose of God fails, and we perish.

The psalmist uses two metaphors to describe God's tender care for him, a book and a bottle.<sup>viii</sup> The first and last line of verse 8 relate the book: *You have kept count of my tossings; are they not in your book?* The middle line is the bottle: *put my tears in your bottle*. The psalmist is bringing to mind the attention God gives to detail. God knows, takes notice, and requires an account.

God's attention to detail gives rise to the psalmist confidence that *in the day when [he] calls, [his] enemies with turn back, [because] God is for [him]* (9). The greatest thing the psalmist knew was that God was for him. We are prone to think when we fear that God is against us. That is the devil's lie.

### **David's faith**

The surge of confident faith in verses 8-9 gave rise to the second use of the refrain (10-11). It is the same as the first but with two modifications to strengthen it. A line is added after the first line that repeats it but deliberately replace *God* with *LORD*, the covenant Name for God. This is a rare occurrence in Book 2 of the Psalter (pss 42-72). When it occurs, we should take notice. God's care for his people in this hostile world is a covenantal issue. Again, the psalmist's faith is fortified by the word of God (10x2).

The second modification is in the last line (11b, cf 4d). In place of *flesh* (4d), the psalmist says *man* (11b), *what can man do to me?* He is showing the nature of his enemy in contrast to God. His enemies are human, but God is his covenant LORD.

The psalm closes with a commitment to give thanks (12-13). In answer to this individual lament, the psalmist will go public with praise. The psalmist owes God the only thing he can give him, praise. The psalmist's faith sores, and he so sure of deliverance that he speaks of it as if it has already happened (13). He speaks as

though God has delivered his soul from death, his feet from falling, and made him walk in the light of life.

Now for a bit of application. Psalm 56 notes two contrasting polarities faith over against fear and God over against humanity. Each occurrence of the word *afraid* is accompanied by the word *trust* (3, 4b, 11a). It is the *word* of God that makes possible the move from fear of man to trust in God.<sup>ix</sup>

No doubt we know the experience of fear. What we may miss is the antidote to fear, faith grounded in and guided by the word of God. As believers we are all over the place in the tension between faith and fear. Often the two are present in us at the same time in a tug-of-war. We must fight fear with faith informed by the Bible.

You can see this battle in the saints through the ages. We know the story of Luther of the Diet of Worms. When asked to repudiate his books, he replied:

*Since then Your Majesty and your lordships desire a simple reply, I will answer with our hors and without teeth. Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason—I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen.<sup>x</sup>*

It is easy to think of Luther in command of the room and speaking boldly without fear.

The day before he first appeared at the Imperial Diet. Luther was asked if the books displayed on the table were his. In a whisper he replied: *The books are all mine, and I have written more.* Then came the question of Luther's readiness to recant. There was no defiant challenge from Luther, no bold defense. Almost inaudibly he replied, *I beg you, give me time to think it over.<sup>xi</sup>*

Luther was given 24 hours to give his answer. That night in the solitude of his room, Luther penned a stirring prayer. Here's how it closed:

*... Though the world should be thronged with devils and this body, which is the work of your hands, should be cast forth, trodden under foot, cut in pieces, ... consumed to ashes, my soul is yours. Yes, I have thine own word to assure me of it.*

*My soul belongs to you, and will abide with you forever! Amen! O God send help! ... Amen!*

The next day Luther gave his answer without a quake or quiver.<sup>xii</sup>

In Luther, we see faith grounded in the word of God fighting fear. Here are some applications for the when the faithful are fearful.

### **1. We must realize we have an enemy**

That point seems weird. Maybe it would be better stated, *know your enemy*. I think as believers, however, we are prone to forget we have an enemy. Perhaps, we are more prone to think God is against us, than we are to think the enemy is attacking us. Our enemy is tricky. He disguises himself as an angel of light (2 Cor 11:14), prowls like a hunting lion (1Peter 5:8), snares us to take us captive to do his will (2 Tim 2:26), and he is a liar and the father of lies (Jn8:44). Paul cautions us amazingly, not to be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his devices (2Cor. 2:11). We are not ignorant of his devices, but we fall for his lies far too often.

David went into great detail to describe his enemy (1-2 and 5-6). The enemy was relentlessly pursuing him (*trample*) and pressing hard on him (*oppress*—afflict, crush, force, hold fast). Constantly, his enemy dreamed up ways to stir up strife, lurking and watching his steps waiting for opportunity.

Dear friend, this is the way we are pursued. If David's enemy studied him, he studied his enemy. How does Satan attack you? What thoughts does he bring to mind? What lies does he whisper? What fear does he play on? If you examine your life, you may find he plays on the same vulnerabilities over and over again, tells the same lies over and over again, presents the same temptations over and over again, and plagues your mind with the thought patterns over and over.

We must learn to recognize the enemy and resist him. The Bible says, *Submit yourselves to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you* (James 4:7). And again, *Resist him, firm in the your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world* (1Pet 5:9).

Two times we are told to resist. You can resist destructive thoughts patterns, you can fight patterns of fear, you can resist temptations, but you are going to have to fight for faith and truth.

It's odd that we get in a place like David was in verse 5 when he said, *All their thoughts are against me for evil*. Perhaps, their thoughts were against him for evil, but this kind of thinking is where we go when we are fearful. We invent the thoughts others are having of us and take them for the truth about ourselves. You can resist thinking like that.

David was not doing his best thinking when he fled to the Philistines for refuge. If we are not careful, we will exalt the enemy beyond measure in our minds. The enemy takes on greater attributes in our minds than he has in reality. The enemy becomes supernatural to us, taking on the attributes of God in some way, but without mercy. Fear settles into our souls.

We then become guided by our emotions, by our fear. We legitimize how we feel, even if we know the facts say something different. When how we feel becomes what is truest about us, we can act in ways that disregard what we know to be true. We become our own worst enemy.

Know your enemy—how he attacks you and resist him in faith.

## **2. We must give ourselves to knowing God**

This psalm draws a deliberate and clear contrast between God and the enemy. Ed Welch wrote a book called, *When People Are Big and God is Small: Overcoming Peer Pressure, Codependency, and the Fear of Man*. The psalmist is in that situation.

When he fled to the Philistines, he was looking to others for only what God could give: deliverance from death (13). He feared Saul, and he feared Achish. He should have feared God. He had a misplaced fear that exalted people above God, the power of man above the power of God.

He reminds himself in the Psalm of who God is. First, God is gracious (1), an attribute his enemies are lacking. God is, also, just. There is no escape for people who do evil (7). The wrath of God is coming on mankind. We must realize God takes note of injustices (8). You can put the injustice you have experienced in the

hands of God because God is for his people. You can call on Him; he will turn the enemy back (9).

When the psalmist thinks rightly about God, His enemies are put in the proper perspective. Each occurrence of the refrain ends with a similar question: *What can flesh do to me?* (4d), and *What can man do to me?* (11b). To see God rightly, to know God rightly, enabled him to see his enemies from a proper perspective.

How did the psalmist get to know God? The Word of God is central to the psalm. Three times in the refrains, the psalmist emphasizes the *Word* of God (4a, 10a-b). The psalmist binds his trust in God to the Word of God. He used the curious words, *In God, whose word I praise* (4a); *In God, whose word I praise* (11a); *In the LORD, whose word I praise* (11b). Can you say that? The psalmist did, not once but three times.

The Bible is the revelation of God to man. Without the Bible, you will not know God rightly and redemptively. To praise the Word is to praise the God of the Word. All our knowledge of God must be measured against God's self-revelation in the Word.

It is the Word that creates and informs our faith. The Word tells us who God is, who we are, and who the enemy is. Faith informed by the Word of God fights fear. Faith is resistance. It is defiance. It is taking hold of what God says is true about him, about you, and about the enemy and refusing to be intimidated by fear.

What you fear controls you. That is your fear takes the place of God in your life. It makes people bigger than God. The Word exalts God and makes Him bigger to you than people are.

There are many voices in our world. They are all around you, speaking to you. These voices even those closest to us can be the messengers of Satan (Matt 16:23). There are voices of family—spouse, parents, children, in-laws—friends, coworkers, all kinds of media, the culture, temptations, patterns of thinking, etc.

They are all speaking at once, forming a cacophony of noise. These voices can be overwhelming and even debilitating. They drag you in a thousand directions all at once. You need to please this person or that person. You need to put out this fire or

that fire. The kids need to go here or there. All the while you have a sense that you are not being cared for.

People are big, God is small. Fear sets in because you are not measuring up to the demands being put on you. The Word of God is clarifying at this point. It tells you what God wants you to do. In the middle of the gaggle of voices, the Word says, *Hey Tom, What does God want you to do? What is God saying to you?* I may respond, *I don't know. I hear so many voices, and I don't know which one is God's.* The Word helps. It cries out, *What does the Word say? Measure the voices you hear in your mind, your heart, your life by what the Word says.*

Then you will see how faith fortified in the Word of God fights fear.

### **3. Learn the lesson of gratitude**

In verses 12-13, the psalmist expresses his gratitude to the LORD. He commits to giving public testimony to the Lord delivering him from death, keeping his feet from falling, and causing him to walk in the light of life.

Just because there are only 2 verses of gratitude doesn't mean it is simply something tacked onto the end of a prayer. Obviously, the psalmist had not yet been delivered, but he prays as though he had been delivered (13). This is not just wishful thinking; it is thinking rightly.

Ingratitude is a huge problem, especially for believers. It tells us something about ourselves. When I am unthankful, I am acting in pride. I am thinking much too highly of myself. I think I didn't get what I deserve. I think God is holding out on me. I disapprove of God's handling of the case and could do it better myself. I know best. The whole of existence is reduced to the moment. We lose perspective.

Ingratitude opens our lives to the tyranny of fear. When we are not thinking rightly about God and rightly interpreting His work in our lives, God becomes small, and life and its circumstances becomes all consuming.

The Bible is so different. While you are struggling with overwhelming issues, the Bible holds out to you the promises:

*For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thess. 5:9).*

We hear Paul write from prison, *For I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death* (Phil. 1:19-20).

*Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us* (Eph. 3:20).

*No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly* (Ps 84:11).

*For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope* (Jer 29:11).

We keep setting our hope on this life and the Bible directs us to the next life. Even as we close this service, we come to the table to testify that our hope is fixed on the world to come. We are called in the suffering, stress, and pain of this present time to know the God of the Bible, resist the enemy, and ground our faith in the Word of God.

---

<sup>i</sup> Perhaps the tune in the superscription, according to the dove on far-off terebinths, reflects on Psalm 55:6, Oh, that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest. David, no doubt, would like to fly away to a better situation, so he tunes his song appropriately. Wilson points out that Psalm 56 is the first of 5 consecutive psalms that are *miktams*. The three central psalms (57,58,59) have the tune *do not destroy*. The two outer psalms (56,60) have distinct tunes. See Wilson, NIVAC, vol 1, 820.

<sup>ii</sup> Trample used in verses 1-2, has the meaning of haste, pant, desire, swallow up.

<sup>iii</sup> *When* is the Hebrew word for *day* (yom).

<sup>iv</sup> Kidner, TOTC, 221.

<sup>v</sup> Goldingay, BCOT, 185.

<sup>vi</sup> Goldingay, 185.

<sup>vii</sup> *Injure* (asab) means hurt, vex, pain, shape, form fashion. *Cause* (dabar) means words, speech, acts, business, affairs. The NKJV and the NIV translate it, *twist my words*. The KJV has it, *wrest my words*, and the NLT translates it, *twisting what I say*. The ESV footnote offers, *they twist my words*.

<sup>viii</sup> Verse 8 is a beautiful word play: *count* (sapar) and *book* (seper); *tossings* (nod) and *bottle* (no'd). This poetic construction helps us see why these metaphors were chosen.

<sup>ix</sup> Goldingay, 189-190.

<sup>x</sup> R.C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God*, 111-112.

<sup>xi</sup> Sproul, 109-110.

<sup>xii</sup> Luther's prayer also comes from Sproul, 110-111.