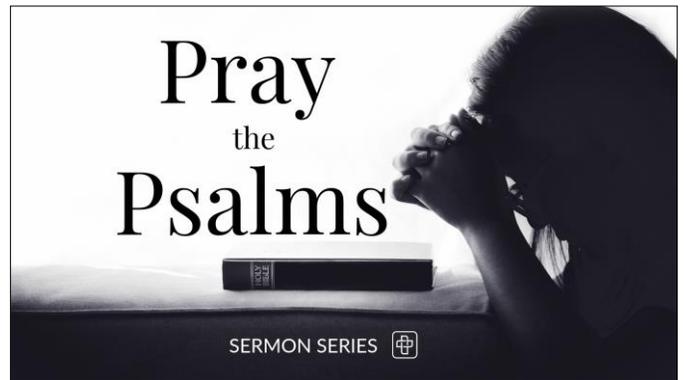


From Fear to Confidence in God

Psalm 56

Brandon Stern July 7, 2019



Let me express what a joy it has been to be on staff here as a pastoral assistant for the past six months, getting to know the quality men and women who serve you on a weekly basis. I've been taken by their character and their love for the Lord. It is truly a privilege to be at New Covenant Bible Church, opening God's Word with you this morning.

Our sermon passage is Psalm 56 which I will be reading from the CSB:

For the choir director: according to "A Silent Dove Far Away." A Miktam of David. When the Philistines seized him in Gath.

¹ *Be gracious to me, God, for a man is trampling me;
he fights and oppresses me all day long.*

² *My adversaries trample me all day,
for many arrogantly fight against me.*

³ *When I am afraid,
I will trust in you.*

⁴ *In God, whose word I praise,
in God I trust; I will not be afraid.
What can mere mortals do to me?*

⁵ *They twist my words all day long;
all their thoughts against me are evil.*

⁶ *They stir up strife, they lurk;
they watch my steps
while they wait to take my life.*

⁷ *Will they escape in spite of such sin?
God, bring down the nations in wrath.*

⁸ *You yourself have recorded my wanderings.
Put my tears in your bottle.
Are they not in your book?*

⁹ *Then my enemies will retreat on the day when I call.
This I know: God is for me.*

¹⁰ *In God, whose word I praise,
in the LORD, whose word I praise,
¹¹ in God I trust; I will not be afraid.
What can mere humans do to me?*

¹² *I am obligated by vows to you, God;
I will make my thank offerings to you.
¹³ For you rescued me from death,
even my feet from stumbling,
to walk before God in the light of life.*

This is God's Word to us this morning.

I want to share something about myself with you that may come back to bite me. I am a very skittish person; it does not take much to scare me. I had a college friend who loved to jump out and scare me. In our dorm room there was a little hallway that led to where the beds and desks were with two closets in that hallway. I would come back from class or lunch, innocently walking into my dorm room. Sure enough, my friend would pop out of one of those closet doors with this blood-curdling screech he had and it would scare me so badly. There were times I even fell over—which of course made it all the more fun for him.

Unfortunately, I haven't outgrown this and my wife and kids have learned this about me. Just a few weeks ago my seven-year-old daughter, Kaitlyn—my sweet little girl—popped out from around a corner in our house and startled me. She loved every minute of it. It really is sad that I can't even feel safe in my own home anymore.

Today I want to talk to you about fear, but I'm not interested in talking about the fear that comes from someone popping out and scaring you. Rather, I want to consider the big fears of life, the ones that lay heavy on our hearts and cast a dark shadow over our souls. You see, if we're honest with ourselves, there are a lot of good reasons to be afraid. Just think about it. We live in a world that is largely outside of our control and in which we are quite vulnerable. Unlike Superman, there's a whole lot more than kryptonite that can hurt us.

Take your health, for example. Although you can do some things to help your health, it is largely outside of your control. You cannot simply choose to not get cancer or to not let someone you love get cancer. We are incredibly vulnerable to the diseases that plague our world. Think about finances. Financial security isn't always as secure as we'd like it to be. We could lose our jobs. The stock market can crash. Medical bills or other expenses can pile up and wipe out our

savings account in no time. There are so many things outside of our control that financial stability is really more of an illusion than a reality.

Relationships are fairly uncontrollable as well. People we love can move away or die. Issues can come up that can cause separation and struggle. There is also the fear that comes from not wanting to fail. We can be haunted by questions like this: “Am I strong enough? Am I capable enough? Do I have what it takes to succeed?” Then there’s the fear of the unknown. What does the future hold for me?

See, as much as we’d like to think we are the masters of our fate, we’re not. We don’t know for sure what the next ten minutes will be like, let alone the next ten years. These and many other things are all good reasons for us to be afraid. The world is uncontrollable and we are so very vulnerable. So how do we handle our fears? I’m sure we all have our unique ways we handle our fears but let me just share with you a few common ways people handle fears.

For some of us, fear reveals itself in anger. This is because anger is a secondary emotion, not a primary emotion. Here’s what I mean by that. Anger is the emotion we show in response to the primary feeling of being hurt or frustrated or scared. For some of us, whether we realize it or not, our primary problem isn’t actually anger, but that we are afraid—and our anger is just our desperate attempt to try to exercise some sense of control over our lives. Anger is manipulative. We use it to try to gain power over or to control those around us.

Sadly, I found this to be true in my own life. After moving here in January, I began to notice that I was being quite irritable and short-tempered with my children. As I prayed about this, searched my heart and talked with others about it, I began to realize that my anger toward my children was due in large part to my feelings of insecurity and instability as a result of our move. My life felt out of control in some ways—moving from Texas to Chicago is a big transition. I think I was using my anger to feel in control of at least part of my life and trying to get my kids to do what I wanted them to do. I realized what was behind my anger was actually fear and uncertainty.

For others of us, however, our fears live at the forefront of our minds. We are always so very aware of our weaknesses and vulnerabilities. So we live life feeling like we’re on this never-ending battle just to keep fear at bay, always aware that at any moment the dam could break and fear could sweep in and overwhelm us. Still others of us try to escape fear by just refusing to face it. We try to drown out our fears with food or drink or entertainment—anything we can come up with to distract us from facing the terrifying reality of our own weakness and vulnerability.

So is there any hope for fearful people like you and me this morning? In ourselves, no—but thankfully the sermon doesn’t end here. In God, yes, there is. In God there is hope and help for

fearful people. You see, throughout the Bible God calls His people to not be afraid. This command is actually one of the most repeated commands in the entire Bible.

However, there's something different about this command. It's not like the other commands God gives, like do not murder or do not steal. This command is often followed by something else. Take Isaiah 41:10 for example. God says, "*Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be afraid, for I am your God. I will strengthen you; I will help you; I will hold on to you with my righteous right hand.*" That is so very different from just simply saying, "Fear not" and leaving it at that. God's promising His presence. He's promising to hold on to you. He's promising to be with you.

In Luke 12:32, Jesus says to His followers, "*Don't be afraid, little flock, because your Father delights to give you the kingdom.*" Did you catch what Jesus said here? After telling us to not be afraid, He calls us "little flock." Notice, He doesn't say, "Don't be afraid, mighty lions." No! Jesus knows better than that. We are not mighty lions. We are weak, vulnerable, needy little lambs. There's nothing about looking to ourselves that calms our fears. Our fears are only calmed, not when we look to our own strength, but when we look to God. Because God is with us, we don't need to fear, even though we are weak and vulnerable little lambs. It's His joy to give us the Kingdom; we don't need to be afraid.

So the picture we get throughout the Bible is God as a gracious heavenly Father saying to His scared children, "Don't worry. I'm here. I'm with you. I'm not going to leave you." So what does this look like in real life?

Well, that's the question Psalm 56 answers for us today. My goal for us this morning is to allow David—and ultimately Jesus, the One this Psalm points us toward—to guide us on this journey from fear to confidence in God. I want us to see how David handles his fears and specifically what truths about God he uses to help him when he is afraid. Hopefully, by the time we're done working our way through this Psalm, we can move by God's grace from just observing David to joining him on this journey from fear to confidence in God. Let's get started.

Recognize Your Weakness and Need For God's Help

David begins by crying out to God. Look at the beginning of verse one: "*Be gracious to me, God...*" Be gracious to me. Help me. This Psalm begins with this cry for grace which is so instructive for us. Notice that in his trouble, David is turning to God, not away from God. David is recognizing his weakness and his need for God's help. This is the first step on the journey from fear to confidence in God.

What about you this morning? When the stresses and fears of life come crashing down on you, who or what do you turn to? Do you humble yourself and cry out to God for grace? “Help me. Be gracious to me.” Or do you try to handle the craziness of your life in your own strength? Be real with yourself this morning. How are you handling your fears? Are you feeling worn out and exhausted from trying to carry this burden all alone? If so, I’d invite you to humble yourself and cry to God. Turn to God in your trouble.

However, instead of trying to face your fears, maybe you’ve chosen to run and hide from them. You think that if you can keep yourself busy enough or entertained enough, the problems will just go away. So you run to work or food or sex or entertainment—whatever you can find—in this desperate attempt to suppress your fears, not face them.

If that’s you this morning, I want to encourage you that God is inviting you to come out of hiding and face your fears. Not because you’re strong enough. You’re not. None of us are. But because your God is and to cry for His grace invites Him into your trouble. Look at how David does this in verses one and two. We begin with this cry: *“Be gracious to me, God, for a man is trampling on me. He fights and oppresses me all day long. My adversaries trample on me all day, for many arrogantly fight against me.”*

David’s not denying his problems or trying to run from them. He’s being honest about them. He’s feeling overwhelmed by the attacks of those around him, pouring out his heart to God. As you may have noticed in the superscript of this Psalm, David is writing about a time in his life when he felt as though he was between a rock and a hard place. You see, he had to leave his own country because King Saul was trying to kill him. Then in running from his own country, he’s ended up in his enemy’s country, the land of the Philistines who are trying to kill him. Everywhere David’s going, everywhere he’s looking, there are people out to get him, people out to hurt him, people out to kill him.

Now, of course our particular situations are different from David’s, but I think we can still empathize with his experience, can’t we? We know what it’s like to face uncertainty, to not know what tomorrow will hold for us. We know what it’s like to feel attacked by others, as if the entire world is against us. And we know the exhaustion that comes from feeling trampled on by the hardships of life, day after day after day.

So where do we turn in our times of trouble? Well, David is encouraging us to turn to God.

Speak The Word Of God To Yourself

Look at verses three and four, noticing this journey from fear to confidence in God. David says, *“When I am afraid.”* See how honest he’s being? Fear is a real thing. Let’s not deny that.

Let's own it. *"When I am afraid, I will trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?"*

Notice what's happening; this is so helpful for us. David is having a conversation with himself. You see, far too often we simply listen to ourselves instead of talking to ourselves. Here's what I mean by this. When troubles or fears come, our hearts are always responding to them in some way. As humans, we're always trying to make sense of what is happening to us. So we begin interpreting the circumstances and situations we find ourselves in—and there's nothing wrong with that. This is how God made us. It's how we make sense of the world.

However, although we were created to view the world through the lens of God's glory and goodness, now unfortunately as the result of the fall, sin's corruption of our hearts has made our default lens no longer God's glory and goodness. Instead, sin causes us to hate God's glory and doubt God's goodness. So left to ourselves, our hearts will not interpret the world around us correctly. Thus, we cannot simply listen to ourselves; we must speak the Word of God to ourselves.

In other words, we must let God's Word begin to shape and inform our understanding of the world around us. This is exactly what David does. He faces his fears with faith and confidence in God and His Word. Instead of allowing his problems to overwhelm him, he tells his heart to trust God. *"When I am afraid, I will trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?"*

You see, this is a conscious act to take his eyes off his troubles and fix them on his God. Notice what happens when he does this at the end of verse four. The enemies who seem so fierce and overwhelming to him are now seen for what they really are—simply flesh and blood, mere mortals. They are no match for his God.

This is a truth my mom held on to during the last year or so of her life. Like David, she had plenty of things to be afraid of. She had a very aggressive form of ovarian cancer which eventually took her life. However, by God's grace, she followed David along this journey from fear to confidence in God. My mom found this little saying that captured the truths of these verses that she would say over and over again as a way to encourage her faith. She would say, "Gaze at God; glance at circumstances." Gaze at God, then just briefly glance at your circumstances.

In committing to gaze at her God and just glance at her circumstances, she was saying, "In God I trust. I will not be afraid. What can cancer do to me?" Now, of course, this didn't cause the cancer to go away. What it did cause to go away was the fear, because Mom knew she wasn't alone. Her God was with her and He would never leave her or forsake her. Not even cancer and death could separate her from His love for her—and that makes all the difference in the world.

Bring Your Troubles to God

So what about you this morning? Are there certain fears that have captured your gaze? What do you wake up in the morning thinking about? What do you go to bed at night stressed about? Are you more aware of your problems than you are of your God? If so, I'd encourage you to follow David's example and speak the truth of God's Word to yourself. In your fear, turn to God in faith. Fix your gaze on Him and allow your vision of Him to grow and grow and grow, until it overshadows your fears. Then you can say, "In God I trust; I will not be afraid. What can [fill in the blank] do to me? What can sickness, job loss or loneliness do to me? My God is with me."

Beloved, this idea of gazing at God and glancing at circumstances isn't just a nice little Christian cliché. This is biblical faith in action. Hebrews 11:1 says, "*Now faith is the reality of what is hoped for, the proof of what is not seen.*" And 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 says, "*Therefore we do not give up. Even though our outer person is being destroyed, our inner person is being renewed day by day. For our momentary light affliction is producing for us an absolutely incomparable eternal weight of glory...*" Now hear this. "...*So we do not focus on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.*"

How are your eyes of faith this morning? Are you able to see the unseen? Can you see through and past your troubles and problems to your invisible God of remarkable wisdom and power and goodness, Who is working all things for your good and into Whose care you can entrust yourself? Or are you only able to see the visible problems and troubles of your life?

This isn't easy to do. This isn't a one-and-done thing. It takes a lot of prayer and effort and continual going back to God, asking for His grace and help, because the visible things of this world will continue to fight and clamor for our attention.

Look at Psalm 56:5-6. David says, "*They twist my words all day long; all their thoughts against me are evil. They stir up strife, they lurk, they watch my steps while they wait to take my life.*" I love the honesty here. This is the Christian life, isn't it? It's the back and forth battle between the things that are seen and the things that are not seen. It's the honest cry to God for help. You see, David is feeling hunted like he's only one step ahead of death. So he continues to bring his troubles to God—and this is what we are to do as well.

Focus on God's Attributes

In the rest of this Psalm, David is going to offer some more guidance to us along the journey from fear to confidence in God. He's going to do that by drawing our attention to some important aspects of God's character that we need to fix our gaze on. What attributes of God do we want to

focus on when we're fighting our fears? David is going to help us with this. Look at verse seven where he says, "*Will they escape in spite of such sin? God, bring down the nations in wrath.*"

Here David is fixing his eyes on God's justice and judgment of the wicked. Right now the wicked seem to be prospering, don't they? They're all around him. Everywhere he turns, there are people who are trying to kill him. Yet with eyes of faith, he appeals to God's future judgment. David is confident that in the end, all wrongs will be righted. So with eyes of faith, he entrusts himself to God's justice.

However, David believes that God is much more than simply a just Judge, as wonderful and comforting as that is. Our God is also a loving, caring Father. Look at verse eight. David says to his God, "*You yourself have recorded my wanderings. Put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your book?*" What a beautiful truth about God we see here. David is aware of God's intimate, personal care and concern for him. God is aware of his wanderings. He knows the troubled path David has walked. God knows the tears David has cried.

It's truths like these with which we must fight our fears. You see, one of the biggest lies that fear tries to convince us of is that we're all alone. So in our minds, our fears and troubles try to isolate us. Of course, this only adds to our sense of vulnerability and weakness, then soon we become overwhelmed. However, for the one who trusts in God, we need not fear, because God is with us and cares deeply for us. He knows the troubles you're facing and He's not indifferent to them. He's storing your tears in His bottle and backing them up in His book. He's not going to forget your pain. He's not going to stop caring about your struggles. You can trust Him.

This is so important in the journey from fear to confidence in God, so please hear me on this. You are not going to trust someone you don't think loves you or cares about you. Let me say this again. You are not going to trust someone you don't think loves you or cares about you. And this is where the battle for faith is most intense and this is where our enemy focuses his attention. You see, if he can undermine your confidence in God's love, he's won—because you won't trust someone you don't think loves you. This is what he did with Adam and Eve in the garden. He got them to doubt God's love and goodness. "Does God really know what's best for you?" If he can undermine this, he's got you.

Believe God is for You

So examine your hearts this morning. When troubles and fears attack, what do you actually believe about God? Get real with yourself. Have you come to believe that God is distant and uncaring? This is what our enemy is trying to get us to do. Another way of asking this is do you interpret God according to your circumstances. "Life is hard, therefore God must not love me." Or,

do you interpret your circumstances according to the truths of God's Word? "Yes, life is hard, but my God loves me, He's here with me, He will never leave me or forsake me—and He's working all things for my good" (Romans 8:26-30).

There's a huge difference between those two choices. The first option will leave you hopeless and afraid. The second option will give you courage and comfort to face the difficulties and trials of life with confidence in your God. Beloved, it is only when we believe our God is near to us in our troubles, that He cares deeply for us, that He loves you more than you can possibly imagine, that you'll be able to make this journey from fear to confidence in God.

Here we have even more than David had to encourage our faith, don't we? We have the giving of God's Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to not only observe our tears, but to join us in our sorrows and troubles. You see, as Jesus hung dying on the cross, God was proclaiming to the world that He is not indifferent to your pain. Rather, in Christ, He is willing to enter into your suffering in order to provide you rescue out of it.

This is the beauty and wonder of Christianity. We have a God Who has come to us. Jesus Christ lived, died and rose again to rescue us from everything that could hurt and destroy us. This is why the resurrection is so central to the Christian faith. As Christians, we believe in the resurrection of the dead. We believe that just as Christ was raised bodily, we too will one day be raised. So although the road may be marked by suffering and hardship today, your future is so safe and secure in Christ. As He was raised, one day you too will be raised.

This is why we can cry with David in verse nine, "*Then my enemies will retreat on the day when I call. This I know: God is for me.*" God is for me. With eyes of faith we look to the unseen future when Christ returns, so everything that is scary and wrong with the world will be turned back. Our bodies will be resurrected, never to die again; we will enter into life eternal with Christ in the new heavens and the new earth, free from sin, free from death and gloriously free from everything that is scary and wrong and can hurt us today.

This is what it means to say, "God is for me." Just stop and think about the beautiful, fear-destroying truth of that statement. You see, this is one of those little phrases you need to memorize so you can pull it out and use it any time your fears start to overwhelm you. If God is for you, then, as Paul says in Romans 8, who or what can be against you? Yes, this world is a scary place where people can attack you, trample on you, oppress you and even kill you. But your God is for you. Your troubles will not have the final say, because God is for you. Your pain will not have the final say, because God is for you. Death—even death itself—will not have the final say, because God is for you and is able to raise the dead.

So we cry out, in verses 10 and 11, “In God—in my God, Whose Word I praise, in God I trust. I will not be afraid. What can mere humans do to me?”

Oh, dear friend, if you are here today and you haven’t trusted in Jesus Christ to save you, I want to plead with you to do so. It is only through turning from your sin and trusting in Jesus Christ that you can be saved and know with confidence that God is for you. You see, outside of Jesus Christ, you are left alone and vulnerable to the fears and troubles of this life, and even more alarmingly, to the life to come. But in Jesus Christ, you have a Savior Who is bigger than your fears and Who is willing and able to deliver you out of them. So come this morning. Find refuge in Jesus Christ. He will not disappoint you.

Respond with Thanksgiving to God

In the final two verses, Psalm 56:12-13, David models for us the appropriate response to God being for us. He says, “*I am obligated by vows to you, God; I will make my thank offerings to you. For you rescued me from death, even my feet from stumbling, to walk before God in the light of life.*” Here the journey from fear to confidence in God ends with thanksgiving to God. But notice carefully what David says here. David does not say, “I will make my thank offerings to You so that You will rescue me from death.” That’s not gospel. That’s not good news.

He does say, “I will make my thank offerings to You, for You rescued me from death.” Beloved, our rescue has absolutely nothing to do with us and everything to do with God. It’s not the size of our faith, but the size of the Savior Whom our faith grasps hold of. This is what’s so beautiful and this is why thanksgiving is such an appropriate response to God’s rescue. All we can say is, “Thank You. Thank You for the cross. Thank You for the empty tomb. Thank You for Your love. Thank You for Your forgiveness. Thank You for Your grace. Thank You for being for me.”

So how thankful are you this morning? Are you more aware of your problems or of God’s gracious provisions? Regardless of the troubles and fears you may be facing today—and I know some of you are facing some significant ones—you still have much to be thankful for. Because soon this world, with all of its pain and suffering, will pass away and our salvation will be complete. But until that day, like David, we can look with eyes of faith to the future and proclaim, “You have rescued me from death.” This is how faith talks. “*You have rescued me from death, even my feet from stumbling, to walk before God in the light of life.*” You see, in Christ we have been rescued from death. One day soon, our faith will give way to sight, when our Savior returns, and we will walk before Him in the light of resurrection life.

This morning we began by looking at a lot of reasons to feel afraid, seeing that we are weak and vulnerable and that so much of life is outside our control. However, what I hope and pray, by

God's grace, we have seen throughout our journey through Psalm 56 is as David Powlison said, "Though there are good reasons to be afraid, there are better reasons not to be afraid." Our God is for us—what can mere humans do to us?

Let's pray.

O Father, we are so thankful for Your Word. We praise You for Your Word. We trust in You. Father, we ask that in our moments of unbelief, when we struggle to believe, when the struggles, hardships, fears and anxieties of this world press in on us and overwhelm us, when we realize that our gaze is fixed on those things and not You, we pray, Spirit of God, minister grace to us. Pull our eyes away from the troubles and concerns of this world and fix them on Jesus Christ, so that we may gaze into His glory and beauty, into His power and strength. As little children, help us find comfort and refuge in His presence and in His promise that He is for us and that nothing ultimately can separate us from His deep, deep love for us. Comfort us this morning in these truths. Father, as we prepare to celebrate the Lord's Supper, minister this grace to us. Fix our eyes on Jesus afresh, causing us to love Him and be thankful for Him. We pray in His name. Amen.

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All Scriptures quoted directly from the Christian Standard Bible unless otherwise noted.

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