

Praying Your Fear

[Psalms 56:1-13, 57:1](#)

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I am continuing in a series of Lenten sermons focused upon praying with the Psalms. Today we come to Psalm 56 and the call to pray your fear.

Late at night, when you lie in bed unable to sleep, the clock on the night table becomes your grand inquisitor. You toss and turn a bit. You try to count sheep or think happy thoughts. You try just keeping your eyes closed, and willing yourself to sleep. Eventually you roll over, open your eyes, and surrender to the illuminated numbers 2:07.....2:08....2:09. But it isn't the numbers that have your attention. No, you're thinking about something that has made you very anxious: a teenage child who is still not home, or a lump that you found that morning in the shower, or maybe a memo at the end of the workday announcing that your company was being sold. 2:10.....2:11.....2:12.

Maybe your anxieties are not so dramatic. Maybe the fear is exactly that there is no drama. You are tired of going to bed alone and being alone in life. Or you are tired of going to bed with this spouse who snores away the night unaware of your private desperation. Or you are tired of working for things that seem insignificant and for bosses who don't inspire you. Or you are just tired of a life that you can't seem to get right. 2:13.....2:14.....2:15. The clock is silently screaming that you are running out of time!

During the daylight hours, when you are allowed the narcotic of busy-ness, you can stay numb and avoid thinking about your fears. But late at night, when you are alone and undefended by distractions, the fears return like monsters who wait under the bed.

Sometimes you get so afraid of what may happen, or may not happen, that your eyes well up and a silent tear wanders down your face. The late night tears are the worst kind because they make us feel so lonely. No one sees them. No one is there to comfort or reassure us. No one except God, who sees clearly in the dark. In the words of the psalmist David, "O God, you have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle."

Isn't this one of the most amazing lines of all the Bible? The sacred God of heaven and earth, who is also so focused on the crises in Palestine, Macedonia, and Africa, is staying up nights with you counting how many times you toss and turn, saving your tears in a bottle. You are not alone. And that is the only way you will ever find rest from your fears.

David wrote this psalm when he was a young man having a very dark night. He had already been anointed king by Samuel. He had killed Goliath, the giant Philistine, and he had been extremely victorious in Israel's battles with the Philistines. But all of that made him only a great threat to Saul who was already king and wanted to keep the job. David's only comfort in these early struggles was his great friendship with Jonathan, the son of Saul. But things had gone from bad to worse, and now it was clear that David would have to flee Israel for his life. That meant he would never see Jonathan again.

David wandered about for a while, but was safe nowhere. Perhaps out of lonely desperation, or out of fearful craziness, he tries to find refuge in Gath. Not only was Gath a Philistine city, it was also the home town of Goliath. When the Philistines discovered that David was in town, they brought him before their king. Terrified and not knowing how else to save himself, David acted like a crazy man. He started pawing at the walls and allowed the drool to run down his beard. The king was so disgusted by this, that he didn't bother to kill David, but just threw him out of town.

It was that night that the 56th psalm was written. It continues to be the favorite prayer for anyone who stays awake at night wondering how life ever got so crazy.

If God keeps count of our tossings, and has already collected our tears in a bottle, then the reason we pray this psalm is not to inform God of our fears. No, apparently he is already aware of that. We pray in order to find relief from these fears. Most of us live with more anxiety than the human soul was built to contain. Like a cancer, anxiety is one of the things that does not get better with time. It grows and expands until it takes over our lives. The last thing you want to do is learn to cope with your fears. That's like trying to manage cancer. What you must do is get rid of the fear all together. And that is why we pray.

Prayer is the means by which we enter into the presence of God. There, lost in the wonder of sacred attention, your fears finally evaporate.

If it feels like your prayers are going nowhere, or they are just bouncing off the ceiling, that doesn't matter. All that means is that you must also pray about your doubts that your prayers are heard. There is plenty of room for doubt in our prayers, because doubt is not the opposite of faith. Doubt and faith live next door to each other and make great neighbors who talk to each other all the time. According to the Bible, the opposite of faith is not doubt, but fear.

This is why even Jesus, who was so understanding and tolerant of people's failings, was always hard on people who were afraid. Remember how he responded to the disciples who were afraid when their boat, and their lives, were being threatened by a terrible storm? He rebuked them. Or remember how he responded to the would-be follower who was afraid to leave home? Or how he responded to the steward who was afraid of losing his talent so he hid it in a hole? Jesus responded to him by casting him into outer darkness (where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth). We don't really find the reason for Jesus' consistent intolerance of fear until we get to the first epistle of John when we read that, "Perfect love casts out fear." As Jesus sees it, the amount of fear in our lives is the measure of how little of his perfect love we have received.

Have you ever talked to a young couple who are head over heels in love? If you ask them about their plans, most of the time they aren't well thought out. They say things like, "Well, we'll just live on love." Don't you miss that fearlessness? And that is not even perfect love. There is no way to receive perfect love other than entering into prayer. There we commune with this Sacred Lover who fills our hearts with so much love that there is simply no room left for fear.

If you do not pray your fears, if you try instead to manage them, you will soon find that it is the fears that are managing you. Like the young David, you'll discover the fears have taken their place behind the driver's seat of your life. You will be amazed to find yourself in the company of people you don't like. "What am I doing working for the Philistines?" You will also be amazed to find that you are doing the crazy things you don't want to do. "Why am I working all these hours? Why have I given up control of my own life?" Why? Because you did not treat the fear with prayer, and the cancer took over. I'm not saying that there are no reasons to be alarmed. I'm saying that if your heart is filled with the love of God those alarms will be a call to action and never an excuse to lose control of your life.

After David was forced to flee Gath, he found refuge in the cave of Adullam. There, protected in the shadow of this safe cave, he wrote the next psalm. Psalm 57 begins with him praying, Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me, for in you my soul takes refuge; In the shadow of your wings I will take refuge, until the destroying storms pass by."

As many of you know, my family spends some of our summer vacation on a lake in Canada. Every year we are greeted by magnificent eagles who also summer there. They always build their nests in the highest trees of the various islands on this lake. More than once when a summer rain storm has blown across the lake, we have grabbed binoculars to watch one of the eagles' nests from our cabin. As the skies grow dark and the wind begins to blow the tall trees back and forth, the parent eagles spread their massive wings across the whole nest, protecting the young eaglets who stay safely under the wings until the destroying storm passes.

There is nothing in the Bible that promises if you just live right you can avoid the storms. To the contrary, it reminds us that the rain falls upon the just and the unjust. But the Bible does promise that you can survive the storm if you just stay under the wings of God who nurtures you in his love.

You don't have to do the crazy thing! You don't have to run out into every destroying storm that comes along. Imagine if one of those little eaglets became overwhelmed with fear during the storm and said, "I'm not staying up in this tree during a thunder storm. I'm pushing my way out of these wings and flying out of here." How long would it last out in the destroying storms? But that never happens. Why? Because eaglets know where they belong in a storm. How? Because they are made in the image of eagles. You are made in the image of God. Why? How? Because he loves you. When you are afraid, it is only because you have forgotten that.

Have you ever looked at one of those crazy mirrors in the carnival fun house? The ones that distort your image and make you look so weird. That is the image the storms give you. They make you think you are smaller than you are. If you are going to survive the storms you have to return to the wings of God and be reminded of who you really are. You are the beloved of God. You are the cherished sons and daughters of the heavenly Father.

So if you want a true reflection of who you really are, prayerfully look at your joint heir, Jesus Christ. Everything else about your life is just pretend -- and it will only make you afraid.

You, O God are our refuge and strength, an ever present help in times of trouble. Therefore we will not fear. Amen.