

Preserve Me, O God!

Psalm 16

“Preserve me, O God!” Maybe that’s what you feel like saying today. Maybe all the changes going on within you or around you have left you bewildered. Maybe your life seems to be spiraling out of control.

David knew what that feels like. His whole life was constantly swinging violently between extremes. As Jesse’s youngest son, he started off as a shepherd. When he killed Goliath with a sling and a stone, he became a favorite of King Saul. When he became too successful as a warrior, Saul became jealous of him, and tried to kill him. After Saul’s death, David became king. Later in his life, his own son Absalom tried to kill him and seize the throne. David knew a lot more about radical change than he did about stability.

So, in the face of all of his problems and challenges, where did David look for safety? The first line of the psalm tells us – David asks God to preserve him, to guard him and to protect him, just as David had watched over his father Jesse’s sheep. David knew that God is the only true author of our security.

We know that, don’t we? Of course, we often limit the sort of security we expect from God, thinking about it only in terms of the next world. That’s not wrong, of course. Verses 10 and 11 clearly illustrate that David expected his blessings to continue after his death. And in Jesus Christ, the Holy One of God, we know that David’s hopes were fulfilled. God did not leave Jesus in the grave, but raised Him up on the third day, destroying the power of death for all His people.

Moreover, Jesus has ascended into the presence of the Father. And as we read in our responsive reading this morning, He has promised to prepare a place for all those who trust in Him. And He has promised to take us to be with Him, to a place where as David says in verse 11 there is fullness of joy and there are pleasures forever more, not least because all his people will be in the presence of Christ Himself.

Yes, being safe with Jesus in the life to come will undoubtedly be a source of great joy. And knowing about the promises of Jesus is a great reason for the hope that David mentions in verse 9. But in that same verse, David also says that his heart is glad now. David speaks of rejoicing now. How can we get that sort of gladness today, where we are, in the midst of all our problems, when we have so little firm footing on which to stand?

Look back at verse 1 – the reason that David can be so hopeful and so joyful no matter what may have been going on in his life is because of his trust in God. If we would have the same sort of glad security, we must therefore have the same sort of trust.

So, what does that sort of trust look like? Most obviously, it means not worshipping other gods. In David's day worshipping idols was often as cruel and bloody as verse 4 says, sometimes even involving human sacrifice. It goes without saying that people who do these sorts of things can expect to find little hope or joy or security either in this life or in the life to come.

But idolatry isn't always as obvious as bowing down before a carved statue or engaging in a weird ritual. After all, a god is anything in which we place our trust, anything to which we look for answers, whatever is the focus of our lives. Whatever we expect to be the source of our joy and our security, whatever is the object of our hope – chances are that thing or that person is what we are really worshipping. And if in fact we are placing our trust in anyone or in anything besides the One True God, we cannot expect any joy or gladness in this life.

So, what would it look like for the real God, for David's God to be our God as well? What would it look like for Him to be truly the focus of our lives? In verse 5, David says that God is the portion of his inheritance. The Hebrew word David uses points to a tract of land that someone might inherit, and in an agricultural society, land meant security and the ability to make a livelihood. Thus, David is saying that he relies on God the way a farmer relies on his land.

What would that look like for those of us who aren't farmers or ranchers? We might say that we should rely on God the way a worker relies on his paycheck, or the way a retiree relies on his pension. If God is our portion, that means we are trusting God to provide whatever we need. That's radical trust. That's complete trust. And that is the sort of trust in God that leads us to joy.

And it is because David understands that God is the portion of his inheritance that in verse six he can go on to say that his heritage, his inheritance is goodly, a word which in the Hebrew means pleasing or beautiful. The good news is that we are not called to trust in a God Who is cruel and malicious, but to trust in a God Who is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. If trusting God is our duty, our God is also supremely worthy of our trust.

David makes a similar point in another of his psalms, number 37: "Delight yourself also in the Lord, and He shall give you the desires of your heart." If we are truly trusting in God, if God is truly the focus of our lives, how can we fail to delight in Him? And if we delight in Him, we can be

certain that He will give Himself to us, that we might find the fullness of joy in His presence. Having our hearts set on God and God alone is one of the keys to contentment and joy in this life.

But as anyone who has lived the Christian life for any amount of time will tell you, just placing our trust in God doesn't make all our problems disappear. It certainly didn't for David. In fact, sometimes drawing closer to God brings us more problems, not fewer. That's why David also says in verse 5 that God is his cup.

What does that mean? Jesus used the same language when He asked His disciples if they were willing to share His cup – he was asking if they were willing to go through the same thing that was going to happen to Him. For them, identifying with Jesus meant that they would suffer in a similar manner to His own suffering.

And sometimes sharing Jesus' cup means the same thing for us. If God is our cup, that means we are on His team, for good or ill. That's the same thing we say when we partake in the Lord's Supper – it is a public acknowledgment that we are part of the Body of Christ, and that He is part of us. And if we are connected to Christ in such an intimate way, we should not be surprised if the unbelieving world treats us in much the same way that it treated Him.

But how can that sort of closeness to God bring us joy and security if at the same time identifying with Christ sets us at odds with the non-believing world? One reason is the certainty that closeness to Christ brings us. In verse 7 we learn that God gives us counsel. What could be more comforting in our confusing world, where so many truth claims contradict each other, than to know where we can find absolute truth, truth on which we can always rely? Therefore, even if the non-believing world stands in opposition to us, we can still rejoice and take comfort in knowing that God has revealed His perfect will to us in His Word.

But if God is our only reliable source of truth, how does the rest of verse 7 make sense? David says that his "reins" instruct him – and the Hebrew word here refers to what we would call our guts.

But how can we really trust our instincts? All of us have made serious mistakes even while we were certain that we were doing the right thing. And we know all too well that many of our urges are in no way in agreement with God's Word. So how can the second half of verse 7 possibly agree with the first half? How can we listen to the counsel of the Lord and also follow our inner inclinations? How could David have done this?

Well, we've already seen that David truly trusted God. We've seen that God was the true focus of his life, and that no matter what happened, David was determined to drink God's cup, to

be on God's side. We've already seen that David blessed God for giving him counsel. To someone like that, whenever God's Word told him to do something, he would have the same desire, wouldn't he? To someone that devoted to God, there would be very little distance between God's will and his own will. Someone that close to God could indeed trust his gut instincts most of the time.

How do we get to that point in our own lives? Look at verse 8. David says that God is continually before him. This reinforces what we have learned in verse 7 – if David is earnestly seeking God's counsel, of course He would continually seek God's face in prayer. Of course he would continually meditate on God's Word. In the same way, if we are continually filling our minds with the words of God, even as the Holy Spirit fills our hearts with trust in God, we will have little room left for our worries and our anxieties, no matter how serious our problems may be. Closeness to God, not change in our circumstances, is the key to joyful living.

But verse 8 also has another meaning, one that would perhaps have been more obvious to David. If God is always before him, in front of him, that means that David is following God, going wherever God is leading him. Just as David the shepherd led his sheep to the next source of water and food, so David made a practice not just of listening to God's Word but of putting it into practice, following God's law of love with each step that he took.

And no matter how hostile the unbelieving world may be towards us, sticking close to God is the safest place to be. In verse 8, David uses a military image, saying that God would be on his right hand. In those days, you held your shield in your left hand, so your right side was vulnerable – unless you had a buddy standing close enough so that his own shield would protect you. For David, and for all those who trust in the Lord, God is on our right side, guarding us even in the midst of our fiercest battles. As long as we stay close to him, we will not be moved.

But there is another source of safety, and thus a source of joy for us, no matter how severe our trials may be. Look at verse 3 – David delights himself in the saints, those other people who share his passion for God. The word saint in Hebrew means someone who is holy, someone who is set apart for God, someone who is on God's side. David thus rejoices not only in his God but in his godly allies.

But notice that David also calls these people excellent. In the Hebrew, this word can also be translated as "mighty." It just makes sense for a soldier to rejoice in the strength and bravery of his comrades. And it makes sense for us Christians to be equally glad for the powerful example that so many of our brothers and sisters have set for us – examples of self-sacrifice and service, of

purity and passion. It gives us confidence when we see other people struggling to lead the Christian life and it brings us joy and security to know that such genuine followers of Christ are on our team, encouraging us, praying with and for us, challenging us to more consistent, joyful trust in God.

Do we seek security in these stressful times? Do we long for gladness and joy? Then let us draw near to God's Word, to God's people, to God Himself. If He is our portion and our cup, if He is our counselor and our defender, the nearer we are to Him, no matter what happens, the greater will be our joy.