

From Desperation to Faith  
I Samuel 21:10-15; Psalm 56

Desperation – what else could have caused David to travel to Gath, in the land of the Philistines? Of course, it's easy to understand why he wouldn't have felt safe anywhere in the land of Israel: when the king is out to get you, there really isn't anywhere to hide. But does it really make sense to flee from one set of enemies into the arms of those who hate you just as much? Does it really make sense to jump out of the frying pan only to land in the fire?

The writer of I Samuel doesn't provide us with many details, but we could make a few educated guesses as to why David might try such a dangerous stunt. It could be that, as Saul was chasing him, David was caught on the west side of the Judean hills and that going to Gath was his only option. Or it could be that he thought he could disguise himself, perhaps passing himself off as an Israelite soldier who had deserted.

But of course, David was far too well known for him to hide even in Gath. He was so popular in Israel that all the girls made up a song about his military exploits – “Saul has slain his thousands and David his ten thousands.” And this song was such a hit that even the Philistines knew the words, even though it celebrated their own defeat at David's hands. No, David was too big a celebrity to remain incognito, even in the land of the Philistines. It's no wonder he was so easily discovered, and then captured.

Now, David did try to deliver himself from the Philistines through another, equally desperate gamble – he decided to act like a madman, drooling into his beard, and scrawling incomprehensible graffiti on the city gates.

Now, there's a brilliant idea. I mean, it's not like Ancient Near Eastern people were known for the mercy they showed to their enemies, whether they were crazy or sane. And given that David was such a well-known, even a celebrated killer of Philistines, why wouldn't he expect some of the Philistines to try to take vengeance for their kinsfolk that David had slain? After all, Goliath himself was from Gath. What if David met one of the giant's cousins in a dark alley? Would acting crazy help him then? No, there's no denying that David was in big, big trouble, with nowhere to run, nowhere to hide from his troubles.

Have you ever felt like that? Have you ever been in a place where there were no good solutions, and when everything you did just seemed to make matters worse?

Well, we don't have to wonder how David felt because, as he often did in the midst of difficult situations, he wrote a song about it. Now, this wasn't an escapist song. David wasn't just trying to whistle a happy tune or put on a happy face. No, David is as honest as any good country songwriter would be, even if he uses some rather vivid poetic imagery to describe his problems.

In verse one he says he is so oppressed by his enemies that he feels like he is being swallowed up or trampled upon. In Psalm 56 verses 5 and 6 he complains that his enemies distort his words and plot against him, laying in wait for him to make a misstep so they can pounce. He's in a fight for his life, and he never gets a break: in verse 2 and verse 5 he says that his enemies are at his heels all day long.

So, what does David do in the face of such overwhelming opposition? Well, we've already seen that the best plan he could come up with was to act crazy and hope against hope that his otherwise bloodthirsty enemies would have mercy on him. But in verse 1 of Psalm 56, David has a much better idea – to appeal instead to the God Who truly is merciful. And instead of trying to seek vengeance on his enemies, which he probably couldn't accomplish anyway, in verse 7 David asks God to cast them down in anger.

And no matter what sort of enemies we face, these are good strategies for us, too. For isn't God a lot more capable of defending us than we are able to take care of ourselves? David sums up this sort of confidence in God in the last part of verse 4: what can flesh, what can mere man do to us if God Himself has chosen to have mercy on us and to avenge us? No, even in the face of our worst problems, it only makes sense to turn away from our own feeble efforts and cast ourselves instead on the mercy and the justice of God.

And this sort of trust in God is the best antidote to fear, as both verses 3 and 4 tell us: even though we have good reasons to be afraid, we will trust in Him. And when we have put our trust in God, we will have no reason to fear anyone or anything, even when we are the midst of our most serious, most intractable difficulties.

Ah, but how can we know we can trust God? How can we know He is so merciful and so just? How can we be sure that He really will save us, just as He saved David from the hands of the Philistines?

Well, look what lies right between David's two statements of trust in God in verses 3 and 4: He will put his trust in God because he praises God's word. This thought is so important that David repeats it twice in verses 10 and 11: "In God, whose word I praise, in the Lord, whose word I praise, in God I have put my trust."

In other words, the trust that David has in God – a trust that is strong enough to drive out even the most reasonable of his fears in the face of his biggest problems – his trust in God is founded upon the truths he has learned about God from the Word of God.

And the second half of the psalm is in large measure a rehearsal of some of these Biblical truths. In verse 8 David says that God tells his wanderings: this means that God has kept count of all the places David has gone, even into the land of the Philistines, watching over him and being with him all the time. And isn't this the same thing that Paul told us in our responsive reading? He insists that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. He tells us that no matter what tribulation, no matter what problems we may face – not even the sort of persecution or threats that David faced – shall separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. No matter where we are or what we are going through, God is with us all the time because He loves us.

And this love of God is the second truth on which David builds his confidence in God. He describes God's compassion in beautiful poetic language: he says that God has saved all of his tears in a bottle and that God has written all the reasons for his sorrows down in a book. David thus places his trust in God not only because He knows that God is with him but because he knows God cares so much about him.

And David's certainty that God is with him all the time and his confidence that God loves him so much are both based on God's close relationship with him. In verse 9, David simply says,

“My enemies will turn back because God is for me.” And Paul says the same thing in Romans 8: “If God is for us, who is against us?” Yes, if God went so far as to adopt us as His children by giving His own Son up for all of us, how can we doubt His love? How can we doubt He will take care of everything we need?

For ultimately it is the living Word of God, the Person and Work of Jesus Christ Who is the firmest foundation for everything we know about God, isn't He? We know that God knows about all our wanderings because Jesus came to share in all our troubles and sorrows. We know that God cares about us so deeply because Jesus wept with us and suffered for us. We know that God is for us because Jesus was willing to die so that all who trust in Him might be saved. And we know all these things about Jesus to be true because we find them all recorded for us in the Word of God, the Holy Scriptures.

So, even in the midst of our problems, even when we feel overwhelmed, we can draw strength and confidence from the Word of God. But what do we do then? Because of our trust in God, how should our lives be different? Well, the first of David's resolutions is an obvious one: because he trusts in God he will not be afraid. And that certainly makes sense, for as we focus on God's power and God's love, it will be hard to remain paralyzed even in the face of the worst of our problems. Faith in God is truly the opposite of fear.

But our response to God's love and care should go beyond simply changing the way we feel, and David makes this clear in the conclusion of his psalm. Notice that in verse 12, he refers to the vows he has taken to God. Also in verse 12, David says that he will render praises to God, and in the Hebrew this refers to offerings of thanksgiving. The last lines of the psalm explain David's remembrance of all God has done for him, and his intention to walk before God, living a life that is always conscious of God's presence.

So, putting all this together, if we are really trusting in God, how will our actions be different? What will truly faithful lives look like? Our focus will no longer be on ourselves, but on God, praising Him for Who He is, and giving Him thanks for all He has done for us. Our trust in Him will be expressed through our obedience, as we seek to put into practice the truths we find in His Word, especially when we don't feel like it, especially when those things don't make sense to us. But above all, a life of trust in God is a life lived in constant relationship with God, consistently walking with Him even when troubles assail us, even when our way is not certain.

And it should be no surprise that the basis for such an obedient life, the foundation for such a thankful life, for such a faithful life, for a life lived in the presence of God is God Himself. After all, God is the One Who is merciful and just, which inspires our confidence. God is the One Whose Word reveals Himself to us, giving us the fuel for our faith. God is the One Who enters into relationship with us and promises to help us – otherwise why would David have bothered praying to Him in his time of greatest need?

So, instead of giving in to our fears, reasonable though they may be, and instead of focusing on all our problems, serious though they may be, let's turn our attention to these and so many more gracious promises that we find in God's Word. Let's join our voices with David and Paul in praise to God: In God, whose word I praise, in the Lord whose word I praise, In God I have put my trust, I shall not be afraid. What can mere man, what can tribulation or distress or

persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword do to me? If God is for us, who can be against us?