

Whom Then Shall I Fear?

Psalm 27

“Be of good courage.” Well, I suppose we could all use a little more courage right now. After all, we have an invisible enemy that stalks our streets and we’ve all been told to hide from this coronavirus. But as early as next week, it looks like some of the legal restrictions on our movements may start to ease up. So while we look forward to more of our businesses reopening, much uncertainty will still remain.

For that will mean that more of the responsibility for our own health and the health of our friends will fall on our own shoulders. We’ll have to make our own decisions about social distancing, while we are still unable to tell who’s sick and who’s not. So, once we are allowed to go out again, should we? If so, where will it be safe to go? Whom will it be safe to visit? What precautions will we need to take? Will we have to wear gloves and facemasks long enough for them to become de rigueur, as “hats, heels and hose” were for ladies in the 1950’s?

Just as the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 changed air travel forever, it’s hard to see how we’ll ever be able to get back to the way things were in 2019. Our culture, our world has truly turned a page, and we have no idea what the next chapter of our story may hold.

So, how can we be of good courage? How can our hearts be strengthened for the unknown challenges that will face us in the days to come? In this psalm, David gives us a clue. It is God, he says, Who will strengthen our hearts. It is God Who is the strength of our lives, no matter what uncertainties or troubles we may face.

And David knew a lot about troubles, didn’t he? Before he became king, he alternated between fighting the Philistines and trying to keep King Saul, his own father-in-law, from killing him. But even after he ascended the throne of Israel, his conflicts didn’t cease. He continued to fight the Philistines and the Moabites and the Edomites and the Ammonites and lots of other people. And later in his life, his own son Absalom staged a coup against him and tried to seize power. David had to flee from his own capital city while his family was torn apart by civil war.

But even in the midst of all these conflicts and wars, even though, as verse 3 says, hosts of hostile soldiers were encamped around him, waiting to fight against him, David says that he was not afraid. Instead, he says that his trust continued to be in the Lord.

But how could David be so confident in God when he continued to face such obvious, such urgent problems? His faith was based in the first place on his experience of God’s grace in the past. Verse 2 reminds us that throughout David’s life, he could always look back and recall how God had protected him from his enemies.

For example, we’ve all heard the story of how he faced the giant Goliath when he was a young man. But even during that battle, David could think back on how God had protected him at an earlier time, allowing him to overcome the wild animals that had threatened the sheep that had been under his care. And the longer David lived, the more reasons he had to praise God for delivering him in times of war and plague and famine. Because David could remember how God had defeated his enemies in the past, he could be confident that God would continue to protect him in the future.

And can’t we all do the same thing? By this point in our lives, can’t we all look back and give countless examples of how God has provided for us, giving us health and strength, family and friends,

peace and prosperity? Can't we recall lots of prayers God has answered – prayers for our loved ones, prayers for healing, for safety, for provision? Even in the midst of this coronavirus craziness, we can give thanks that no one in our country has gone without a ventilator who has needed one, that we still have food in our grocery stores and drugs in our pharmacies – Doug even had some toilet paper at the M&M this week! Perhaps most of all, we can thank God for those who are recovering from this virus and thus for the hope that this crisis will be over some day.

But our faith, like David's faith, isn't just built on giving thanks for the things that God has done for us in the past. It is also founded upon a real relationship with God Himself in the present. That's why in verse 4 David tells us that the dearest desire of his heart is not for peace or power or prosperity, but simply to come into the house of the Lord, into the presence of God Himself. David's greatest longing is simply to meditate on God's beauty and learn from His wisdom.

And just being in God's presence made David feel so safe. Look at the images he piles up in verse 5: he says that God will hide him in his pavilion, his tent, so that David's enemies wouldn't be able to find him. He says that God will set him up high on a rock out of their reach. But David doesn't want to be with God just so that he will be safe. He wants to be in God's presence because of Who God is – and personal safety just happens to be a part of the package.

And no matter what our priorities may be in life – work, family, friends – that same goal really should outshine them all: to be close to God Himself. As David has told us, God is more beautiful than anything else we can desire. God is more full of knowledge and wisdom than any other source of truth. And so, if closeness to God is the chief goal of our lives of course we will be safe in the shadow of His wings. If we stick close to our Good Shepherd, of course we will be able to find our way even in the darkest, most confusing parts of our journey. It is because the Lord is our light and our salvation that we will have no need to fear.

And it would be wonderful to close with such an uplifting thought. We would like to join David at this point in singing praises to the Lord, just as he does in verse 6. But that's not the conclusion of the psalm. No, it goes on to verse 7, where we see David plunging back once more into the depths of his problems. Once again he cries out to God to save him. Once again He begs God to deliver him from all the problems that threaten to engulf him. In verse 9, he continues to plead with God to hear his prayers, to stay close to him, to help him.

And isn't that the way real life works? Even after the governor says we can go back to work, that virus isn't just going to vanish. And in fact most of our problems aren't instantly resolved the way they are at the end of a two-hour movie or in the final episode of a reality TV show. Even after we achieve our greatest successes, life goes on, and so do so many of our questions and our problems. And the longer we live, the less control we seem to have, at least over the things that matter most.

What do I do if my wife stops loving me? How can I help my child with an incurable disease, or with a mental illness? How will I go on when a loved one dies? How will I support my family if my health fails or if I get laid off? How can I have the strength to keep on keeping on, to endure the challenges that face me every day?

For David, the answer to all these kinds of questions is not so much a what as a Who. In verse 9, he simply states – "You have been my help. Don't leave me." And in verse 10, he continues to look confidently to God even when those closest to him have abandoned him: "When my father and my

mother forsake me, then the Lord will take me up.” Once again, we see that it is God’s presence, it is God Himself Who is our greatest blessing.

And isn’t that just what God promised us in our responsive reading from Isaiah 43? “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you” – and the children of Israel fleeing from Pharaoh’s army with the waters of the Red Sea as a wall on their right and left could testify to that. “When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned” – couldn’t Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego give a big “Amen” to that? “Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and gather you from the west” – and didn’t God do just that when He brought His people back to the Promised Land from their exile in Babylon? And hasn’t God done that to an even greater extent as people from every tribe and tongue and nation, people from all over the world have placed their trust in Jesus, becoming part of the family of faith? Hasn’t God been with us in so many ways throughout the years?

But how do we know God will continue to be with us? In the face of all our real fears and all our real questions and all our real problems in this real world, how do we know that God will never leave us? Sure, God may have helped us out in the past, but how do we know He will deliver us from our current problems? Sure, God may be the only true source of light and salvation, but what’s the next step I need to take in the darkness now? How do I know that God will save me now?

Well, take another look at Psalm 27, verse 12: David asks that God would not deliver him over to the will of his enemies, those who tell lies about him, those who act cruelly and violently toward him. But remember: there was another One Who prayed a very similar prayer, and under very similar circumstances. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayer, “Father, let this cup of suffering pass from Me.” But instead of being delivered, Jesus chose to drink that cup, the cup of God’s righteous anger and judgment, the cup that all our sins deserved. He drank that bitter cup down to its very bottom.

No, Jesus chose not to refute those who bore false witness against Him. He embraced instead the violent cruelty, the crown of thorns, the beatings, the nails, the spear, the cold of the tomb. And why? So that David, so that we might be assured of the comfort of His presence, so that we might know we are welcome in the house of the Lord, so that we might be set high upon a rock away from the torments of even our worst enemies – even sin and death itself.

That’s how we know our God is so beautiful. That’s how we know our God is the strength of our life. That’s how we know we will see the goodness of the Lord in so many ways, not just when Jesus comes someday to take us to be with Him, but here, in the land of the living, in the midst of all our questions, in the midst of all our problems.

For when we look at God’s amazing plan of salvation, how can we doubt His wisdom? When we look at the cross, how can we doubt God’s love for us? When we look at the empty tomb, how can we doubt God’s power to save us?

So, as we all stand at the door of an uncertain future, let us be of good courage. Let’s wait on God to help us, no matter how difficult, no matter how confusing our lives may be right now. For of this we can be sure: the God Whose plan of salvation included the sacrifice of His own Son is willing and able to strengthen our hearts, no matter what we may have to face. So be of good courage. Wait, I say, on the Lord.