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## OVERCOMING FEAR

Psalm 27

by

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June 13, 1993

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Psalms: Lesson 8

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My thirty-sixth birthday is forever etched in my memory. On that day I did the funeral service for Scott, a 39-year-old man in our church, who lost a long battle with cancer. He left behind a wife and two children. Two-and-a-half years later, just after Thanksgiving, I buried Scott's wife, Glo, who lost her battle with cancer.

When you're closely involved with people about your own age who die, it has a way of making you face your own mortality. But the Lord hammered the lesson home, so I wouldn't miss it. A few months after burying Scott, I felt an unusual pain in my back. I looked in the mirror and was shocked to see a large lump. I found that the large lump had a more firm, smaller lump in the center of it. Since Scott's cancer had started in his back, my immediate thought was, "I've got the same thing that killed Scott! I'm going to die!"

We all know intellectually that we're going to die someday. But it's another thing when it jumps out in front of you. It was a Saturday night and I had to prepare my heart to preach the next morning. I prostrated myself before the Lord and sought Him until my heart was calm. The hardest thing was entrusting my kids to the Lord. I had to keep seeking Him for peace until I could get in to see a specialist who told me that the large lump was most likely a strained back muscle and the small lump was a cyst which he thought was benign.

About a year later, the small lump was bothering me, so I decided to have it removed. They did a biopsy as a routine matter. A week later I called the doctor's office to see if I could drop by and have the nurse remove the stitches or if I needed to make an appointment with the doctor. The receptionist put me on hold to

check. She came back on the line and said, "The doctor wants to see to you."

Instantly, I was engulfed with fear as I thought, "The only reason he needs to talk with me is if the lump was malignant! I've got cancer!" I couldn't concentrate on my work. So I put Psalm 27 on a card and walked around Lake Gregory, reading the psalm over and over as I called out to the Lord. About half-way around the lake, I regained God's peace. When I went to the doctor, I discovered that the cyst was benign. He just wanted to chat with me and see how I was doing!

I share that experience to let you know that applying Psalm 27 to my personal fears is not theoretical! David shows us how to overcome fear, whether it be the fear of death, the fear of speaking in public (which surveys show to be greater than the fear of death!), fear of losing your children (my greatest fear), fear of the future, or whatever. He says:

To overcome fear, seek the Lord!

You may be inclined to scoff, "How simplistic! That doesn't apply to my fears." But this isn't ivory-tower-theology, unrelated to life. David knew what he was talking about! He had evildoers coming at him to devour his flesh (27:2). They were breathing out violence (27:12). Nothing would have made them happier than to see David's head removed from his body. He had an entire army encamped against him. The soldiers had probably been told, "Whoever comes back with David's head gets an instant promotion to general and a fat reward!" And yet David could say, "My heart will not fear; though war arise against me, in spite of this I am confident" (27:3)! The man knows his subject! He can teach us about overcoming fear.

Though "seeking the Lord" may sound easy or simplistic, I warn you that David isn't dispensing a formula that's easy or simple to apply. God isn't a good-luck charm which you can pull out when you're in a jam and rub the right way. David is talking about a total

way of life that is focused on God and which clings to God with naked faith in desperately overwhelming situations where there is no other source of help.

The structure of the psalm is in line with the subject matter. Liberal critics have asserted without any textual basis that the psalm was originally two psalms, because the tone of verses 1-6 differs from verses 7-12. But the difference can easily be explained by the reality of life-threatening fear. In 27:1-3, David asserts his confidence in the Lord alone in the face of these violent enemies. He follows this (27:4-6) by affirming his deliberate focus on the Lord and His presence, even as he is surrounded by enemies.

But anyone who has struggled with this sort of fear knows that it doesn't go away and stay away the first time you tell it to get lost! You can bar the door, but fear climbs in the window! So David, who was confident in verse 3, finds himself anxious again in verse 7. So he redirects his focus to the Lord (27:7-12) and then reaffirms his faith in the Lord and His goodness by repeatedly reminding himself to wait for the Lord (27:13-14). So David shows us practically how to seek the Lord to overcome all our fears (see Ps. 34:4).

1. Seek the Lord in a time of fear by affirming your faith in Him alone (27:1-3).

To appreciate what David is saying here, we need to remember that he was a mighty warrior. As a teenager he had gone one-on-one with the fearful giant, Goliath, and won. Before that he had defended his father's flock by killing a bear and a lion. If Psalm 27 was written before he became king, while Saul was pursuing him, David had with him a tough bunch of fighting men. If the psalm stems from Absalom's rebellion, David had with him an army of tough, seasoned warriors that had defeated all the enemy nations around Israel. It would have been easy for David to boast in his own strength or in the might of his army. But instead, he affirms that his defense is the Lord alone (27:1)!

Because of the fall, we all have the proud tendency to trust in ourselves. We see this in the widespread notion that we can get to heaven by our own good works. Sure, if we're really humble, we'll admit that we need a little boost from the Lord: "God helps those who help themselves." But we take pride in our own goodness and in our own ability to commend ourselves to God.

But the Bible strips us of any avenue of congratulating ourselves: "For by grace [unmerited favor] you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast" (Eph. 2:8-9). Everything, even our faith, comes from God. He alone is our salvation. We dare not trust in our goodness, our efforts, or even in our faith.

If the Lord has saved us apart from our own efforts, then He will defend us until the moment it is His time for us to leave this earth. As Paul put it (Rom. 8:30-31), whom the Lord "predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified. What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us?"

So in a time of fear, make sure that the Lord is for you, not against you. If you are still in your sins (and the pride of thinking that you are good enough to save yourself is a great sin!), then the Lord is opposed to you (James 4:6). But if, renouncing trust in yourself, you have put your trust in Christ alone as Savior, then you can say, "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the defense of my life; whom shall I dread?" (27:1-2). If you fear God, then it is God alone you need to fear, because He is on your side! So in a time of fear, seek the Lord by affirming your faith in Him alone.

2. Seek the Lord in a time of fear by focusing on the Lord

Himself (27:4-6).

If we were writing this psalm, we would have written verse 4 differently: "One thing I have asked from the Lord, that I shall seek: GET ME OUT OF HERE!" We'd be crying out for deliverance! Of course, David is praying for deliverance. But--and this is crucial--David realizes that the only deliverance that matters comes from drawing near to the presence of God (the tabernacle [or temple] was the place where God's presence was known) and being caught up with God's beauty.

So David isn't just praying for an escape from his troubles, but for an ongoing experience of God Himself, both in this time of trouble and forever thereafter. He wants his fear to drive him to a deeper experience of the Lord Himself. Beholding God's beauty points to being emotionally caught up with the very being of God. Matthew Henry [Revell, 3:332] explains, "The harmony of all [God's] attributes is the beauty of his nature." Most of us have had an aesthetic experience in nature, where we've been emotionally caught up with the beauty of God's creation. But what David wanted was to be caught up with the beauty of God's person. He wanted to be captivated by the Lord.

Have you ever been captivated by the beauty of the Lord? When I read the life or works of Jonathan Edwards, the great New England preacher, I am usually challenged. Comparing my experience in the Lord with his often makes me feel like I'm not even a Christian. But after I recover, I realize that I've got a lot more growing to do! He describes his own conversion experience in terms of delighting in the beauty of the Lord:

The first instance that I remember of that sort of inward, sweet delight in God and divine things that I have lived much in since, was on reading those words [1 Tim. 1:17], "Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the

only wise God, be honour and glory for ever and ever, Amen." As I read the words, there came into my soul, and was as it were diffused through it, a sense of the glory of the Divine Being; a new sense, quite different from any thing I ever experienced before. Never any words of scripture seemed to me as these words did. I thought with myself, how excellent a Being that was, and how happy I should be, if I might enjoy that God, and be rapt up in him in heaven, and be as it were swallowed up in him for ever! ...

From about that time, I began to have a new kind of apprehensions and ideas of Christ, and the work of redemption, and the glorious way of salvation by him. An inward, sweet sense of these things, at times, came into my heart; and my soul was led away in pleasant views and contemplations of them. And my mind was greatly engaged to spend my time in reading and meditating on Christ, on the beauty and excellency of his person, and the lovely way of salvation by free grace in him.... The sense I had of divine things, would often of a sudden kindle up, as it were, a sweet burning in my heart; an ardor of soul, that I know not how to express. (Cited in *Jonathan Edwards*, by Iain H. Murray [Banner of Truth], pp. 35, 36.)

He goes on (p. 37) to say how from this time onward, he had "vehement longings of soul after God and Christ."

My mind was greatly fixed on divine things; almost perpetually in the contemplation of them. I spent most of my time in thinking of divine things, year after year; often walking alone in the woods, and solitary places, for meditation, soliloquy, and prayer, and converse with God; and it was always my manner, at such times to sing forth my contemplations. I was almost constantly in ejaculatory prayer, wherever I was. Prayer seemed to be natural to me, as the breath by which the inward

burnings of my heart had vent. The delights which I now felt in those things of religion, were of an exceeding different kind from those before mentioned, that I had when a boy; and what I then had no more notion of than one born blind has of pleasant and beautiful colours. They were of a more inward, pure, soul-animating and refreshing nature. Those former delights never reached the heart; and did not arise from any sight of the divine excellency of the things of God; or any taste of the soul-satisfying and life-giving good there is in them.

There's a man caught up with the beauty of God! It's interesting that in the same section, Edwards mentions how that before this conversion experience, he was terrified of thunderstorms. But afterwards, he rejoiced in them and was entertained by them, because he could see the majestic voice of God in them, which led him to "sweet contemplations of my great and glorious God." Beholding the beauty of God alleviated Edwards' fears!

Perhaps not many of us will be as caught up with the Lord as Edwards or David were. But the point still stands, that we will overcome our fears to the extent that we focus on the Lord Himself and are captivated with His glorious beauty. Make that the one thing you seek: To dwell in the Lord's presence and to behold His beauty all the days of your life.

But this psalm wasn't written by a man out of touch with the real world. David had a hostile army encamped against him. As I said, when that kind of mortal fear comes calling, it doesn't go away the first time you slam the door in its face. So David's early confidence turns to anxiety and we find him redirecting his focus to the Lord in prayer (27:7-12) and then reaffirming his faith in the Lord (27:13-14). We must do the same.

3. When fear returns, seek the Lord by redirecting your focus to the Lord in heartfelt prayer (27:7-12).

Note briefly the following principles of prayer:

A. Prayer flows out of awareness of our need (27:7).

The fact is, we are totally dependent on the Lord. But the fact also is, we are often ignorant of the extent of our need. Hence, we do not pray as we ought. So the Lord graciously brings us into situations where we are overwhelmed and we realize, "If God doesn't come through, I'm doomed!" Precisely! But that's true every day, not just in a crisis.

Do you ever get tired of going through the motions of giving thanks for your food before you eat? It can become a meaningless ritual. But does it ever occur to you that if the Lord doesn't provide, you would starve? We are dependent on the Lord for our next breath. Colossians 1:17 says that in Him all things hold together. If He let go, we would all disintegrate! And yet we're so self-sufficient that we think we can handle everything by ourselves, except the really big crises. So we don't pray.

The well-known Bible teacher, G. Campbell Morgan once had a woman come up to him after he spoke and ask, "Dr. Morgan, should we pray about everything in our lives, or just about the big things?" In his formal, British manner Dr. Morgan stiffened up and said, "Madam, can you think of *anything* in your life that is big to God?" Prayer flows when we see our total need for God in everything.

B. Prayer is based on God's mercy (27:7).

"Be gracious to me and answer me." David didn't say, "Answer me because I'm such a good person; I deserve it." In fact, in verse 9 David gives a tacit confession of sin when he asks the Lord not to turn away in anger. If

God should count iniquities, who could stand? (Ps. 130:3). The only way to approach God is through His abundant grace and mercy as shown to us in the Lord Jesus Christ.

- C. Prayer should expect answers (27:7b).

"Answer me." Sounds obvious! But how often we pray but don't expect God to answer, especially when the answer is delayed for years. We should be surprised when the Lord doesn't answer, not when He does!

- D. Prayer is a response to God (27:8).

The sense of the Hebrew of verse 8 is ambiguous, but the idea is that God invited David to seek His face and David responded by doing it. When we see God in all His splendor and beauty and when we recognize our own sinfulness, we might be hesitant to draw near to Him. But He graciously invites us to draw near with confidence to His throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and may find grace to help in time of need (Heb. 4:16).

- E. Prayer should be a seeking after God Himself, not just after answers (27:8-9).

While we should look for and expect answers to our requests, prayer involves more than just bringing our shopping list to God. Prayer ought to be a seeking after God Himself, a seeking of His face. David didn't just want an answer; he wanted God.

- F. Prayer is always a resource (27:10).

I believe the sense here is hypothetical. David's parents had not abandoned him, but he is saying that even if that most basic of earthly relationships should fail, he still has

access to God who will take him in and defend him. Nothing can cut us off from prayer as our link with our loving Father.

- G. Prayer is linked with our obedience, especially in a time of trial (27:11-12).

David was aware that it's easy to get out of line when you're under attack. It's easy to react to wrongs against you with retaliation or revenge. And so he humbly asks the Lord to teach him His way and to lead him in a level path because of his foes. He had a teachable heart and he was willing to do what the Lord showed him. We can't honestly pray to God for deliverance from a fearful situation if we aren't willing to learn and walk in His ways. God brings us into trials to teach us to obey Him on a deeper level than we would have known apart from the trial. In a trial, ask God to teach you His way.

Thus when David's fears returned after his initial confidence, he redirected his focus to the Lord in heartfelt prayer. Then he reaffirmed his faith:

- 4. Continue seeking the Lord by continually reaffirming your faith in Him (27:13-14).

The Hebrew here is elliptical to produce an abrupt effect: "Unless I had believed to see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living ... (I would have been doomed)!" Calvin gives the sense, "Had I not relied on the promise of God, and been assuredly persuaded that he would safely preserve me, and had I not continued firm in this persuasion, I had utterly perished: There was no other remedy."

The Hebrew verbs of verse 14 are singular, as if David is talking to himself. In a time when God seems silent and the crisis is severe, you've got to talk to yourself and reaffirm the goodness of God (which you're tempted to doubt) and your

own need to keep waiting on Him. This isn't just passive stoicism; it's an active mental attitude that says, "I believe that God is and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him" (Heb. 11:6). As often as you veer off those thoughts, you bring your thinking back on course and keep it there, just like keeping a boat on a compass course in a storm.

### Conclusion

As I said at the outset, we don't have here a simple formula for overcoming fear. What we have is a way of life: Seeking the Lord is the way to overcome fear. If God gave us a formula, we'd use it and then forget God until the next crisis. But seeking the Lord is a daily matter.

Years ago a number of people in the jungles of Central Africa responded to the gospel. Since they had no church building where they could gather for prayer, they cleared a central spot in the jungle for that purpose. Soon individual trails from many different directions converged there as believers walked through the grass to that place of meeting with God. Whenever a Christian seemed to be losing his first love, the others would admonish him by saying, "Brother, the grass is growing on your path." What about *your* path? Are you seeking the Lord and His face each day? That is God's way to overcome all your fears.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How would you counsel a fearful person?
2. If psychology helps a person overcome fear, is it wrong to use it?
3. How can a person who lacks faith get it?
4. How can we know, in a given situation, whether fear is healthy or not?

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