

Psalm 56

“Why Does God Bring Crisis?”

July 3, 2022

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Pentecost Season

If you follow Jesus for any length of time, you’ll discover that God will again and again bring crisis into your life.

It might be the loss of a job. It might be relational conflict with a long time friend. It might be deep challenges in your marriage. It might be cancer or illness or some other serious health concern.

But the reality is that God will do these kinds of things.

What is God up to when he brings crisis into our lives? Why does he do it?

David knew what it meant to be suddenly thrust into a crisis by God.

His life, it appeared, was on an understandable trajectory.

He had been secretly anointed by Samuel to one day become the king of Israel. And, as training for that throne, he was called for a time, into service to Saul, the wicked king that David knew he would one day replace.

This was not an easy path that God had called him, but it some way, it made sense. It was a way of learning humility and patience and faith, preparing him to be a faithful king for God’s people when he would be eventually elevated to the throne.

And so David served Saul. First he served him with his harp, soothing Saul’s mood when he was afflicted by an evil spirit.

Then, David served Saul on the battlefield, fighting Goliath in his place and winning the victory for Israel.

Then, David served Saul by commanding his armies and marrying his daughter and entering into a covenant with his son Jonathan.

None of this was easy, mind you. Sometimes Saul would have fits of rage or accuse David of misbehaving, or set seemingly impossible tasks for him to perform.

But, on some level, it made sense. Saul was a wicked king, and David was learning to be a good king by humbly and obediently serving him. And so David continued on this path for some years.

But then things changed. Saul turned against David in a decisive way, and began to conspire to murder him. David had to leave his wife and his home and his role in the king's service to save his life.

And that's how David found himself, as we read in our first Old Testament reading this morning, in the clutches of Achish the king of the Philistines.

Fleeing Saul, David had gone to the Philistines, hoping that they would offer him safe refuge given their hatred of Saul (and indeed, later in David's wanderings, he would find safe harbor with the Philistines).

But Achish had not responded as David had hoped. His life was just as much in danger by the hands of the Philistines as it had been in the hands of Saul.

And so David, in a moment of Holy Spirit inspired craftiness, began to act like a mad man.

He scratched at the walls of the city gate with his bear hands, tearing his nails and bloodying his fingers. He intentionally spewed saliva from his mouth until it drenched his beard.

This must have been the lowest point in David's life thus far.

It was a moment of utter public humiliation and internal desperation. He was no longer a successful warrior, a favored son-in-law of the king. He was just a man with torn nails, bloody fingers, and spittle running down his beard.

And the important thing to see is that God did this. God introduced this crisis into David's life, God brought him to this point of humiliation and desperation.

And Psalm 56, in many ways, is David working out the answer to this question - why has God brought this crisis into my life?

Listen now to God's word from Psalm 56, which is printed on the back of your order of worship if you'd like to read along.

Psalm 56

*To the choirmaster: according to The Dove on Far-off Terebinths.
A Miktam of David, when the Philistines seized him in Gath.*

*1 Be gracious to me, O God, for man tramples on me;
all day long an attacker oppresses me;
2 my enemies trample on me all day long,
for many attack me proudly.*

- 3 *When I am afraid,
I put my trust in you.*
- 4 *In God, whose word I praise,
in God I trust; I shall not be afraid.
What can flesh do to me?*
- 5 *All day long they injure my cause;
all their thoughts are against me for evil.*
- 6 *They stir up strife, they lurk;
they watch my steps,
as they have waited for my life.*
- 7 *For their crime will they escape?
In wrath cast down the peoples, O God!*
- 8 *You have kept count of my tossings;
put my tears in your bottle.
Are they not in your book?*
- 9 *Then my enemies will turn back
in the day when I call.
This I know, that God is for me.*
- 10 *In God, whose word I praise,
in the LORD, whose word I praise,*
- 11 *in God I trust; I shall not be afraid.
What can man do to me?*
- 12 *I must perform my vows to you, O God;
I will render thank offerings to you.*
- 13 *For you have delivered my soul from death,
yes, my feet from falling,
that I may walk before God
in the light of life.*

Thus far the reading of God's word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in heaven loves you.

Blessed Lord, who caused all the holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear this portion of your word, and to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest these words, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

As I've said, in many ways, Psalm 56 is David working through the crisis in his life that God introduced - his experience of extreme desperation and vulnerability - and trying to understand what God is doing — what he is up to in all these things.

And I love how David begins Psalm 56.

"Be gracious to me, O God," he says. I mean that sums it up, right there.

God's graciousness, God's kindness, God's mercy - friend, that is what we need, more than anything else in our lives. We need, above all things, the kindness of God.

In the rest of verse 1 and verse 2, David explains why, in this moment, he needs the graciousness of God - because Saul has arisen against him, and now Achish, king of the Philistines has joined in the persecution.

"My enemies trample on me all day long," David says.

Then, in verses 3-4, we see David working out the first reason why God has brought this crisis into his life.

God has done it as a means by which to move David from a place of fear to a place of confidence.

Let me show you what I mean.

In verse 3, David says, speaking to God: *“When I am afraid, I put my trust in you.”*

Interestingly, David assumes that there will be times in his life when he will be afraid.

And the same is true for us, beloved. Fear is not something we are immune from. There is much in our world to be afraid of - death, sickness, the plans of evil men, the inherent vulnerability of our lives and the lives of those whom we love.

But what if, beloved, those experiences of fear are an opportunity that God has intentionally given you to place your trust in him in a new and deeper way?

There is nothing like a real experience of fear, of terror, of confusion, to reveal what it is that we actually trust in to deliver us.

“When I am afraid,” David says to God, *“I put my trust in you.”*

And he invites us to pray that prayer with him.

Beloved, this is a prayer that is short enough to teach our children.

What if we taught our children, in their moments of fear or terror - not to try to manage that fear, not to dismiss it, but to use it as a moment to place themselves into God’s hands in a deeper way, to say to God: *“When I am afraid, I put my trust in you.”*

In verse 4, David shows us what will take place, over time, as we place our trust in God when we are afraid. Over time, by the work of the Spirit, God has promised to move us from a place of fear to a place of confidence.

David writes: *4 In God, whose word I praise,
in God I trust; I shall not be afraid.
What can flesh do to me?*

In verse 3, David says, "When I am afraid." Now, in verse 4, because he is learning to put his trust in God in the midst of his fear, he says: "I shall not be afraid."

And why? Because he trusts in God, because he knows that God is with him, and if God is with them, then what can flesh, what can any created them do to him?

Beloved, I know that some of you are plagued by fear. Fear and anxiety are deeply familiar — you've lived with those things for so long that they just seem normal.

Your mind is consumed at times with compulsive thoughts. At times your body seems ready to shut down because of your fear and anxiety.

But, beloved, what I want you to see is that God desires to move you from a place of overwhelming fear to a place of profound confidence in him.

To a place where you say in the midst of whatever situation seems fearful or overwhelming: *"In God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can flesh do to me?"*

And the means by which God's Spirit will move us from a place of fear to a place of confidence is by learning to pray even as this psalm instructs us to pray - to say directly to God again and again and again every time we are afraid or anxious or overwhelmed: *"When I am afraid, I put my trust in you."*

That's a prayer to pray in the middle of the night when we wake up with our mind racing.

That's a prayer to pray before we have to have a difficult conversation we'd rather avoid.

That's a prayer to pray when we look at our bank account or our housing situation or our declining physical health and can't figure out how it's all going to work out: *"When I am afraid, I put my trust in you."*

In verses 5-7, David lays out before God the wickedness and evil of his enemies, asking him to judge not only them, but to judge all the world: *"In wrath, cast down the peoples, O God!"* David says.

Then, in verse 8, David illuminates a second reason why God brings crisis into our lives. We might summarize this reason in this way: In verse 8, David shows us that God brings crisis into our lives that he might know us in our tears.

Listen to what David writes in verse 8. This is a remarkable verse that shows us, I believe what it means for God to know us and for us to experience real intimacy with God in the midst of our grief and sorrow.

David says to God: *You have kept count of my tossings;
put my tears in your bottle.
Are they not in your book?*

You have kept count of my tossings, David says. Think of what that means.

Beloved, David is saying that in every experience of anxiety, fear, and grief, even in your most private and intimate experiences of those things, God has seen you.

He has recorded those moments in his memory. They are not lost to him.

God has kept count of your tossings, your moments of overwhelming emotion. God remembers them. He is with you, he knows you in the midst of those most private places of your heart.

And then, David says these remarkable words to God: *“Put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your book?”*

Beloved, what David is asking of God here is that God would treasure the very tears that he has shed in his moments of sorrow or anxiety or confusion, that God would not lose them, that God would gather them in a bottle and keep them safe.

And you must know that this is exactly what God does with your tears. This, beloved, is the way in which the Living God knows you. By his Spirit, he is always with you. Through his Son, he is united to you.

And all the tears you have shed are gathered up by him.

They are precious to him, for the tears you shed reveal the innermost places of your heart. And God knows you in those places. He sees you, even in your most intimate moments. None of those sorrows or fears or griefs are lost to him.

And beloved, he makes you this promise as well. Your tears will not last forever. God treasures them up because, one day, he will wipe them away.

Has he not promised:

God will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

Indeed, beloved, he has made this promise, and he will keep it. Your tears, precious in his sight, will not last forever.

So, we've said that one reason God brings crisis into our lives is give us opportunities to trust him in a new way that we might, over time, move from fear to confidence.

And we've said also that God brings crisis into our lives that we might be known by him in deeper and deeper ways even in our tears.

And now, in verses 12-13, David explains to us the third reason for which he reveals that God brings crisis into our lives - so that we might learn to thank him.

He writes:

*12 I must perform my vows to you, O God;
I will render thank offerings to you.
13 For you have delivered my soul from death,
yes, my feet from falling,
that I may walk before God
in the light of life.*

Beloved, at least one of the reasons God brings crisis into your lives is to teach you what it means to give him thanks. This is the way it has always been.

God's people experience a shaking, a time of suffering, a crisis, and then, after deliverance, they render thanks to Him.

Think of Noah and his family offering sacrifices after the flood waters receded. Think of Moses and Miriam leading Israel in praise after the defeat of Egypt at the Red Sea. Thank of the exiles returning to Jerusalem from Babylon, their mouths full of gratitude.

The dynamic we see in this psalm - which begins with David's request for God to be gracious in the midst of his trouble, and ends with him offering him thanksgiving for his deliverance - this is the constant dynamic of the Christian life.

It happens in big ways, in response to huge crises in our corporate or individual lives, but it happens in small ways, too.

Every Lord's Day, beloved, is an opportunity to enter into this pattern of thanksgiving that David models for us here. Every Lord's Day is an opportunity to reflect back on the last week, to remember God's faithfulness, and to render him thanksgiving for all that he has done.

Indeed, this is one of the reasons why assembling with the saints each Lord's Day is such an essential part of the Christian life.

It's not just because we need the means of grace - word, Sacrament and prayer to bind us to Jesus and keep us steadfast. It's not just because of the encouragement that we offer to and receive other members of the body.

No, we also come to Lord's Day worship because we *owe* God something. We owe him our thanksgiving, our gratitude, and we offer that to him together every Sunday when we gather to worship him together.

As David puts it: *I must perform my vows to you, O God;
I will render thank offerings to you.*

This movement that we see in this psalm from crisis *to* deliverance, from petition *to* thanksgiving is the fundamental movement of the Christian life.

This movement happens in big ways. It happens in small ways. And it happens again and again and again.

Because for those who are beloved of God, every crisis is like a kind of death that is followed by a resurrection.

This is true in a hundred different ways in our lives, in symbolic deaths both small and large, and it is true in a fundamental way when death itself will be swallowed up on the last day by the resurrection of those who God loves.

Because it is in this way, through crisis and deliverance, that God binds us to himself and makes us more and more like his beloved Son, Jesus.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.