

Westgate Church

*Walking with God in the Meantime:
The Christian Life through the Lens of the Psalms*

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A Shelter in the Day of Trouble

Psalm 27

For those just joining us this morning, our series this summer is entitled, “Walking with God in the Meantime: The Christian Life through the Lens of the Psalms.” The Psalms are a collection of songs and hymns in the Old Testament of the Bible that give us a portrait of what it looks and feels like to try to walk with God in a world where human rebellion against God still has a significant foothold (what the Bible calls sin).

And the Psalms have a way of penetrating the heart in how they capture the complexities and often painful realities of the Christian life, and at the same time move us closer to the God who can do something about it. The Psalms, if we listen to them, don’t let us stay where we are—they don’t leave us the way they found us, because God doesn’t leave us that way. They are designed not merely to empathize with us and comfort us in our troubles, but to change us—to lift our hearts and our perspectives out of the pit, and onto our loving Heavenly Father, who has made himself known in the face of his Son, Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Psalm 27 is no exception. It gives raw testimony to trouble—particularly, interpersonal trouble, the relational trouble that we find in this world. And yet it lifts our eyes above that trouble to the beauty and goodness of the God who is with us in the midst of it. Let’s pray together, and then we’ll look at this psalm.

When life falls apart, how do you respond? When a conversation with your friend or spouse goes south and erupts into a volcanic argument, what does your mind dwell on for the next few days? When your colleague or your parent or your child, even a fellow Christian, wrongly accuses you, what do you immediately seek? When it feels like you are finding opposition and trouble at every turn of life, whom are you eager to turn to? In other words, when life falls apart, what is the *one thing* that consumes you most?

Psalm 27 is very honest about the reality of trouble in our lives, in particular trouble with other people. Most of the difficulties in this psalm are very personal, or rather, inter-personal. In v. 2, the psalmist describes “evildoers who assail me,” or “evil men advancing against me to devour my flesh.” That’s a pretty graphic picture—chasing someone down in order to feed on them. We’re not talking about cannibalism here though; we’re talking about relational cannibalism: trying to satisfy our own desires and needs and dreams by destroying someone else. It can take all kinds of shapes: family feuds, battling spouses, strained relationships among friends or colleagues, bitter rivalries at school. And these desires drive us to do ungodly things to one another, such as what v. 12 describes: “false witnesses” who “breathe out violence.” That’s not someone mistakenly believing or saying something that hurts us; that is someone intentionally spreading lies and deceit about us for the purpose of harming us (usually, to their own advantage). It’s like the picture of war in v. 3: as a tyrant besieges a city, capturing it by

violence in order to exploit its people and resources for the glory of the tyrant's kingdom, so there are people at times who surround us, besieging our lives, our reputations, our stuff, breaking out in war against us in order to make much of themselves at our expense. We become a target. The word used in v. 11, translated *enemies* or *oppressors*, gives the flavor of someone watching our every move, looking for the opportunity to take a shot. We're in their sights, everywhere we go.

Troubles? Yeah, we have a few. And some of us can name them, though we may use more colorful names in private when we think about them and describe them.

But the question Psalm 27 is interested in is *how you respond to trouble?* What consumes you when it happens? Where do you focus all your attention, all your emotion, all your energy? If you're human and you live in this fallen world, chances are you focus it all on the problem itself (or *himself* or *herself* or *themselves*), for fear that if we don't master the problem, it will master us. We see the problem, and we're afraid. We're afraid that it's going to win, and we're going to lose. We're afraid of what will happen to our reputation, or our resources. We're afraid that the other person will get away with it; that they won't feel the pain they've caused us. We're afraid others will believe them, and think less of us. Maybe we're afraid there might be some truth to their accusation, and we can't bear the thought of the shame and the guilt and the repercussions that would come with the truth.

But look at the posture the psalmist takes and encourages us to take: not a posture of fear, but of faith. Verse 1: "The LORD is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear?" God brings light into the darkness of our trouble, and salvation or rescue from the distress. Everything we fear, God is able to deliver us out of and protect us from: "The LORD is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid?" He is a refuge, a fortress. People may surround us like an army besieging a city (v. 3), but "my heart will not fear . . . even then, I will be confident," "I will trust"—have faith that God is not only able to deal with our trouble, but that his affection for his people and commitment to them is such that he wants to deal with it and promises to do so as we trust him. Verses 1-3 are a confession of faith that God is our shelter in the day of trouble.

So what does it look like to treat God as our shelter, our refuge amid the trouble? Especially amid interpersonal conflict? What does it look like to respond to these situations in faith rather than fear, and what difference does it make? That's the focus of vv. 4-12, which show us a pattern of faith when trouble comes. And according to v. 4, it all comes down to one thing: seeking the presence of God. "One thing I ask of the LORD, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple." The resounding message of this psalm is that when trouble comes, only *one thing* should consume our attention, affection, and hope: God—God himself, who is able to shelter us in his presence and deal with our trouble according to his sovereignty and goodness, which are revealed in the cross of Jesus.

One thing I seek: the presence of the Lord. We see this same trajectory in v. 8: "You have said, 'Seek my face.' My heart says to you, 'Your face, LORD, do I seek.'" But what does it mean to seek God's face? Are we talking eyes, ears, nose, here? To seek God's face in the Old Testament is an expression that means to seek God's presence. To draw near to God in worship

and for relationship. For ancient Israel, God's presence had a tangible expression in the temple, and so to seek his presence was to (v. 4) "dwell in the house of the Lord." For Christians today, there is no physical temple. Jesus, when he walked on this earth, became the temple—the place of God's special presence among his people. And after he ascended back to heaven and God poured out his Spirit on the Church at Pentecost, we, the people of God in Christ, became his temple.

All of that to say, that drawing near to God today is not so much about *where you go*, but *what you do*. It is to seek him *in* worship and *for* relationship. Sometimes we do that individually, sometimes we gather together. It means, like any relationship, that we want to hear from him, so we listen to his voice in his Word, the Scriptures. It means that we want to talk to him, in prayer, pouring out our concerns and questions and desires and requests, telling him how amazing he is in praise—declaring who he is and what he's done. Sometimes we put those prayers to music in songs. It means taking the time to reflect quietly on what he's been teaching us lately about who he is, who we are in him, and what he's doing in and through our lives. To seek God's face is to seek not just what God gives us, or what we can get out of him, but to seek God himself. And this is the one thing that ought to consume us, the desire to draw near to him and enjoy our relationship with him, which is all the more important when the relationships around us are falling apart.

But how important is it really? What difference does it make in whether or not we draw near to God, seeking his face, especially in the face of trouble? The rest of vv. 4-12 unfold five reasons that seeking God's presence amid our interpersonal conflicts is the one thing that we should desire. Five reasons.

First, we seek God's presence in order to meditate on his beauty, rather than on the ugliness of our situation. Middle of v. 4: I want to "dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord, and to seek him in his temple." When someone opposes us or speaks ill or takes advantage of us, or when we find ourselves in a heated disagreement, we're going to be thinking about something for the next couple of days. What is it? Am I consumed with what will happen to my reputation because of this conflict, such that I run around to the different power brokers trying to win them to my side? Am I playing the conversation over and over in my head, thinking about what I should have said or could have said, or how I'll stick to them next time? In my anger, am I murdering them in my heart, doing secretly to them what they've done publically to me? Am I overwhelmed by my own failures and the sins that have been exposed, such that I'm terrified of the implications, convinced that there's no hope of ever repairing what has been damaged? What is it that we allow ourselves to meditate on, the dwell on, to think about over and over and over. Is it the ugliness of the situation? Or the beauty of our God?

One of the reasons we seek God and his presence amid these kinds of trials is that our eyes might be fixed on him and our hearts filled with him and his beauty. His delightfulness. Everything about him that is wonderful and desirable and that makes knowing him such a sweet privilege—which is everything about him. But more specifically, to meditate and think about who God is and what he's done for us. Think about the cross. Think about how every ugly and despicable thing I've done against God or people was taken up by Jesus in my place, such that God's holy

anger against sin was poured out on him instead of me. That is beautiful. That's the extent to which God is willing to go to love us and rescue us. Think about the beauty of the resurrection. How God is able to take something that is dead and make it alive again. And if he can do that with our souls and bodies, he can do that with our relationships. He is the God of the impossible. Think of his love. Think of his grace—how, because of Christ, he gives us something wonderful even though we deserve something terrible. Meditate on the beauty of God—let that fill your mind and affection and attention, not the ugliness of the situation.

Second, we seek God in order to find shelter in his presence, rather than in the shanties this world affords. Verse 5: “For in the day of trouble he will keep me safe in his dwelling; he will hide me in the shelter of his tabernacle and set me high upon a rock.” Where do we run to for protection when our relationships are torn and people are out to get us? Or think of it this way: What is our drug of choice to medicate the pain? Do we pop a pill, hit the gym, head to Coldstone, log on to the porn site? Is our medication a person? People who will surround us and tell us what we want to hear? Who will help us plot the character assassination of our opponent?

Now, the problem is not looking to other people. The question is what are we looking to them *for*? Are we, in our weakness and frustration, looking to them to help us think about this situation through the lens of the gospel, reminding us that sin really is sinful, and grace really is sufficient? Are we looking to them to help us take our refuge in God? That's what the body of Christ does. Or are we medicating ourselves with slander and gossip and substituting God's wisdom and comfort with the earthly and often ungodly wisdom and comfort of people who don't actually love us enough to point us to the cross?

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble” (Psa. 46:1). And drawing near to him, finding refuge in who he is and what he's done for us is a better protection from our opponents than anything this world can concoct. So we seek him to find shelter in his presence.

Third, we seek God's presence in order to trust God to be our vindication, rather than taking matters into our own hands (which usually only makes matters worse). Verse 6: “Then my head will be exalted above the enemies who surround me; at his tabernacle will I sacrifice with shouts of joy; I will sing and make music to the LORD.” It's in the presence of God and who he is and what he's done for us in Christ that our name is cleared, that we are vindicated from our opponents, and not by taking matters into our own hands.

We want results. We want to make sure that we win, that our name is in fact cleared, and that those who have offended us pay. We want them to feel the same pain they've caused us to feel. We may not go so far as to think about it as revenge, but we're afraid that if something along those lines doesn't happen, then they're going to get away with it without consequences. Maybe even someone else will get hurt. We want vindication, *but* we're not willing to trust the gospel of Jesus to supply it. We don't really believe that the grace of God and the power of the Spirit are able to expose the deepest sin and soften the hardest hearts. And so we take action. We rally our troops. Maybe we start looking for a lawyer. In our fear, we turn back to our own strength and choose a course of manipulation and coercion in order to clear our name.

And yet the way of the cross is so very different. Nobody knows the pain of being sinned against relationally like Jesus. Misunderstood, betrayed, abandoned, falsely accused, wrongfully murdered. And yet, as 1 Peter tells us, “When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly” (1 Pet. 2:23). It was enough for Jesus to trust his Father to vindicate him—to judge justly. Is it enough for us to follow Jesus’ pattern and to let the blood of Christ be our vindication, even if it means to suffer as he suffered?

Now this doesn’t mean that we simply lay back and make it easier for people to sin against us. The gospel does not treat sin as less sinful; rather, it recognizes its utter sinfulness, and approaches it with an sufficient solution—not our revenge, but the gospel’s grace. There are other parts of Scripture that give us instruction on how to respond when we’ve been sinned against and the offending party is unable or unwilling to see it: Matthew 18; Galatians 6. There is a proper way to do this, and it’s important to do. But the desire is always reconciliation, restoration. It’s never mere vindication or retribution. The result of the Psalmist being vindicated in v. 6 is not celebrating the clearing of his name, but making much of God’s name in worship, offering sacrifices, making much of the Lord. Romans 12 would be a good place to spend some time this week reading and meditation on what this attitude looks like. Our vindication is in Christ.

Fourth, we seek God’s presence to rest in his acceptance of us by his grace, rather than being anxious about our rejection by others. In v. 7, the Psalm turns a corner in this pattern of faith from a description of what the Psalmist has been doing (vv. 4-6) to a plea to God for help in trouble (vv. 7-12). And in 7-10 we see that part of seeking God’s presence means being satisfied by his acceptance of us and by his grace, rather than being anxious about having been rejected by others. Verse 7:

Hear my voice when I call, O LORD; be merciful to me and answer me. ⁸ My heart says of you, "Seek his face!" Your face, LORD, I will seek. ⁹ Do not hide your face from me, do not turn your servant away in anger; you have been my helper. Do not reject me or forsake me, O God my Savior. ¹⁰ Though my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will receive me.

We all want to know that we’re accepted; there are few things more painful in life than being rejected. And that’s often what’s happening in our interpersonal conflicts. It usually goes both ways: in your cutting words or slander or opposition, you have rejected me; and the penalty of offending me is that now I am rejecting you. And that’s a miserable place to live. The doubts, the anger, the bitterness, the resentment that fester around that rejection. The anxiety of it all, wondering constantly where we stand with that person, and whether we’ll ever stand any closer again. The temptation to evaluate our worth relative to that person’s estimation.

And yet in God’s presence, if we have personally surrendered in faith to Christ, placing all our hope in his death for our sins and resurrection for our life, then we find an acceptance from God that can never be broken. He does not hide his face from us; even the closest natural relationships on earth—parent and child—may fail, but God’s favor will never fail because of his grace in Christ. And that acceptance frees us from the worry and anxiety of broken human relationships. It frees us to worry less about needing people and think more about loving people. It even frees us to respond in kind, God’s kind, standing with a posture of humility and mercy,

eager to extend the mercy we have found from God to those who have wronged us and cancel the debts of their sin by the grace of God. In God's presence, we can rest in his gracious acceptance.

Finally, **we seek God's presence to grow in our walk with God, rather than presuming on our own righteous behavior or response.** Verses 11-12: "Teach me your way, O LORD; lead me in a straight path because of my oppressors. Do not turn me over to the desire of my foes, for false witnesses rise up against me, breathing out violence." It's interesting to see here in this prayer for protection from his enemies, the psalmist's continued desire to grow in his knowledge of who God is and how to walk with him. In fact, the opposition he faces is his very motivation for guarding his steps more carefully: "teach me . . . [and] lead me . . . *because of my enemies.*" He still wants protection from them, but he is not presuming upon his own righteous behavior or response to the situation. He recognizes that even if he's in the right, he cannot let his guard down on walking with God; he cannot assume that he has nothing left to learn.

How easy it is when we're in the midst of conflict with someone to do that very thing—to presume upon our own righteousness, as though we have it all together, we have nothing to learn from their criticism, that we bear no fault whatsoever in this disagreement, and that even our response to the conflict is above reproach. Sometimes that's true; Psalm 26 is an example. But not very often. And even when we've done everything we can to walk uprightly with God, we're still in need of his grace. There's always more to learn about who he is, what he's done, and how that shapes my life. And some of the trials we lament are the very classrooms in which he teaches us. God is still sovereign—he didn't slip of his throne and then life fell apart. He is still at work. So are we willing to learn from the conflict or the trial, with an open heart toward God and toward others? Seeking God's presence reminds us of our continued need for him, and his sufficiency both to guide us and protect us.

What is the one thing that consumes us when life falls apart? Is it seeking God's presence, meditating on his beauty, finding shelter in him, trusting him to vindicate us, resting in his acceptance, growing in our walk? We can be confident that God in his sovereignty and goodness will be faithful carry us through the trial and shelter us in his presence in the meantime. That's what the final two verses of the psalm declare in a closing confession of faith:

I am still confident of this: I will see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living.
Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD. (vv. 13-14)

Do we believe this? Do we believe that what we need more than anything in the trial is the Lord's presence? And that he will be faithful to show us his goodness. To deal with the conflict, to bring resolution in accordance with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Do we have confidence that God will act? And if so, are we willing to wait for him to do it? This closing confession is a picture of both confidence and patience. A confidence in God that strengthens and encourages our hearts, but a patience that expresses our surrender and trust.

The final verse of this psalm is so important, so central to walking with God in the meantime: "Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD." It's not easy to wait on God to act. But it is necessary; it flows directly out of the pattern of faith we see in vv. 4-12. If we truly believe that our greatest need in conflict is to draw near to God, then we will be willing to trust him and wait patiently for him to act. We will respond to life's conflicts with humility,

compassion, and grace; again, not treating sin as though it's not that sinful, but seeking to apply to it the gospel of God's all sufficient grace. Waiting confidently on the Lord to deliver us, to melt hearts, to be our protection is necessary if we believe. And it's also freeing. It takes something that we're not able to do, and that we'd only make a worse mess of if we tried, off our plate, and it gives it to God, who is able to do something about it. The results are no longer up to us—we can trust God to do his work, we can rest, and wait patiently.

When trouble comes, only *one thing* should consume our attention, affection, and hope: God, who is able to shelter us in his presence and deal with our trouble according to his sovereignty and goodness, which are revealed in the cross of Jesus.