

**Sermon for Sunday, May 15, 2011**  
**Dr. Dan Doriani**  
**Fears**  
**Psalm 27**

**1. Our Fears - Common fears**

Psalm 27 begins, "The LORD is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear?" Good question! People have all sorts of fears: rational or irrational, instinctive or learned. We fear snakes, spiders, cockroaches, and dogs – especially if a dog once attacked. In parts of Africa people fear lions, elephants, crocodiles, rhinos, hyenas and hippos, which flip boats, then attack.

We have social fears: rejection, failure, humiliation. Fear of speaking combines all three. Fail in public and reap the rejection and humiliation. People fear formal dinners – too many forks. We fear tests. We fear both failure and success. We fear crowds and loneliness. We fear crime, war, storms and nuclear disasters.

Living in the shadow of a major university, let's admit that lots of people fear that Tiger-Mother Amy Chua is right. The tiger mother forbids play-dates, sleepovers and television, so her children can practice piano and violin and get straight As forever and go to Princeton. Tiger Mother frightens the good mother, who wants her child to play and build relationships. She believes in Advanced Placement classes, but also in creative thinking. She believes her child has talents and passions and must pursue them, but not in a way that keeps her out of elite schools! But if Tiger Mother's kids go to Harvard, "it" works; let the hand-wringing begin.

People fear a variety of spaces and places: high places, open spaces, crowded spaces, enclosed places: tunnels, bridges, caves, tombs. On the other hand, we have Suicide Gorge in South Africa. There hikers must repeatedly jump off 15 to 50 foot cliffs into pools of bone-chilling water, if they want to finish the course. A few of you now want to do this. That name, again, is Suicide Gorge: 464-666-2343 or 1-800-I'm gonna die. Why aren't they afraid?

Most people fear death and things that cause it: cancer, accidents, falling, flying, driving, fire and water. Fears come and go. A few years ago, the fear of terrorist attack was higher. Lately, more people fear disasters.

Economic fears seem constant. People once lived in fear of hunger. Today, we fear lost income and life-style. A recent study shows that the rich fear envy, resentment and insincere friends. Do they have enough for true security? On average, they think they need 20% more.<sup>1</sup> Fear is a topic in dozens of psalms. Fear and afraid are mentioned around sixty-five times. Foes, enemies, armies, and adversaries are common too – mentioned over 150 times. In Psalm 27 David says we need not fear them.

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<sup>1</sup> G Wood, Fortunate One, Atlantic 4/11, 72-80.

### **Fearlessness: David's lack of fear**

Psalm 27 never identifies David's enemies, but it's easy to find them. When David was a talented musician in King Saul's court, Saul threw a spear at him in a fit of rage. Later, after David killed Goliath, Saul viewed him as a political threat and hunted him through the wilderness of Israel. He became a refugee.

Israel's villages at the margin of civilization often became prey to marauders. In his exile, David protected them. But he also made enemies in the process. One day, while David was away preparing for another battle, a band of marauders found his village unprotected. They took his family as plunder or slaves. When he got home, it seemed that he had lost everything most dear. The Bible says, "David and his men wept aloud until they had no strength left to weep" (1 Sam. 30:4). Further, David's "men were talking of stoning him" – who else could they blame in their grief? "But David found strength in the LORD his God" and in the strength he pursued, found, and defeated the marauders and saved every life (1 Sam. 30).

It says David wept and was distressed, but it doesn't say he was afraid. Rather, he found strength to endure, in his Lord. Eventually David became king, but troubles continued. Once, the nations of Ammon and Syria joined together to attack him simultaneously from the north and the east. David and his brave general, Joab, were ready to die together in battle, but they also encouraged each other: "Be strong and let us fight bravely for our people and the cities of our God. The LORD will do what is good in his sight" (2 Sam. 10).

These stories demonstrate that David didn't have a safe job. When David says "The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?" it's not just rhetoric. David constantly faced enemies. He earned the right to say, "Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fail." *Armies did besiege David and his heart stayed strong* (27:2-3, 6,12). Once outsiders stopped attacking David, his own son Absalom tried to steal the kingdom from his father. David faced everything we fear most: hatred, betrayal, death, loss of family. When he asks "Whom shall I fear?" we should listen.

### **Overview of Psalm 27<sup>2</sup>**

Psalm 27 has five parts. First, David declares his confidence in God. He speaks *about* God, not *to* God, yet the tone is personal. The LORD is "*my* light and *my* salvation" (27:1).

Second, David's enemies come into view. Armies want to "devour his flesh" and besiege his city. Yet he does not fear them (27:2-3)!

Third, David longs to experience God's presence in the sanctuary (27:4-6).

Fourth, enemies are to the fore again, but now instead of talking about them, David prays, seeking God's face. He's tense: Do not hide your face from me (27:7-1).

Fifth, David's song ends as it began, with confidence. "I will see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living" (27:13-14).

### **The Lord, our light and salvation, calms our fears (27:1-3)**

David's enemies were tough: foreign armies, traitors intent on killing him. Yet David trusted God. "The Lord is my light and my salvation" his refuge: "Whom shall I fear?" No one: "When evil men advance against me to devour my flesh... they will stumble and fall. Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear" (27:2-3).

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<sup>2</sup> *Futato* 115

We don't face armies, so what are our fears? I'll go first: I lost my voice twice in March. Without my voice I'm a trumpeter in a world without trumpets. It's my instrument. Without it, I can't make a sound and a speaker who can't speak is a threatened man. An essayist who lost his voice said the word vocal "cord" must connect to the word "chord... the resonant vibration that can stir memory, produce music, evoke love, bring tears, move crowds to pity and mobs to passion. We are the only ones who can deploy vocal communication" for pleasure and recreation, for reason and humor. To lose this is to be deprived of an entire range of faculties. "It is... to die more than a little."<sup>3</sup>

The second time I lost my voice, I wondered, "What if it never comes back?" What about you? What frightens you? Rejection, failure, humiliation, cancer, falling, fire? Loss? Loss of jobs, money, safety, friends, health?

The question, "Whom shall I fear?" reminds us of Romans 8. "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (8.31). Yes, people and forces *are* against us, but *who are they*? Paul mentions trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, sword, slaughter, then says, "I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons nor anything else in all creation, [can] separate us from the love of God" (8.35-39). Nothing can shake this kind of confidence.

Why is David so confident? God is his light, refuge and salvation. God is light. Light represents all that is positive: truth, goodness, joy, vitality. Jesus is the light that comes into the world. "The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:5 English Standard Version). Light dispels darkness and gives direction: "In your light we see light" (Ps. 36:9). And David wants God's light. He prays, "Teach me your way, O Lord" (27:11).

God is David's salvation: Deliverance from armies today; eternal life tomorrow. God is David's refuge or stronghold – his fortress. David survived in the past, and with God's help, he is confident that he will prevail in the future.<sup>4</sup> We should have the same confidence. God still is light, salvation, and a refuge for his people.

I think of the Germans who plotted to assassinate Hitler. They were leaders: generals, politicians, even pastors who resolved to risk everything to stop Hitler's cruelty and violence. They were ready to die, to see families and reputations ruined, to see Germany defeated in war, to be called traitors. Plot after plot failed: bombs on planes, in a museum Hitler visited, under a table.

Some were devout Christians. Dietrich Bonhoeffer stayed involved even after he had been jailed for separate, trivial reasons. They knew Hitler was a mass murderer, and believed it was morally right to stop him, by force. Many were young, most married (Bonhoeffer was engaged to marry), yet they were prepared to die. The believers knew, "The Lord is my light and salvation" and had no fear. Bonhoeffer asked: Who stands fast? The man whose final standard is not his reason, his principles, his conscience or his virtue, but who is ready to sacrifice all this when he is called to obedient and responsible action in faith...<sup>5</sup> – the man who fears nothing but God.

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<sup>3</sup> Hitchens, Unspoken Truths, Vanity Fair, 6/11

<sup>4</sup> Craigie, Ps, 1:232.

<sup>5</sup> Metaxas, Bonhoeffer, 446

Today our faith may be tested by a hospital visit. Not the visit for a sprained ankle, but the visit when the ability to walk is in the balance. The visit when life and death are in the balance. When the patient is a child, our child. What do I fear? Whom shall I fear? Some people experience stark terror. Others are troubled yet confident. They know Psalm 27:4: "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..."

Tests can be less dramatic. Once a married couple got into a cruel, senseless quarrel in front of Debbie and me. Their pointless meanness was most disturbing. Later, we were alone, but in stunned silence. Eventually, Debbie said, "Tell me everything will be all right." She meant, "That frightened me for reasons I can't fully fathom." And I said, "We'll be all right." I should have said, I meant to say: "The Lord is our light and salvation. Whom then shall we fear?"

Do you know that? Do you know the Lord? His light and salvation? The peace that brings? I hope you can say, "The LORD is my light and my salvation — whom shall I fear?" How do we remember to say that? David found he could say it best while in the temple.

## 2. The Lord calms our fear – David finds refuge in the temple

David says, "One thing I ask... that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life." The psalms mention various reasons to come to the temple:

- Ps. 24:3-5, righteous worshippers receive a **blessing** from God
- Ps. 25:5-6, 66:13. We come to **offer sacrifices** and **receive forgiveness** of sin.
- Ps. 26:4-8 David loves the temple because **he meets the righteous** there
- Ps. 29:9, 138:2 In the temple **God's people cry glory** to God and praise him.

Psalm 27:4-6 says David comes to the temple, first, to find safety: "He will keep me safe in his dwelling; he will hide me in the shelter of his tabernacle" (27:5). David may be surrounded by enemies but God surrounds both David and his enemies, and he feels that when he is in God's temple.

Second, David *seeks God* in the temple. Literally he "inquires" - he prays and seeks God's will. "Teach me your way... lead me in a straight paths" (27:11).

Third, David dwells in God's house "to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord." David sees God's beauty and feels his presence in the temple. We may have a hard time hearing this because we don't come to church the way David came to temple.

- People come to listen to music and a message – which may or may not resonate that day – and fail to pray, fail to fully turn our thoughts to the Lord.
- We come to church tired, unprepared.

Now the Bible does say that we must worship God "in spirit and in truth" (Jn. 4:23-24). But place still matters. I pray in different places in my house, but there is one place where I pray on my knees and I often feel that my prayers are especially heard. We cannot always pray just as well at our desk because we work there. Similarly, the lake is not just as good as the church for worship. We go to the lake to fish or relax – good things, but it's not our place for concentrated worship.

We're too quick to distinguish between the form of religion and the reality behind it. We say: "A church building is just a gathering place, a meeting house, no more. The church is the *people*, not the *building*." Yes, and Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us, wherever we go. But David experienced God *in the temple*. As the Israelites traveled to the temple, anticipation grew. They grew hungry for worship in God's house (Ps 50:2, 65:4).<sup>6</sup>

We no longer have one temple, to which people must come and sacrifice. Jesus, the Lamb of God, offered one sacrifice, his perfect life that annuls the need for further sacrifice for sin. Now God has established places of worship through the world, so that people in every land can know him. But we can especially meet God in some places. He ordained the church as the concentration point of the kingdom. God ordained four institutions: marriage, government, work and church. So let's hesitate before we bash the church, the bride of Christ. Yes, some churches deserve it. Still, God ordained the church that people may gather to praise God, hear his word, and prepare to go into the world, stronger than ever.

David understood that something powerful can happen when we come into God's presence expectantly. In public we gain strength by singing hymns and confessing our faith with other believers. The sight of the open Bible leads us to expect to hear God's word, with family and friends, *this day*.<sup>7</sup>

Focused private worship can do the same. But Psalm 27 is for public worship in God's house. It describes sacrifices, singing and music in Psalm 27:6. The last line of the psalm may be what the priest would say to conclude worship. Follow:

- We declare "The Lord is my light and my salvation" (27:1-6).
- Then we pray that he *will give* light and salvation (27:7-13).
- Last word is encouragement: "Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart" (27:14).

In God's presence, David learned that he was safe from danger. His head is "exalted above the enemies who surround [him]. David becomes fearless.

### **3. God is our light, salvation, and refuge**

Because God is our light and salvation, we can pray, Lord, *be* my light, my salvation. Look at Psalm 27 again. After 27:1-6 declares confidence in God, the tone changes from 27:7-12. David asks God to hear and answer, to show mercy. "Do not reject me or forsake me," he pleads in 27:7-9. He pleads for God's direction "Teach me your way, O LORD." (27:11).

He appeals to God "Do not turn me over to the desire of my foes... or false witnesses, breathing out violence" (27:12). We hear confidence, yet strain and anxiety, we understand this. We have been here too; confident, yet tense.

David is counting on God. "Though my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will receive me." There is urgency, even pain here. David *was* often rejected. This isn't theology, it's personal. "Hear my voice when I call, O LORD" (27:10). Do not reject me... Do not turn me over to my foes" (27:9, 12). But

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<sup>6</sup> Lewis Reflections Psalms 50-51.

<sup>7</sup> Boice 1:241.

he concludes with assurance: "I am confident of this: I will see the goodness of the, LORD in the land of the living."

See the connections between the psalms two parts. The confidence and praise of the beginning is the basis for the pleas of part two.

- The LORD is my **light**" (27:1). Therefore enlighten me, Lord: "Teach me your way, O LORD; lead me in a straight path (27:11).
- The LORD is my **salvation**" (27:1). Therefore save me: "You have been my helper. Do not reject me, my Savior. Do not turn me over to my foes"( 27:12).
- The LORD is my **refuge**/stronghold... (27:1). Therefore "Though my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will receive me" (27:10).

### **Our fears revisited and answered**

One by one, David names many of our greatest fears. Do you fear rejection, that family and friends will forget you? Even if your family should forget you, God will not. "Can a woman forget her nursing child?" No! Yet even if she does, God says "I *will not* forget you" (Isa. 49.15).

We fear getting lost on strange roads and murky trails. Where should we go? Will we make the wrong decision? David seeks God's way, the straight path. Not because he wants an easy life – as king, he knows better. But he wants to make progress, and God hears that prayer (27:11).

We fear "oppressors" (see 27:11). The original could be translated "my watchful foes." They watch, waiting for David to slip, so they can accuse and do violence. But David holds on to the LORD and that gives him confidence: "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" (27:13-14).

### **Once again – what do you fear?**

I don't understand scary movies. Relentless zombies pursue our harried heroes, heedless of their imminent *second* demise. Or super-powered, supercilious, vampires seduce, then feed on the living. Why is that entertaining? Why pay money to be frightened? Is there a thrill? Does it comfort us to see the hero survive these threats? Does the entertainment supplant our realistic fears?

We certainly have plenty of those. What do you fear? Is it rational or irrational? The Bible says we have a duty to evaluate our fears. "Do not fear what they fear. Do not be frightened" (1 Pet. 3:14). Psalm 27 says, "The LORD is my light and my salvation - whom shall I fear?"

We should live fearlessly. Again David says, "In God I trust; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?" (Ps. 56:11). Well, humans can kill. So? They can send us into God's presence more quickly than we planned. But we dwell with the Lord, awaiting the new creation.

Theologians notice that beside the Bible's call to be fearless, we still hear the command to fear the Lord. The idea: the holy fear of God drive out all lesser fears. We all experience fear when the boss stops by and says, "May I have a word with you?" You may be sure you have his trust. You may admire each other, but there is still a little fear. That fear of a boss resembles the way we should fear the Lord. It is an affectionate awe, respect for someone we love and respect. When we have a proper fear of the boss, it removes other work-related fears. So, a proper fear of God drives out other fears.

Of course, God doesn't want us to court disaster. There is a proper fear of heights, poisonous animals, hunger, and so on. But we have misguided fears and we need to question those. "Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is kept safe" (Prov. 29:25).

Some of us would *like* to be more fearless. The world feels dangerous. Some are crippled by fear of germs or opinions of others. There is a word for you: "The LORD is my light and my salvation - whom shall I fear?"

Meditate on that a bit. Turn it over in your mind and question it: Why did God say this? Why do I need it? What does it remind me about God? About myself? When might I need to remember this? How can it replace my fears?

Psalm 27 tries to move us to see the world God's way. The one great fear, our one great enemy, is death. When Jesus died and rose again to life, he defeated that enemy. Jesus had a real body - He could walk and eat, but his body was also a sign too: Death is not the last word. Jesus defeated death for himself and for all who are united to him. That drives out all other fears.

So choose your fears well. Fear cliffs, poisonous snakes, spiders. But other fears make less sense. Fear the Lord and let that drive out every other fear.