

"What Time I Am Afraid"

Faith Overcomes Fear

Psalms 56

The superscription of this psalm has two unique parts to it. The term "Jonah-elem-rechokim" likely began as the title of a tune, literally translated "The Silent Dove in Distant Lands." It also described David's situation when he wrote Psalm 56 (the second unique part of the superscription). He was like a dove: helpless, far from home, and in enemy territory (the city of Gath, Goliath's hometown – 1 Sam. 21:10-15). That setting provides the backdrop for the psalm's theme: when fear overwhelms and strength is gone, faith must rest in God alone.

There is one more item of note in the superscription; something we saw in Psalm 16 – "Michtam of David." The term "Michtam" only appears six times in the Psalms (16; 56-60), all connected to David and all written in times of danger. The word likely means "engraving" or "golden" (as was pointed out in our study of the 16th Psalm), marking these as psalms of lasting value – precious testimonies of faith in crisis. In Psalm 56, David's fear in Gath becomes "engraved" for us as a permanent reminder that when we are afraid, we can trust in the Lord.

With all that in mind – David, like a dove, being far from home, surrounded by enemies; and this psalm "engraved" as a golden or precious testimony – we come to his prayer in verse 1. He begins the psalm with the cry, "Be merciful unto me, O God." We find here a very important truth: faith always begins in God's mercy, not in our own strength.

As believers, we can come to same place David did – God's throne of grace where mercy and help are always available in times of fear and trouble.

Hebrews 4:16

¹⁶ Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.

I. FAITH IN THE FACE OF OPPOSITION – vs. 1-4

A. The relentless pressure of the enemy – vs. 1-2

1. Speaks of continual, daily oppression.
2. The words “would swallow me up” come from a single word in Hebrew (שָׁחַ), a word that means to literally “pant after, snort, or trample.” It’s a picture of an animal relentlessly hunting prey, not just swallowing occasionally. David’s enemies were “snorting after him” like animals.

B. The reality of fear – vs. 3a

“What time I am afraid...” – fear is a very real thing, even for the believer.

2 Timothy 1:7

⁷ For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.

During World War II, a military governor met with General George Patton in Sicily. When he praised Patton highly for his courage and bravery, the general replied, “Sir, I am not a brave man -- the truth is, I am an utter craven coward. I have never been within the sound of gunshot or in sight of battle in my whole life that I wasn't so scared that I had sweat in the palms of my hands.” Years later, when Patton's autobiography was published, it contained this significant statement by the general: “I learned very early in my life never to take counsel of my fears.”

C. The remedy: trust in God's Word – vs. 3b-4

1. "In God I will praise his word" – this is the first time in the Psalms we see God's *Word* explicitly praised. Usually, it's His name or His works. This makes Psalm 56 stand out as a psalm where Scripture itself is exalted as the believer's anchor.
2. This is repeated again in verse 10, showing that the double expression of Hebrew parallelism – "in God" (Elohim) and "in the LORD" (Yahweh) – emphasizes the point: God's Word is to be praised.
3. This teaches us that God and His Word are inseparable. To praise His Word is to praise Him, because His Word perfectly reflects His character, His promises, and His truth.
4. Faith is anchored in God's promises, not our emotions or how we feel at any given time.

Romans 10:17

¹⁷ So then faith *cometh* by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.

II. FAITH IN THE MIDST OF TREACHERY – VS. 5-11

A. The distortion of the enemy – vs. 5

"Every day the wrest my words" – the word for "wrest" (עָצַב) is one that, at its root, means to hurt or pain, and in its use here meant to distort, twist, or pervert with the intent to harm or cause pain. David's enemies weren't just misquoting him; they were deliberately reshaping his words into weapons to ensnare him.

We shouldn't be surprised today when our words

are twisted and used against us. David's enemies did it to him, and Christ's enemies did it to Him. The intention of this is to cause hurt, confusion, or suspicion, yet while men may distort our words, they cannot change God's truth.

Luke 20:20

²⁰ And they watched *him*, and sent forth spies, which should feign themselves just men, that they might take hold of his words, that so they might deliver him unto the power and authority of the governor.

B. The schemes of the enemy – vs. 6-7

1. Vs. 6 – “They gather...hide...mark my steps” – speaks of constant plotting against the righteous.
 - a) “They gather themselves together” (גִּוֵּר) – literally “to sojourn, assemble, encamp.” It’s the idea of enemies banding together like a pack of predator animals (think wolves).
 - b) “They hide themselves” – this speaks of ambush attacks; not open confrontation.
 - c) “They mark my steps” – they watch closely and spy on his every move.
 - d) “They wait for my soul” – they seek to destroy.
2. Vs. 7 – “Shall they escape by iniquity? in *thine* anger cast down the people, O God.”
 - a) “Shall they escape by iniquity?” – this is a rhetorical question. David is asking if their evil schemes will truly succeed. The implied answer is a resounding “NO.”
 - b) “In *thine* anger cast down the people, O God” –

the word for “cast down” (יָרַד) means to bring low, or to make to fall. David is asking for God’s judgment, not for personal vengeance.

C. The remembrance of God’s grace – vs. 8

God records, remembers, and values all of our trials and troubles. He treasures every tear we shed now (puts them into His bottle), and will one day remove them forever.

Revelation 21:4

⁴ And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.

1. “Thou tellest my wanderings”

- a) “Tellest” (סָפַר) – to number, count, keep record of
- b) “Wanderings” (נִדָּו) – speaks of David’s flight from Saul, but is also a metaphor for the believer’s restless, unsettled struggles.

John Gill states: “Not his sins; though these are aberrations or wanderings from the ways of God’s commandments; yet these are not told by the Lord: he takes no account of them; the number of them is not kept by him; they are blotted out, cast behind his back, and into the depths of the sea...”

- c) God counts every step we take and none are lost or unnoticed.

2. “My tears into thy bottle”

- a) This speaks of an ancient Near Eastern practice: small bottles sometimes collected tears at

funerals as memorials of sorrow.

- b) Here it pictures God preserving every tear as if they are treasures to Him.
- c) This is symbolic of God's intimate care for His children.

3. "Are they not in thy book?"

- a) "Book" is speaking of the divine record here.

Psalm 139:16

¹⁶ Thine eyes did see my substance, yet being imperfect; and in thy book all *my members* were written, *which* in continuance were fashioned, when *as yet there was* none of them.

Malachi 3:16

¹⁶ Then they that feared the LORD spake often one to another: and the LORD hearkened, and heard *it*, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the LORD, and that thought upon his name.

- b) David envisions every tear and trial recorded in God's eternal ledger.
- c) Together, "bottle" (personal preservation) plus "book" (permanent record) emphasizes God's perfect memory of our pain.

- Psalm 56:8 is the Old Testament way of saying what Revelation 21:4 promises: God both treasures our tears now and will one day wipe them away forever. The "bottle" shows His personal compassion, and the "book" shows His perfect justice. Together, they point to a future where remembered sorrows are finally and fully removed.

Romans 8:18

¹⁸ For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time *are* not worthy *to be compared* with the glory which shall be revealed in us.

2 Corinthians 4:17-18

¹⁷ For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding *and* eternal weight of glory; ¹⁸ While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen *are* temporal; but the things which are not seen *are* eternal.

D. The assurance: God is for us – vs. 9-11

There is a refrain repeated here from verse 4: “I will not fear what man can do unto me.”

1. The certainty of God’s presence – vs. 9

- a) “When I cry...then” – the Hebrew terms here demonstrate confidence: “At the very time I call, my enemies will turn back.”
- b) “This I know” – emphatic in Hebrew: “In this I am fully certain.”
- c) “God is for me” – one of the strongest statements of assurance in the Old Testament.

Romans 8:31

³¹ What shall we then say to these things? If God *be* for us, who *can be* against us?

2. The confidence in God’s Word – vs. 10

- a) This is repeated twice in this verse: “In God...in the LORD...I will praise His word.” It’s also found in verse 4.
- b) His promises are sure because His character is sure.

3. The courage against man – vs. 11

a) This parallels verse 4 as well, with a shift from “flesh” to “man.”

(1) Verse 4 emphasizes the frailty of David’s enemies.

(2) Verse 11 emphasizes the collective power of humanity is still nothing compared to God.

(3) Together, the two verses make the declaration all-encompassing: no individual in their weakness, and no humanity in its strength, can ultimately harm the one whom God is for.

III. FAITH FOR THE FUTURE – VS. 12-13

A. Gratitude for past deliverance – vs. 12-13a

Faith looks back and remembers in order to give hope to the future.

Psalm 116:8

⁸ For thou hast delivered my soul from death, mine eyes from tears, *and* my feet from falling.

1. “Thy vows are upon me, O God” (vs. 12a) – this refers to David’s vows to God; commitments he made in his distress, now binding upon him to fulfill with thanksgiving and praise. It is not God’s promises to David (though those undergird his trust), but David’s promised response to God’s mercy.

2. David recognizes God has already acted on his behalf – vs. 13a.

B. Confidence for future preservation – vs. 13b

Faith looks forwards and trusts.

1. "Wilt thou not deliver my feet from falling" – speaks of stability for the journey ahead.
2. "That I may walk before God in the light of the living" – speaks of continued fellowship in God's presence, contrasted with the darkness of death.

Philippians 1:6

⁶ Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform *it* until the day of Jesus Christ:

Conclusion: This psalm begins with David surrounded by his enemies and ends with him surrounded by confidence. He acknowledges fear but chooses faith; he pours out his tears but trusts that God records every one; he looks back on God's deliverance and forward to God's keeping.

Twice he repeats the refrain, "I will not fear what man can do unto me," because he is anchored in this unshakable truth: "God is for me." For the believer, that same assurance holds true in Christ: our fears are real, our enemies are many, but our God is greater. Faith transforms fear into worship, and tears into testimony, until the day He wipes them away forever.